

The Entrusted Life: biblical stewardship

(Eternal life is a *gift*; earthly life is a *trust* for which we are accountable.)

Dedicated

To my wife of more than 60 years
(Elizabeth Leonovich), who has been
a supportive and exemplary partner
in ministry and a model mother for our
three sons.

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(Bible quotations are from the NIV except where indicated)

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Chapter 1

Managing My Two Natures

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize?* Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat [subdue] my body [my sinful nature] and make it my slave [servant] so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27) First century Greek sports.

Introduction

Even with the help of the Holy Spirit, *the management of human nature* (self-denial, self-discipline, self-control, self-crucifixion) *is probably the most difficult of all the stewardship categories*. That’s why it is addressed in this first chapter. It is a full-time job and everything else, including our productivity, depends on it. We must work wholeheartedly and consistently with the Holy Spirit. The genuine Christian life is not for the timid, the indolent, the frivolous, the indecisive, the unstable or the double-minded.

Our old nature

Each one of us is unique in physical appearance and identity but, initially, we are all the same in basic spiritual condition, especially from God’s point of view. He doesn’t put as much importance on outward appearance as he does on the soul; i.e., the psyche.

When we were born physically, we were not given a choice of natures. As a result of Adam and Eve’s disobedience, we are all born with a defective nature. And our flawed personality expresses itself in ways that displeases our Creator. *God* says that, to a lesser or greater degree, the human character is sinful, rebellious, disobedient, alienated and even hostile toward him. This is not something all of us are quick to admit. Yet, all too often, we have no trouble seeing other people’s bad characteristics but we are blind to our own flawed thinking, shortcomings and wrongdoings. (Extreme examples: self-righteous people who bomb abortion clinics and kill illegal immigrants.) This kind of one-sidedness only proves how self-deceiving human nature can be. And, we are all “in the same boat.”

Attempting to restructure human nature is a human idea. God himself does not try to convert our original nature. He knows rudimentary *internal* reformation or refinement is impossible. And, if we are honest with ourselves, we know it too. We all know from personal experience that you can’t change your inner nature. You can only control it, even though you

can (and should) change your outer behavior. But, for God, that's not good enough, and it shouldn't be good enough for us. So, while people are redeemable; our sinful nature is not. *You cannot convert your old nature.* That's why we need a new, totally different nature. "...the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7).

Our new nature

The truth is, our old sinful nature is beyond fundamental renovation. We can do a good job of dressing ourselves up on the outside but we stay the same inside. "That's why the Lord offers us a new nature - nothing less than his own nature. Humans address symptoms; God goes to the heart of the problem. "...we have this treasure [the Lord's presence] in jars of clay [our earthly bodies] to show that this all-surpassing [excelling] power [Greek: *dynamis*] is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Christ's nature is embedded in us with our consent or at our request, when we have met God's conditions. God *offers* his divine nature to us. He does not force it upon us. We are free to accept it or reject it. It's our personal decision, our individual choice.

Inevitable Conflict

The new nature comes as an *addition* to the pre-existing nature. So, it's not an exchange; it's not a trade-in.

The new character is the complete opposite of our first personality – in temperament, values and behavior - because it's from Christ.

"For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other..." (Galatians 5:17).

So, as a born-again believer, you now are indwelt by *two* totally different natures. And they are both jealous – one with sinful envy, the other with godly envy. (See 2 Corinthians 11:2.) Your old nature can be obstinate, demanding, aggressive and persistent. Your new nature is sensitive, quiet, gentle and patient. Both are eager to have their own way with you. Both want supremacy within you. Using your will, you yourself decide which nature will be developed and which one will be suppressed. This exercise will continue until the day you die.

When you had only one nature, you may or may not have struggled with it. If you have two natures, there *should* be a struggle. But now, virtue can and should prevail – *if* you want it to triumph. God is putting you to the test. You decide whether you want to be a spiritual failure or a victorious

overcomer. If you work closely with the indwelling Holy Spirit, you will definitely finish as a winner.

Understanding the Flesh

The “flesh” we are talking about here is our carnal, sinful human nature, which resides in and expresses itself through this physical body - from birth to death.

“For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world” (1 John 2:16).

“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior” (Colossians 1:21).

Human nature is perverted at worst and hypocritical at best. People do not readily admit to sinning. Some say that even their ‘mistakes’ are not their fault. Adam and Eve made excuses and shifted blame for their wrong actions as soon as they disobeyed God and as soon as they lost their innocence.

Today, human nature is characteristically selfish, self-seeking, self-centered, self-ruling, proud, disobedient, stubborn, devious, defiant.

Understanding Sin

Sin’s definition

In the Bible, to “sin” is to stray from God, to miss the mark of his expectations, to fail in fulfilling his commandments. Sin is a theological term. Sin has to do with my condition and conduct in the eyes of a pure and holy God. It has to do with my attitude toward, and treatment of, God’s standards and laws. When I ignore, rebel against, trespass, break, violate or offend God’s laws, I sin.

Sin’s expression

“For from within, out of men’s [human] hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man [person] unclean” (Mark 7:21-23).

“The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

“...sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry... anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language... Do not lie to each other...” (Colossians 3:5, 8-9).

Sin’s seductiveness

Sin is captivating because it appeals to our lustful, pleasure-loving human nature.

“The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature” (Luke 8:14).

“...all will be condemned who...have delighted in [*approved*; AV: *had pleasure in*] wickedness” (2 Thessalonians 2:12)

“But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives” (1Timothy 5:6). However, that’s true of *any* pleasure seeker.

“...in the last days. People will be...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2Timothy 3:1-2,4-5).

“At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures” (Titus 3:3).

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward” (Hebrews 11:24-26).

“You [rich people] have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence [pleasure]” (James 5:5).

“They [false prophets and teachers] will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures while they feast with you. With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed – an accursed brood! They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness... Blackest darkness is reserved for them. For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature... They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity...” (2 Peter 2:13-15, 17-19).

Satan makes sin attractive to our sinful human nature. Without God's help, it can be very hard to resist. We succumb if we don't feel responsible and accountable to an all-seeing God and if we don't consider the inevitable consequences. Sin's pleasures are short-lived but the results can affect a lot of other people, can be long lasting and can accompany us into eternity. "For the wages of sin is [spiritual] death..." (Romans 6:23).

We are pursuing "...the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air..." when we gratify "...the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts..." (Ephesians 2:2-3). In reality, if I am not serving the Lord, I am serving Satan. How, then, can I be sure I'm serving the Lord? By deliberately and consistently practicing the Great Commandment in every part of my life!

It does not surprise me that an affluent *secular* society turns to a lifestyle of pleasure. However, it does surprise me when born-again believers are infected with the same spirit. In today's Western World, most everything has to be fun – even church, even Christian activities and service. But, let's not allow external fleshly fun to take the place of internal spiritual joy.

Personally, I find it hard to reconciling *fun faith* with biblical Christianity. Jesus never said, "Follow me and you will have a lot of fun." But, he did say, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). Not exactly fun but, "Blessed, [happy] are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12). "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him..." (Philippians 1:29). But carnal, worldly Christians don't want to hear such biblical truths.

Good pleasure

Yes, of course, there is good, legitimate pleasure that is pleasing to the Lord. We can enjoy relational (personal, marital, family, social), and other wholesome pleasures on earth. "[God] richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Timothy 6:17).

And that's not all; there is eternity to enjoy. David said to the Lord, "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:11). But, let's not be Christians just for the fun of it.

As for here and now, I can think of no greater pleasure than living a life that's pleasing to the Lord. I can think of no greater joy, fulfillment and

satisfaction than bringing lost souls to Christ. And isn't that why we are still here and not in heaven?

Controlling the flesh

Death by crucifixion

“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature, its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24).

“We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:10).

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature...” (Colossians 3:5).

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness...” (1 Peter 2:24).

“...count [*consider*; AV: *reckon*] yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus...do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin...but rather offer yourselves to God...as instruments of righteousness...*You have been set free from sin* and have become slaves to righteousness” (Romans 6:11-13,18 Emphasis added).

Don't give in to your sinful nature. Don't listen to it. Reject it. Neglect it. Ignore it. Starve it. You owe it nothing. Develop a serious strategy to minimize its detrimental influence and activity. Ask the Holy Spirit to work with you in formulating and achieving your spiritual goals.

You *can* say “No!”

“It [God's grace] teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:12-14).

“Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11).

“If anyone would come after me [Jesus], he must deny himself and take up his cross [of self-denial] and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

Christ-encrypted

“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. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:1-3).

The word “hidden” is from the Greek word *kruptō* – to encrypt. It also means to conceal, cover, hide from view, entomb, put out of sight, rescue from (sinful self).

What’s hidden is *your* life, not Christ’s. You are “dead”; now he lives in and through you. You can be raised with Christ only if you voluntarily, ideologically “die” with him.

Control yourself, yourself

There are things for which the residing *Holy Spirit* is responsible in my life. But there are things for which God holds *me* responsible; there are things he expects *me* to do. If *I* don’t do them, they will not get done. I need to notice and know what those things are.

“Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled...As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:13-16).

“But the fruit of the Spirit is...self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

“But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet” (1 Thessalonians 5:8).

Take off, put on

Our personal responsibilities are spelled out for us in great detail. Speaking in the vernacular, here is how we are to “clean up our act.”

“... you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:9-10).

“Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind” (1Peter 2:1).

“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body” (Ephesians 4:22-25).

“Put on the full armor of God...” (Ephesians 6:11. See verses 13-18).

“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (Romans 13:12-14). So, if and when you catch yourself talking to yourself “about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature,” just change the subject. Apostle Paul says our behavior and our deeds need to change. And, as for gratifying the desires of the sinful nature - don't even think about it!

“...for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

“Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12).

“In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (Hebrews 12:4). Either you *struggle* against sin or you *succumb* to it. Either you *resist* your sinful nature or you *submit* to it.

“Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ‘Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!’ These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” Colossians 2:20-23).

So, let's be sure our struggle is in and of the Spirit, and not from the “flesh.” *It is humanly impossible to live the Christian life.* We must have supernatural assistance. I need Christ to live his life in and through me. I need to totally surrender myself to him.

“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body” (2 Corinthians 4:8-11).

A matter of simple obedience

“Although he [Jesus] was a son, he learned [firsthand about] obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect [completed: “It is finished”], he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him...” (Hebrews 5:8-9).

“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires...But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted” (Romans 6:12,17).

“He [the Lord] will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed” (2 Thessalonians 1:8-10).

“...the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” (Acts 5:32).

“...whatever is

noble...right...pure...lovely...admirable...excellent...praiseworthy – think about such things” (Phil. 4:8).

“...we take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Personal Thought Control.

Do you know, from one moment to the next, if you are thinking and acting in the flesh or in the Spirit? If not, work on it with the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit. At first it will feel awkward but, before long, it will become automatic. Remember: For the rest of your Christian life, you are personally refereeing the struggle between two opposing natures.

The Lord expects us to be energetic, committed overcomers.

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21)

“I write you... because you have overcome the evil one” (1 John 2:13).

“You...are from God and have overcome them [the evil spirits of false teaching], because the one who is in you [the Holy Spirit] is greater than the one [Satan] who is in the world” (1John 4:4).

“This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4).

Christ has astonishing news for those who overcome

“the world, the flesh and the devil” (1 John 2:16).

- “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7).
- “He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death” (Revelation 2:11).
- “To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it” (Revelation 2:17).
- “To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star” (Revelation 2:26-28).
- “He who overcomes will...be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels” (Revelation 3:5).
- “Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God...I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem...I will also write on him my new name” (Revelation 3:12).
- “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Rev. 3:21).

Here is an effective way to overcome the devil! “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony...” (Revelation 12:11).

”He who overcomes will inherit all this [the new life in the new heaven and the new earth], and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur” (Revelation 21:7-8).

Overcome or be overcome!

The Spirit- controlled Mind and Body

There are things that only the Spirit of God can do in, for, and through me.

“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (Romans 7:18). In verse 24, Apostle Paul calls it “...this body of death.” Earlier, in verses five and six, he writes, “For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit...”

“...the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (Romans 8:7).

“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

“But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you” (Romans 8:10-11).

“...by [through] the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body...” (Romans 8:13).

“... live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (Galatians 5:16).

*But, after all, it isn’t so much what I do or what the Holy Spirit does; it isn’t an either/or situation. We don’t act independently of each other. We do it together. I can’t live the Christian life without him, and he can’t perform in me without my collaboration. “...God’s fellow workers...” (2 Corinthians 6:1). The Greek uses sunergō – workers together (with God). From *energeia* we get our words energy and power. The prefix – sun – means co- or joint. So, we work jointly with the Holy Spirit. Even though the superhuman power and the ability are his, we are partners with him because we co-operate with him.*

What is the Holy Spirit like? When we allow him to live Christ's life in and through us, what can we expect?

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23).

"...[we] do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace...Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" (Romans 8:4-6, 8-9). Apostle Paul says our *minds* can and should be "controlled by the Spirit." Do you have a Spirit-controlled mindset?

"...do not use your freedom [in Christ] to indulge the sinful nature...live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature... But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law... Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:13,16,18,25). So, the Holy Spirit wants to be our life; he wants to lead us and to control us.

"...so that...you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:4). Just think! God shares his nature with us! That means we can have fellowship with him on his level! That's because now Christ is in us. "...this mystery...Christ in you..." (Colossians 1:27).

It's true that Christ is in us. But the New Testament also says (over fifty times) that we are "in Christ." "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The best place to be is *in Christ!* No matter where you are, you are always in Christ. And, this arrangement, this relationship, will never end!

What our sin does to us and what God does to our sin.

When we acknowledge our sin and "repent" (turn away from it), God will forgive us and remove our feelings of guilt (1 John 1:9). *But that does not mean there will be no direct consequences.* Our sins affect (a) ourselves, (b) our families and (c) our society.

(Psalm 51. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.)

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
- 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned

and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak
and justified when you judge.
- 5 Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
- 6 Surely you desire truth in the inner parts
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.
- 7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.
- 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you.

14 Save me from bloodguilt, O God,
the God who saves me,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.

18 In your good pleasure make Zion prosper;
build up the walls of Jerusalem.

19 Then there will be righteous sacrifices,
whole burnt offerings to delight you;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

David felt like a miserable transgressor (verse 1,3), unclean (vv. 2,7), evil (v. 4), crushed (v. 8), unhappy (v. 12) and abandoned (v. 11).

Consequences of David's sin.

2 Samuel 12:7-18

7 Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. 8 I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. 9 Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. 10 Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.'

11 "This is what the LORD says: 'Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you

[his son Absalom], and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. 12 You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.' "

13 Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. 14 But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die."

15 After Nathan had gone home, the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife had borne to David, and he became ill. 16 David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. 17 The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them. 18 On the seventh day the child died.

More consequences

2 Samuel 16:5-11

5 As King David approached Bahurim, a man from the same clan as Saul's family came out from there. His name was Shimei son of Gera, and he cursed as he came out. 6 He pelted David and all the king's officials with stones, though all the troops and the special guard were on David's right and left. 7 As he cursed, Shimei said, "Get out, get out, you man of blood, you scoundrel! 8 The LORD has repaid you for all the blood you shed in the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned. The LORD has handed the kingdom over to your son Absalom. You have come to ruin because you are a man of blood!"

9 Then Abishai son of Zeruiah said to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and cut off his head."

10 But the king said, "What do you and I have in common, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the LORD said to him, 'Curse David,' who can ask, 'Why do you do this?' "

11 David then said to Abishai and all his officials, "My son who is of my own flesh, is trying to take my life. How much more, then, this Benjamite! Leave him alone; let him curse, for the LORD has told him to.

Why am I here?

Pleasing purpose

“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” (Ephesians 5:8-10).

“...we obey his commands and do what pleases him” (1 John 3:22).

“For even Christ did not please himself...” (Romans 15:3).

“... I [Jesus Christ] always do what pleases him (the Father)” (John 8:29).

“...that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way...” (Colossians 1:10).

“...we instructed you how to live in order to please God...” (1Thessalonians 4:1).

“So we make it our goal to please him [the Lord]...” (2 Corinthians 5:9).

Pursue purity

The Lord fully expects us to pursue purity. We need to be holy in body, thought, word and action. We are representatives of God here on earth (See Acts 1:8; 2 Corinthians 5:20), his living epistles (2 Corinthians 3:2), “...read by everybody.”

“God made him [Christ] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

“... become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:16).

“...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25-27).

“...be holy in all you do” (1 Peter 1:15). “All” is all. Everything. No exceptions.

“May God himself...sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” 1 Thessalonians 5:23).

Reverent residence

“The body is ...for the Lord, and the Lord for the body....Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? ...he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:13,15,17,19,20).

Why is your body not yours? Because God ransomed it. He ransomed it because it was his initially. He created us for his glory, but Satan claimed humans for himself because he was successful in getting our first parents to listen to him rather than to God. God paid the ultimate price to buy us back. Let's not crucify Christ all over again by willfully sinning! (See Hebrews 6:6) Let's not insult the Spirit of grace! (See Hebrews 10:29)

“...for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple” (1 Corinthians 3:17).

“In him [Christ Jesus] the whole building [his church body] is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too [as individuals] are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Ephesians 2:21-22).

“...Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (Apostle Paul, in Philippians 1:20).

Practical application

“...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God...” (Romans 12:1).

Since the body I live in belongs to the Lord, I should be careful how I treat it, what I do to it and with it. I must try to keep it in good health and in good condition for him. I have no right to neglect, abuse, disfigure or destroy it. Nor should I pamper it. Its appetites should not control me; I must control it. My appearance should glorify God and be a good example to others.

Your basic appearance is God-given; so, if you are handsome or beautiful, don't take the credit, don't become proud. If you have a high IQ [intelligence quotient], God gave it to you, so don't become conceited. The same goes for abilities. Give God the glory and serve him humbly. Everything you are and have is entrusted to you by your Creator for time

and eternity. Be conscientious and responsible, because you definitely will give an account for how you managed your God-given earthly life (See Romans 14:12).

Conclusion

Even 100 chronological years of earth life are but a millisecond compared with eternity. “What is your [earthly] life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14). Why, then, do we live our earthly lives as though they are endless and treat our eternal future and fortune as though they are imaginary and unimportant? “For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

God expects you to be a Christian – internally and externally. All the time. If he says you can do it with his help, you can do it. No more excuses, no more shifting blame or responsibility. And don't try to talk yourself into a false sense of security. Prove you're saved by the godly life you live. “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:2). If you are not serious about thinking and living for the Lord, you're fooling and cheating yourself. My concentrating on Christ will keep me focused on eternity, preparing for it, investing in it.

To help me in my realistic relationship with my two natures, I call my old nature “Sinner,” and my new nature “Saint.” My *will* deals with both of them. It is as if my mind is an objective observer while my will deals with my two natures. When I sin it is as though my old nature sins, not I. When I do what is right, my new nature gets the credit, not I. Apostle Paul expresses this process so well in Romans 7:14-25 (NLT). First he explains in detail the presence and power of the old nature; then, concisely, he shares God's glorious solution to the problem.

“The law is good, then. The trouble is not with the law but with me, because I am sold into slavery, with sin as my master. I don't understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do the very thing I hate. I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong, and my bad conscience shows that I agree that the law is good. But I can't help myself, because it is sin inside me that makes me do these evil things. I know I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. But if I am doing what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing it; the sin within me is doing it. It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart. But there is

another law at work within me that is at war with my mind. This law wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord."

Although this truth removes the misplaced feeling of guilt, it does not take away the sensitivity and responsibility for our thoughts and actions.

Related questions:

__How would you define sin?

__How can I verify that I'm really serving the Lord?

__What should be a Christian's attitude and reaction to persecution?

__How did King David despise the Lord?

__Why is your body not yours?

__What are some of the characteristics of the old nature? Of the new nature?

__What is God's solution to the problem of sin?

Chapter 2

Dealing with the Devil

Count on it. The devil will not give up on you; he will tempt you the rest of your earthly life, no matter how spiritually strong you become. In fact, he will probably target you more if you are a high profile Christian and a good role model. Just because he was unable to stop you from getting saved doesn't mean he stops trying to control or influence you, to a lesser or greater degree. To deter you, all he needs is a foothold. He may already have you where he wants you. If you are *not* being tempted or attacked by Satan, you may not be a serious threat to him. But don't go looking for trouble; if your light is shining brightly, trouble will come looking for you -- but so will blessings.

Introduction

Satan repeatedly tempted Christ throughout his earthly life and ministry. "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). "...[Jesus] has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin..." (Hebrews 4:15).

Satan can use the least likely people to tempt us. When Jesus shared with his disciples that he would have to suffer and die "...at the hands of the elders, chief

priests and teachers of the law... Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!' Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men'" (*Matthew 16:21-23*).

You can depend on Satan to do everything in his power to interfere with your becoming a good steward for God. He knows how best to tempt, distract and neutralize each one of us. He knows our weak points; he knows where and when we are most vulnerable.

The devil knows that the success of Christ's mission on earth depends on you. And he certainly doesn't want you to store up treasures for yourself in heaven. If he can't stop you from being a Christian, he will try to make you an ineffective one. He will try to keep you from serving God. If he can't dissuade you from going to heaven, he wants you to go there empty-handed. Instead, he will talk you into serving yourself or, unwittingly, him. In reality, he doesn't care whom you serve, as long as it isn't God. We have only two choices: to be "slaves to sin" or "slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:16-18), to serve Satan (Ephesians 2:2) or to serve God (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

Satan would rather you didn't believe in him, because he is devious, because he is absolute evil, because – in person - he is frightening (if not terrifying) to the average person. He likes to use more attractive agents: the formerly beautiful serpent to tempt Eve in the Garden of Eden; likeable Peter to tempt Jesus. He is most effective with people who are not even aware of his existence. He prefers it that way. Those who expose him are viciously attacked. But, if Satan is not real, neither is God, because the same Bible that reveals God reveals Satan. It's inconsistent to believe in one but not in the other.

Actually, there are not one but three real enemies that interfere with our being good managers of the entrusted life. We already know that one of them is *the devil* (Gospel of Matthew 13:39); but the other two may surprise you. They are *the world* and *the flesh*. All three are serious and strong opponents of the Lord.

This rebellious, aggressive and persistent trio does not want me to comprehend or comply with the principles of biblical stewardship. We have an ongoing struggle with this triple enemy. We *can* overcome them but, first, *we must understand their nature and activity*.

It is imperative that we become skilled at defeating the world, the flesh and the devil. Until that happens, we are doomed to failure, no matter how hard we try to be good servants of our Lord. Without divine insight and strength we will not succeed.

Understanding the World

The Gospel does not tell us to hate people; on the contrary, we are to love everybody, including our enemies. But we are to reject this world's godless mentality and philosophy, "...*the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth...*" (Matthew 13:22), "...*the things [scheme, lifestyle] of the world...*" (1Corinthians 7:31), "...*the wisdom of the world*" (1 Corinthians 1:20; see also 3:19).

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world [this age], 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).

“...the Lord Jesus Christ...gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age...” (Galatians 1:4).

*“...Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me (Apostle Paul)”
2 Timothy 4:10).*

“... don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:4-5, 8).

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).

Let’s not forget that this world is largely controlled by Satan’s mind and will, not God’s. The devil is the current god of this world and of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4).

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood [humans], but against the rulers, against the authorities (literally: cosmocrats; i.e., world rulers), against the powers of this dark world...” (Ephesians 6:12).

“... you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:1-2).

“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ ...you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world...” (Colossians 2:8,20).

“Religion [reverence] that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is... to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27).

“...the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14).

“...for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4).

Understanding the Flesh

We have already studied both our old and new natures in the first chapter. (If you want a biblical description of your old nature, read the Mark 7:21-22, Galatians 5:19-21 and Colossians 3:5-10.)

Understanding the devil

“...that Satan might not outwit [*defraud*] us. For we are not unaware of his schemes [*thoughts and plans*]...” (2 Corinthians 2:11). *It will help us a lot if we know something about the devil’s past, present and future.*

His Past

Satan is a created angel of God, although now fallen from God’s good graces.

“One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them” (Job 1:6).

He was once a perfectly good angel. But, because of his superior beauty and wisdom, he became proud [*inflated*] (1 Timothy 3:6), corrupt and violent (See Ezekiel 28:12-17). Not only that, he wanted to become as great as his Creator.

“How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star [AV: Lucifer], son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low nations! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’ But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit” (Isaiah 14:12-15).

“His [the red dragon’s] tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to earth” (Revelation 12:4). This is an allusion to the one-third of the angels who rebelled against God and irrevocably pledged allegiance to Satan.

His Present

Satan is the ruler of this world (John 14:30; 16:11), and he endeavors to direct world governments and resources. *“...the whole world is under the control of the evil one”* (1 John 5:19).

Everything in the universe initially and ultimately belongs to God. He created and sustains it. But Satan currently controls much of the earth's power and wealth, because God appointed him sovereign of this planet, probably long before his downfall. Satan was already there to tempt Eve. He tempted Jesus by offering him all the kingdoms of this world. *“...I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours”* (Luke 4:6,7).

Satan is *“...the prince of this world...”* (John 12:31), and he controls the atmosphere around it. (Read the 10th chapter of Daniel.) In order to get through to Daniel, an angel of God had to fight with one of Satan's "princes." These are ranking fallen angels. The evil [spirit] "prince" - assigned to Persia – successfully withstood God's messenger for three weeks. (Later, Satan's "prince" of Persia would be joined by a new "prince of Greece.")

Finally, Michael, a good "prince," assigned by God to Israel, came to the rescue of the Lord's emissary to Daniel. To state it simply, both God and Satan assign their "princes" to individual nations - to determine their future. I believe we can be a part of this spiritual struggle, of this "psychological warfare" over a nation - of its direction and its destiny. We can do it with our intercessory prayers. This, too, is part of biblical stewardship.

"You [*believers in Ephesus*] followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air..." (*Ephesians 2:2*). "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" (*Ephesians 6:12*).

His Future

"And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him" (*Revelation 12:7-9*).

Eventually, Satan and all his rebellious angels will be confined permanently to hell. "*Then he [Christ the King] will say 'Depart from me, you [people] who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'*" (*Matthew 25:41*). "...*God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment...*" (*2 Peter 2:4*). "*And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home – these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day*" (*Jude 6*).

Fortunately for us, many of Satan's angels are already held in custody! In addition, the Lord surrounds us with good, helpful angels! "*Are not all [God's] angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?*" (*Hebrews 1:14*).

Satan's situation

The devil's demeanor

"*He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning*" (*1 John 3:8*).

"*He [the devil] was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is liar and the father of lies*" (*John 8:44*).

The devil's domain

Christian activity creates spiritual conflict, because the earth is Satan's territory.

Lost souls are legally his until they choose freedom through and in Christ. Much of the world's currency, real estate, power and know-how are under the devil's authority.

When we work to save souls, we attack Satan. When we accept Christ, we are set free from his powerful grip. When we release and use money for Christ's cause, we divert it from Satan. When we exercise Jesus' authority, we challenge Satan's authority on his own turf.

Satanic temptation

The meaning of temptation

In the biblical sense, the word *temptation* means to *probe, test and ascertain*. One way Satan tests us is via temptation. A modern dictionary definition of *to tempt* is: *to entice to do wrong by promise of pleasure or gain*.

God tests but does not tempt people. "*When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death*" (James 1:13-15).

Temptation comes from (1) *the world* - glamour, popularity, recognition, power, wealth; (2) *the flesh* (sin prone) - lust of the flesh and eyes, pride; and from (3) *the devil* - using his classic formula with Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden and with Jesus in the wilderness.

The means of temptation

Satan tries to defend his holdings, including all his human captives. He responds to and harasses God's people with various forms of temptation and aggression, in an effort to compromise and weaken us, render us harmless to him and his cause, and useless to the Lord.

Satan is a thief, a destroyer and a murderer (John 10:10). He focuses his attacks on families, marriages, children, ministries, resources and relationships. He works through self-centeredness, unfaithfulness, distrust, unforgiveness, anger, hatred, bitterness and a multitude of similar things. He resorts to lies, deception, intimidation, gossip, slander and psychological, emotional, physical and spiritual violence.

He tries to infiltrate the church and destroy it from within. "...*Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light*" (2 Corinthians 11:14). Exemplary churches are especially targeted. He doesn't *pretend* to be an angel; he *is* an angel. But he disguises himself as an angel of *light*, even though, in reality, he's an angel of darkness, destruction and death. He doesn't *play the role* of an imposter; he *is* an imposter. He is a master at misrepresenting and perverting truth. Don't expect Satan to ever tell you the truth, at least not voluntarily.

“The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron” (1 Timothy 4:1-2).

The parable of the weeds (Matthew 13:37-39). Satan has his own people and propaganda in this world, for the purpose of sabotaging and destroying God’s work. “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil.”

The parable of the Sower (Luke 8:11-12). “...The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.”

“But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them [*Barnabas and Paul*] and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ‘You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun.’ Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand” (*Acts 13:8-11*).

“The god of this age [*Satan*] has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (*2 Corinthians 4:4*).

“And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will” (*2 Timothy 2:24-26*).

After Satan unsuccessfully tempted Jesus in the wilderness, “...*he left him until an opportune time*” (*Luke 4:13*). When are times and circumstances favorable for him? They are different for different people. It depends on the intended victim. In addition, he tempts us in cycles; he comes and goes. He works methodically and almost always incognito. He encourages us to take shortcuts to good goals. That’s what he tried to do with Jesus. He pushes us to do things our (actually his) way, not God’s. (Few of us deal directly with Satan himself; most of the time we contend with subordinates who follow his orders unquestioningly.)

The devil tempts us to question and to doubt God’s word. “...*Did God really say...?*” (*Genesis 3:1*). He hates and perverts truth.

Regarding your serious *stewardship performance*, he tells you that you've got all the time in the world. *No rush! You should and you will, but not now, not today. Spend and provide for yourself first. First, make yourself comfortable.* He

convinces you it's OK to go into debt, because he knows the interest rates will probably put you into a financial bind and tie your hands ministry-wise.

He distracts or diverts pastors so they don't have time to help church members discover, develop and deploy their God-given gifts in Christ's Body and in society. Jobs don't get done because no one is assigned to them. *But every member must undergo teaching, training, organization, responsibility, supervision and accountability!*

When does Satan strike?

- When my family life is close, loving and devout.
- When I've had special success in my personal Christian life or ministry.
- When I'm a good role model.
- When I am an effective leader (and proud of it).
- When I enlighten others about his (the devil's) character and activities.
- When I'm spiritually, physically, mentally or emotionally exhausted.
- When I abuse drugs, including alcohol.
- When my moral guard is down.
- When I take credit for who and what I am.

Disgraced preachers and ruined reputations

"[An overseer, presbyter, bishop]...must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap" (1 Timothy 3:6-7).

Spiritual leaders are most often tempted in the areas of:

- *egotistical power over people*
- *self-centered motivation or lack of the right kind*
- *pride of pulchritude, perception or performance*
- *financial deviation*
- *moral deviation*

Why do otherwise well-meaning and sensible men and women yield to these temptations and commit these sins? It is because of "...sin's deceitfulness"

(Hebrews 3:13). When we talk about the deceitfulness of sin, we mean that it is seductive (enticing), beguiling, misleading, deceptive, fraudulent. Combine a deceitful human heart (Jeremiah 17:9) with a deceitful devil, and what do you expect? If we are not "...strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" (Ephesians 6:10), we are powerless against temptation. If we are not wearing "...the full armor of God..." (verse 11), we have no protection. "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Satan is called "...the accuser of our brothers," because he "...accuses them before our God day and night..." (Revelation 12:10). But God the Son and God the Holy Spirit intervene and intercede for us and defend us before God the Father, who justifies us. (Romans 8:27,33-34) How important it is for us *not* to give Satan reason to accuse us! "...give the enemy no opportunity for slander" (1 Timothy 5:14). "...so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1 Corinthians 7:5).

Defeating the devil

Mind-set

God is in control of all that happens to you; at minimum, he allows everything you experience. His use of negative things has to do with the realistic and effective treatment of our old sinful nature and the development of our new nature. God knows what he is doing with us, even if we don't always understand.

We do know that trials and temptations are meant to help us grow in faith. Jesus said to Peter, "*Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers*" (Luke 22:31-32). In what used to be called Asia Minor, Paul and Barnabas "...strengthened the disciples and encouraged them to remain true to the faith. 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,' they said" (Acts 14:22).

How, then, should you handle yourself from a biblical point of view? To be victorious, you need to have a clearly defined strategy (battle plan). Take the cause of Christ to heart! Become a fighter! Get focused and stay focused or you're lost. "*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood*" (Hebrews 12:2-4).

"*Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God*" (Colossians 3:2-3).

"*Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear*" (1 Peter 1:17).

"*Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak*" (Mark 14:38).

Jesus withstood Satan's temptations because he:

- was full of the Holy Spirit and led by him (See Luke 4:1);
- was always obedient to God, always did his Father's will;
- denied the desires of the flesh;
- used Scripture to overcome the tempter's appeal.

Our minds and mouths should percolate Scripture when temptation's heat is on.

We need perceptiveness to deal effectively with the devil. *"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God..."* (James 1:5).

Jesus is able to help us when we are put to the test because he himself underwent testing (See Hebrews 2:18).

"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 'In your anger do not sin.' Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:25-27). Unbridled anger is only one of many of the devil's door openers.

Be prepared defensively and offensively

An athlete will not go out onto the field to play American football competitively without his protective and aggressive gear. Each piece of equipment serves a specific purpose. If such concern and precaution go into a game, what should be done in readiness for the *conflict of the ages*?

Are you a fully covered Christian - defensively and offensively? The first-century believers easily understood Apostle Paul's analogy to ancient body armor. And, most of us should have no trouble understanding the following descriptive comparison.

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes...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 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. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:10-11,13-18. Emphasis added).

We cannot afford to be "...complacent in Zion..." (Amos 6:1). Let us never forget we are at war – *spiritual warfare!* Satan is very angry. *"Then the dragon [Satan]*

was enraged... and went off to make war against...those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 12:17). If you are not actively engaged in spiritual battle, you are an easy target. You will be neutralized, taken captive or mortally wounded.

Run from wrong

"Flee... evil desires..." (2 Timothy 2:22).

"Flee from sexual immorality...honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:18,20). The young Joseph understood temptation and knew how to handle it. (See Genesis 39:6-12).

"People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction...But you...flee from [the desire to get rich]..." (1 Timothy 6:9,11).

Resist the devil

"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7) You will not be able to resist Satan if, first, you do not submit to God.

"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (1 Peter 5:8-9. Emphasis added). If you do not exercise self-discipline and stay on guard, you will not be able to oppose the devil. And you do not resist Satan by asking God to do it for you. You resist him yourself. You have to want to do it. That's important. You have the authority of the name of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit supporting you.

Divine provision

"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation [testing] has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted [tested] beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted [tested], he will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:12-13). Be sure to maintain humility, trust and fortitude!

Defeat and destroy

Satan knows Christ has defeated him and that his days on earth are numbered (See Revelation 12:12). But he would like to have us believe nothing has changed. He doesn't want us to know we have been *empowered* by God (Colossians 1:11). We have been given authority over him, by living blameless lives and using the victorious name of Jesus – *"...the name that is above every name..."* (Philippians 2:9).

"He [Jesus] replied, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you [my disciples] authority to...overcome all the power of the enemy..."

(Luke 10:18-19).

“The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work”
(1 John 3:8).

“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too [Jesus] shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Hebrews 2:14,15).

“[Jesus Christ]...has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him” (1 Peter 3:22).

“And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15).

“For he [the Father] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son...” (Colossians 1:13).

“...the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one”
(2 Thessalonians 3:3).

“They overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death”
(Revelation 12:11). Just think! These humble humans overcame *the devil*, even though it may have cost them their physical lives!

Conclusion

My personal experience

After I began - earnestly and comprehensively - to put this stewardship material together primarily for God’s people in the former Soviet Union, Satan consistently and persistently attacked me from a formidable arsenal of weaponry: accusations, apathy, confusion, depression, discouragement, doubt, false humility, fear, feeling of inadequacy, intimidation, pride and unworthiness.

Throughout my life, the devil has tempted, frustrated, harassed, intimidated and hurt me. He made many attempts on my life. There were times when I came very close to aborting this stewardship project. My concern was not as much for myself as for our children and grandchildren. One thing became crystal clear from Satan’s tactics: *he does not want you to know and practice biblical management of this earthy life and what it entails in time and in eternity.*

Concentrate on Christ

I encourage you to learn about Satan, but don’t become intrigued by him. He wants you to become preoccupied with him. He would be pleased if you gave him at least equal time with the Lord Jesus Christ. But if he can’t get you to make him the center of your life, then he will be satisfied if you are self-centered. And if he can’t convince you to be self-centered, he will try to deceive you into

accepting the philosophy, principles, wisdom, pattern and fashion of this world, all of which are his and from him. When you embrace the world's way of life, you embrace Satan. Too many people *believe* in God but *serve* the devil, because they walk in the worldly way – Satan's way. That's why we should *stay centered in Christ!*

Act decisively and quickly when dealing with the devil himself. And even when you study about him to learn about his person and his methodology, don't become absorbed by the subject. Focus on Christ.

Continually live in such a way that you are always on your guard, spiritually stable and strong, capable of exercising authority over the forces of evil.

It's also good to periodically and prayerfully analyze and evaluate your philosophy of life, your interests, pastimes, priorities and how you spend the time God has entrusted to you. Make sure you're in tune with *heaven* (God's domain), not with *earth* (the devil's domain). Jesus said, "*What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight*" (Luke 16:15).

Set stewardship goals

Our human nature is often indifferent, selfish, obstinate, undisciplined and even rebellious. Therefore, we need to set stewardship goals for ourselves. These goals should be specific and realistic. Spiritual growth and development takes time.

Chapter 3

God & Greed

In a 1987 movie, "Wall Street," the "ruthless stockbroker guru," Gordon Gekko, in an address to Teldar Paper stockholders, says:

The point, ladies and gentlemen, is that greed ... is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms ... has marked the upward surge of mankind.

Greed is no game

"Greed" was the name of an America TV game show. The players openly admitted to being greedy. At different points in the game, they were given opportunities to eliminate ("terminate") each other from the team, in an effort to increase their own personal share of the winnings.

But you don't have to be a contestant in a TV game show to display your greed. In the "game" of life, you have endless daily opportunities to show whether you are greedy or generous.

Anatomy of greed

Isn't it odd that I can be indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, be possessed by his thinking and feeling, and still be covetous? Shouldn't born-of-the-Spirit believers be the most charitable people in the world? *It depends, of course, on which nature (the old or the new) is controlling my life.*

A Christian who is motivated by greed instead of by generosity is clearly out of character. Yet, in the lives of too many of God's children, covetousness is the main obstacle to liberated, joyful, generous living. This severely impedes God's great goal for our mortal bodies and for our immortal souls. A big part of the problem is that we see other people's greed but not our own.

The words *greedy* or *covetous* can mean the carnal or unjust *pursuit* of money and material assets. But covetousness can also be the unethical and immoral *craving* to possess a certain person, position, power or property. Covetousness is sinful self's shortsighted striving to fulfill its desires by any means. Basically, though, greed is a person's preoccupation with trying to please oneself rather than God. At heart, this is self-gratification, which does not put God first, nor does it care for others as much as for itself.

Don't covet: it's The Law!

God even has an explicit commandment for covetous people (See Exodus 20). It is the last (tenth) commandment but not necessarily the least, because the preceding nine may depend on it for their success or failure.

After Jesus related the story of the unjust steward in the 16th chapter of Luke's Gospel, the writer says in verse 14: "The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus."

It's easy to spot a money-loving church member. The brother or sister criticizes the fund-raising efforts of the pastor ("he's always asking for money"), and finds fault with the financial needs of a mission or a missionary. The financial needs of the church are someone else's responsibility and concern – not mine. And if this stingy saint does drop anything in the offering plate, it's done grudgingly and only in token amounts. Or it's done to impress others.

Judas Iscariot criticized Mary (Martha's sister) for "wasting" expensive perfume on Jesus, "... because he [Judas] was a thief; as keeper of the moneybag, he used to help himself to what was put into it" (John 12:6). Today, there are endless ways to steal from Jesus.* Is it hard for you to love the Lord your God with all of your being, and your neighbor as yourself? Maybe unrecognized, unconfessed covetousness is the culprit.

Get past the thinking that says, "Well, after all, it is my money!" It *isn't* your money. You and everything you have is the Lord's. You are only the manager, not the owner. One day, you will give him an account for what you did with the life he entrusted to you. That includes all the abilities and resources you possess.

Covetousness: in the beginning and in the end

Covetousness is one of the things that first got Adam and Eve in trouble with God. They wanted something God said they couldn't have. Their latent egocentricity cost them their happy habitat but, more importantly, they forfeited their unique union with God. (Consequently, subsequent generations inherited that ruptured relationship with their Maker.)

Not only did covetousness contribute to humanity's introductory sin (disobedience), it was behind Israel's first recorded sin in the Promised Land. Remember how Achan coveted and took the divinely cursed gold and silver of Jericho? It is interesting that God did not say to Joshua, "Achan has sinned" but "Israel has sinned." They were one big family, and all of them had to suffer because of the avarice and disobedience of one member of that "household."

Apostle Paul says of the Body of Christ, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it..." (1 Corinthians 12:26). What affects one member affects all members. Joshua said to Achan, "Why have you troubled us? [brought trouble upon us; why have you become a troublemaker?] The Lord shall trouble you this day [shall make trouble for you today]." In that particular situation God, in his anger, saw to it that covetousness was punished without delay.

For his own good reasons, God does not act as drastically today as he did with Achan and his family in the Old Testament (See Joshua, chapter 7) and with Ananias and Sapphira in the New Testament (See Acts, chapter 5). Instead, he suffers, lets us suffer, lets his work suffer, because of the Ananiases and Sapphiras among us. But, he will deal with all of us individually at the Judgment Seat of Christ, according to our attitude toward money and our financial input into his church and his worldwide mission.

Who are the Ananiases and Sapphiras of our day? They are the avaricious Christians who lie to the church - explicitly or implicitly - about what they did or are doing for God. When we lie to the church about what we do for God, we are really lying to the Holy Spirit. We lie to the Holy Spirit when we say we have little or nothing to give to God's work but have money stored in a bottle, a bag, a bank or in something more sophisticated and remote.

If we know we are dishonest about our finances before the church, we can be sure the Holy Spirit, too, knows it. God sees through people today as he did in the days of Ezekiel (33:31): "With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain."

"There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money [greedy], boastful, proud...ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control...not lovers of

the good...conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God - having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them" (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

God's grief with greed

"Then all Israel stoned him (Achan); and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them...Then the Lord turned from his fierce anger" (Joshua 7:25,26).

"I was enraged by his [Israel's] sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger..." (Isaiah 57:17). There are few sins that God hates as much as avarice, not only because it does not reflect his gracious, generous character but also because it has eternal consequences, in terms of a person's destination (heaven or hell), position, responsibility, inheritance, investment (treasure) and reward in heaven.

"For because of such things [greed] God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient" (Ephesians 5:6). God is very angry with you if you are not generous with the money he has entrusted to you. And he will punish you accordingly.

Covetous Christians and other sordid sinners

"They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity" (Romans 1:29).

Have you ever heard of a church expelling and isolating a member because s/he was greedy? "I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat...Expel the wicked man from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:11,13). Sounds like harsh treatment, until you realize what a deterrent and detriment greedy members are to the rest of the body and the cause of Christ. Unless they change, the Body of Christ is much better off without them.

Covetousness is completely opposite to God's generous, giving personality. It was Satan who brought out the inert covetousness in Adam and Eve. To this day, he continues to use this approach, because it works. The devil wants people to reflect *his* character. When he was still Lucifer ("shining one"), he got into serious trouble with his creator because he coveted something that was not lawful: to exalt his throne above the stars of El (God), to be like Elyon (the most High). (See Isaiah 14:12-14.)

I believe the Lord is unhappy and even angry about the widespread deficiency of discipline in his churches. This stems from lack of conviction, good example, teaching and appropriate action on the part of spiritual leadership. The Lord will hold church leaders responsible for such detrimental negligence.

But, whether or not you have been told about the perils of avarice, I feel obligated to tell you. It is my duty to draw your attention to the perpetual blessings of benevolence and the eternal curse of covetousness.

You have been redeemed (bought) by God for a great price and, as I've already quoted Scripture -- you are not your own. The property, possessions and money you think are yours are actually his. Everything you are and have belongs entirely to the Lord. God gives and maintains all physical life. Your brain, your hands, would not work without God. All your abilities and skills are God-given – for his use and for his glory.

Only eternal life is a gift; earthly life is a trust (an assignment). If you are a good and faithful manager for your Lord, he will certainly commend and reward you. If you are an irresponsible servant, you will definitely be censured and punished. Fortunately, it's not too late for you to turn your life around. But you have no time to lose. Take action today! It's in your Lord's main interests, but it's also in your own best interests.

The curse of covetousness

There will be no greedy people in heaven. "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person - such a man is an idolater - has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God..." (Ephesians 5:5). On the contrary, greedy people will experience the wrath of God. (v. 6)

"They know God's righteous decree that those who do such things [depravity and greed] deserve death..." (Romans 1:32).

The consequences of covetousness

"A greedy man brings trouble to his family..." (Proverbs 15:27).

There is something very deceptive, dangerous and destructive about love of money and wealth. "Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income" (Ecclesiastes 5:10). "The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether he eats little or much, but the abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep" (verse 12). (My wife's parents didn't lose any money in the Great (Wall Street) Crash of 1929 because they had no money to lose.)

"People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1Timothy 6:9-10).

Because of these things [the idolatry of greed], the wrath of God is coming" (Colossians 3:6).

Covetousness: caution and counsel

"Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain" (Psalm 119:36).

"But among you [children of light] there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people" (Ephesians. 5:3. Emphasis added). Not even a *hint* of greed!

"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed;* a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). Be on guard against greed! My concern should not be about having money but about what I do with the money I have. God is concerned about the proper use of the money you *have*, not what you would give him if you were rich. You get absolutely no credit for good intentions. God isn't the least bit impressed by your good intentions for tomorrow; he wants to see your good deeds today.

The cure for covetousness

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). In reality, to be "in Christ" is "Christ in you." And that means having his caring and serving new nature. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

"He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need" (Ephesians 4:28). He who works only for himself is cheating God and society. Conscientious Christians live for others as well as for themselves; otherwise, what practical meaning would the second part of the Great Commandment have? "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

The old, covetous self has to be crucified with Christ. "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). He who is greedy worships Mammon; and he who worships Mammon does not worship God. You cannot have two masters.

Covetousness or contentment?

Yes, with the help of the Holy Spirit, I can control covetousness. But, I need to ask for his assistance - seriously and sincerely. I have to consider, reckon, myself to be dead to this sin. Greedy Self needs to be rejected and neglected; the giving Spirit of Christ needs to be recognized and released.

What, in God's estimation, is great gain? "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For [materially] we brought nothing into the world, and [materially] we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that" (1 Timothy 6:6-8). The original Greek says: "But reverence with self-contentment is mega gain." External things just don't provide lasting satisfaction. We get used to and soon get tired of things. Inner contentment is the secret. This comes from an active, satisfying relationship with the Lord.

Notice that "great gain" is made up of two parts: spiritual and material. The spiritual is our godliness - our God-orientation. The material is contentment with material and physical necessities. *Necessities*, not wants. If we try to please our wants, we will never be content.

When (1) your body is covered and (2) your stomach has food, be satisfied with that! There is no mention of a roof over your head. Shelter, evidently, is not considered to be a necessity in God's earthly economy. Come to think of it, Jesus doesn't mention housing either, when he talks about our physical and material needs. (See Matthew 6:25-31.) Neither does James. (See James 2:15-16.) I don't think God is against shelter; he just doesn't classify it as essential.

So, if I'm *not* content when I have clothes on my back and food in my stomach, does that mean I might be catering to covetousness? Literally, 1 Timothy 6:8 says: "And having sustenance and covering, let us be satisfied with that.."

"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you' (Hebrews 13:5). Your God will never leave you, even if your money does.

Let Apostle Paul's words to the Philippian Christians (4:11) encourage you: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." This doesn't happen instantly or even overnight. It is learned. Learning may include unlearning some things. Learning means training. Training means experience. Sooner or later, we learn to be content, no matter what the conditions. *And that is mega gain!*

Conclusion

Early on, decide on objectives that determine how you will spend less on yourself and more on other people and on the Lord's work. At first, you may find this hard to do but, as time goes on, it will become increasingly easier, more enjoyable and definitely more rewarding. If you can break the *financial barrier*, the total stewardship project (including everything you are and have) will be easier to implement.

We normally don't think of John the Baptist as someone who taught stewardship, but he did – basic and practical. Above all, he addressed selfishness and greed. He exhorted everyone to "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:80). And what was that fruit?

To the crowd he said: "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same" (verse 11). He is teaching us to be generous, not stingy.

To the tax collectors he said: "Don't collect any more than you are required to" (verse 13). He is teaching us not to be mercenary, but to be merciful.

To the soldiers he said: "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely – be content with your pay" (verse 14). He is teaching us to be honest and fair, not to be greedy but to be content with what we have.

And all this is part of "...the good news..." that he – John the baptizer - preached (verse 18).

If you think you have a problem with greed, I urge you to read the fifth chapter of 2 Kings. There you will see the ugly consequences of covetousness. It is the happy story of how generous Naaman (a high-ranking Syrian) was *healed of his leprosy* and the sad story of how greedy Gehazi (Ilisha's servant) *became a leper*.

- what are some of the ways we can steal from Jesus?
- How many different kinds of greed are there?

Chapter 4

The Rich & The Poor – In This Life & The Next

Many Western Christians now believe the Lord wants all his children to be wealthy - *here and now*. The only thing they lack is faith. This is a relatively recent perception, at least on a global scale. Throughout Church history, not many believers (universally speaking) were rich, even though they knew what the Bible taught about wealth and poverty. And most of us will go through life relatively poor, no matter how rich we are in faith.

How rich I'm not

Last week I heard a televangelist say that because Abram was very rich (Genesis 13:2), it means that today God wants all his children to be rich on earth. Personally, I don't think so. God's *Gospel Age* emphasizes *spiritual*, not material, wealth. God promised the Hebrews affluence in the Promised Land, but his commitment was exclusively related to the life of an *earthly* nation and completely contingent on keeping *The Law* – the whole Law.

God instructs Joshua: *"Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful"* (Joshua 1:6-8).

Israel had a visible, material, earthly kingdom. Jesus said, *“My kingdom is not of this world”* (John 18:3). He also said: *“But seek first his [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”* (Matthew 6:33). “All these things” consist of what we *need* – food and clothing - not necessarily wealth or whatever we want.

“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have...” (Hebrews 13:5).

“But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1Timothy 6:6-10).

Apostle James certainly didn’t promote the prosperity doctrine (1:9-10); rather, he gives all of us the biblical perspective on material poverty and wealth. *“The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position [in Christ]. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position”* [because he is here today and gone tomorrow].

God *does* want all his children to be rich, *but primarily in heaven*, if for no other reason than that they will be able to handle wealth better there than they do here. It is hard for the rich to enter the *Kingdom of Heaven*, probably because most of them put more faith in themselves and in wealth than in God. Prosperous people know money can give them advantages. It can provide them with power, recognition, influence and comfort. But it cannot satisfy the soul like God can. And, sometimes, we must give away (See Mark 10:21) or leave behind all of our earthy possessions (See Luke 12:33) in order to follow Jesus. The New Testament provides no strict, clear parameters for wealth or poverty.

Comfort, if not clout

Most Christians are not flagrantly driven to possess power, recognition and influence. But we are unashamedly captivated by the siren song of comfort, even though the Bible tells us to be uneasy about it. (See Amos 6:1.) Comfortable living on earth is inconsistent with the biblical Christian profile, characterized by self-denial, self-sacrifice, transitoriness, urgency and otherworldliness. Christianity is always comforting but never comfortable.

And, anyway, wealth on earth cannot grant durable satisfaction, contentment, peace or joy. On the contrary, if used wrongly, it will bring feelings of guilt or emptiness. Furthermore, wealth is more appropriate for Christians in the future *Kingdom of Heaven* than in the present *Realm of Satan*, who is the current (though temporary) ruler of this world. (cf John 12:31; 14:30; 2 Corinthians 4:4).

The devil rewards his faithful followers only briefly and only in this life. Before long, he himself will be permanently deposed, dispossessed and forever exiled

from God's presence. But, Satan had the right to offer Jesus all the power and property of this world. All this should say something to us about having wealth in this sin-filled world, in our sinful state. It appears that a small minority - unsaved or saved - is able to use wealth wisely, objectively, in a goodly, if not godly, manner.

Place versus position

The *Kingdom of Heaven* will be like the parable of talents (Matthew 25:14). You were faithful in a few things; you will be put in charge of many things. The lazy, indifferent servant should have put his departed lord's money on deposit with the bankers, so that when he returned he would have received it back with interest. But since the servant didn't do that, what little he had was taken from him *and* he was punished.

Good deeds on earth guarantee a good life in *heaven*. Our *faith* will provide us our *place* in heaven; our *works* will provide us our *position* there.

Rich in God's direction

"Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

What's all this talk about being rich? Doesn't God have a special place in his heart for the poor? Wasn't Jesus poor? Didn't he and his disciples live on contributions? Didn't the apostles rebuke the rich?

Even on earth, there is nothing wrong with being rich, *if you are "...rich toward God"* (Luke 12:21). In that case, the richer the better. Gain is normal and necessary to life. We *should* try to succeed. The parable of the talents makes that clear.

God is not against wealth, *per se*. He's against *avarice*, (covetousness, greed).

He cautions against *love* of money, not against money itself. Even he needs money to accomplish his earthly mission of mercy. (That's where we come in.) Money itself is neither good nor bad; it's all a matter of what good or bad people do with it.

Blessed are the poor?

Jesus did not say, "Blessed are the poor." He said, "*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*" (Luke 6:20). In other words, they might be poor – materially and spiritually - on earth, but they are now permanently locked into the richest sovereignty in the universe – God's Super State in heaven. The

poor were blessed because, thanks to the Lord, they would not be poor much longer – neither materially nor spiritually.

Jesus never said poverty was good. On the contrary, he appeals to you and me to alleviate the needs of the poor. "...*give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven*" (Mark 10:21). Jesus pitied the poor and went out of his way to preach the gospel to them. He was always for the underdog. "*Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?*" (James 2:5). Still, he wasn't against the rich for being rich; he was critical of them because many of them were exploiting instead of helping the poor.*

Human sin brought poverty into this world. In both Testaments, the rich are censured only when they are greedy, get their wealth wrongfully, and are stingy.

“Our Lord Jesus Christ...was rich”

But, also in both Testaments, wealth is admired, appreciated and approved when it is used *for the glory of God and the good of mankind*. Yes, Jesus was poor, but only for 33 years *and by choice!* "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might be made rich*" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

God doesn't mind if you get rich on earth (in the right way and for the right reasons). But, he will consider you to be a fool if you're not rich for his sake (Luke 12:20). He will treat you like an evil, lazy person, if you are not working hard on his behalf (Matthew 25:26).

Love...yourself”

Maybe you have wanted to receive or earn more money, to be rich; but then you felt guilty, because you thought that would be selfish and sinful. Well, first of all, acting in your best self-interests is not necessarily acting selfishly. You should provide for yourself, for your family. You should love yourself; it's part of keeping the second half of Christ's Great Commandment.

When you got saved, in whose interests was that? When you received Christ into your life, wasn't that directly related to your self-identity, self-worth and self-fulfillment? Your *self* is going to be around a long time. Just be on guard against egocentrism, covetousness and stinginess.

Would you say our Father in heaven is rich? Do you think he is rich by mistake? By accident? Because he's greedy?

Do you think he thinks being rich is good? Would our good heavenly Father be happy being rich while his children stayed poor throughout eternity? He is

showing us *we can become rich in heaven by investing in it even while we are on earth.*

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 22:34). Wisely, he is not going to outright give us undeserved, unearned riches in heaven; he shows us how we can give toward his projects here on earth and, in so doing, invest for ourselves in eternity.

Suggestion: Concentrate on doing God's will and work, and let him concentrate on your reward. Don't speculate. Caution: Examine your motives.

What inheritance?

But, what if I am not interested in laying up treasures for myself in heaven? What if I simply settle for my promised inheritance? Well, that's just not good enough. That kind of thinking will get me in trouble with my Master. He will be very unhappy with me, to the extent that I will be punished for not being more industrious - for him and for myself. However, if I am already zealously doing good – left and right – in Jesus' name and for God's glory, I *am* storing up treasure for myself in heaven.

The word *inheritance* has many meanings and connotations in the Bible. So, what kind of an inheritance are we talking about? Usually, an inheritance is something you receive without charge or obligation, unearned and even undeserved. On earth, an inheritance usually means material things. In heaven, an inheritance means much more, or something else.

In the original Greek, *to inherit* means *to obtain, to receive* (a possession, an allotted portion), *to become a partaker of*.

There is *the promised eternal inheritance*, which is eternal life (Hebrews 9:15); it is *“...an inheritance that can never perish”* (1 Peter 1:4). You will inherit the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21:7). You inherit redemption (Ephesians 1:14). You inherit your *place* in the *Kingdom of Heaven*; you inherit your royal *status* in Christ.

But there is also an inheritance that is a reward for a certain quality of work – all done as unto the Lord. *“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for humans, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. For you serve the Lord Christ”* (Colossians 3:23-24).

Winning awards

Yes, by trusting in Christ, you will go to heaven. Salvation is God's gift to you. Salvation is priceless; it can't be earned, it can't be bought. But your benevolence and good deeds in Jesus' name will determine your position and possessions in

heaven. There, your level of responsibility, power and property will depend entirely on how you are performing here and now - in service and, ***if you are so disposed, in sacrifice. In heaven, you will not get any assets or assignments you do not deserve, that you did not faithfully work for a while on earth.***

So, salvation is an outright gift. However, riches, awards and rewards are earned or won. It's for something *you do*. You've been equipped, endowed, endowed and entrusted. Now work, minister, serve! Keep busy! God gives you the option, the possibility, of laying up a lot of treasure in *heaven*. How *much* is up to you.

Responsibility, accountability, liability

But, whether you do or don't, one thing is sure: you will be accountable and you will be rewarded or punished accordingly - depending on how much you pleased or displeased your Master. Here are the words you will want to hear: "*You have been faithful in a few things; well done, good and faithful servant! I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness*" (Matthew 25:21).

- Inserted from my brochure, What Good Are Good Works?
-

The good deeds God expects us to do after we're saved

To start with, we can help the needy, the poor, the hungry, the suffering, the widows and the orphans. And, through our local church and para-church organizations, we can help carry out Christ's current mission on our aquamarine globe - preaching the "Evangel" (Good News) domestically and internationally. By doing all this, we can benefit from his generous proposal to store up for ourselves (yes, for *ourselves!*) treasures in heaven. (See Matthew 6:20; Luke 18:22.)

Chapter 5

The Source

***Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?***

***for from him
and through him***

**and to him
are all things.
To him be the glory forever!
Amen.
(Romans 11:35-36)**

Introduction

Individuals, families, communities and nations fight because of disputes over the ownership of all kinds of things. You know there is a fundamental and serious problem if you say something is yours when God says it's his. We humans can be mistaken but, when God says something is his, you can be sure it's his. *My relationship with my Lord and my stewardship for him will not be right until the subject of rightful ownership is understood, accepted, established and activated.*

You may be in for somewhat of a surprise, because God claims to be the owner of much more than we normally suppose. From early childhood, we become accustomed to thinking "me" and saying "mine!" So it is not surprising that we get hurt or angry or belligerent or bitter when God says something we are or have is his.

It may not be easy to start saying "his" instead of "mine." At first, you may even catch yourself doubting God or disagreeing with him about some of the items. But as you begin to understand the Lord's purposes, you may actually be relieved to know that being a manager (not the owner) is enough of a responsibility in God's system and economy.

The philosophy behind the "Me Generation" has, tragically, invaded (if not permeated) Western Christianity. The question is no longer, "Peter, do you love Me?" It is now the Christian who poses the love question to God: "How much do you love me, Lord? What nice things will you do for me? Make me feel good, Lord!" That is the message from too many of today's pulpits and from much of contemporary Christian music.

Certainly, God loved, loves and will always love me. *Of course*, God is "so good to me." (When is God not good to me?) He did, is doing and will continue to do nice things for me. That's all true. And that's a good beginning. But we can't stay there. The baby needs to grow, to mature.

We go on to self-denial, self-crucifixion, surrender, obedience. We stop living for self and start living for the Lord. We do *his* will. Please *him*, not ourselves. Make *him* happy, not ourselves. Glorify *him*. Let him use us

instead of us using him. The focus, the attention is on him, not on me. I am not the center of the universe; he is. He's the Alpha and Omega – the beginning and the end. "For from him and through him and to him are all things." (Emphasis added.)

Source: "...from [of] him..."

God is the source of all life, of all matter and of everything good.

"...God...made the universe" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

"...God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding" (Jeremiah 10:12).

"...you [God] created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (Revelation 4:11).

"Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all" (Proverbs 22:2).

"I [God] have made you..." (Isaiah 46:4).

"We all are the work of your [the Lord's] hand" (Isaiah 64:8).

"...everything comes from God" (1 Corinthians 11:12).

Resource: "...through [by] him..."

Not only is God the *source* of all life and matter, he personally continues to *sustain* everything he has created.

"For the Lord is your life..." (Deuteronomy 30:20).

"You give life to everything..." (Nehemiah 9:6).

"I am the vine; you are the branches...apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

"...he [God] himself gives all men [people] life and breath and everything else...For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:25, 28).

"He [Christ] is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17).

"The Son is...sustaining all things [in the whole universe] by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3).

"...God...through whom everything exists..." (Hebrews 2:10).

“...God...gives life to everything...” (1Timothy 6:13).

“In his [the Lord’s] hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind” (Job 12:10).

“...you [Belshazzar, king of Babylon] have not glorified the God who holds in his own power your breath of life and all your destiny” (Daniel 5:23 - Moffatt).

“If God were to take back his spirit and withdraw his breath, all life would cease, and humanity would turn again to dust” (Job 34:14-15 NLT).

We did not create ourselves; we did not give life to ourselves, nor do we give life to ourselves at this moment. Whether or not we acknowledge it or think about it, God is our creator *and* maintainer. That means he keeps our hearts beating, our lungs breathing and our brains working. He always has been and always will be our primary life-support system.

Time

Adam and Eve did not create time; God did. He placed humans into *his* time. Time and we are inseparable in this world. But time is no more ours than the air we breathe. God is the sole owner of time. He has a permanent patent on it. We only use what he provides.

Today comes from God; it belongs to him. It is not my time, not my day, not my hour. *Tomorrow* belongs to God; we will go here or there, do this or that, *if* the Lord wills (See James 4:15). It’s not borrowed time. You don’t have a long-term lease on time. And it’s not for sale. We live in God’s time. It’s entrusted to us. We will be held accountable for what we do in and with his time. In his 31st Psalm, in verse 15, David says, *“My times are in your hands.”*

Talents

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father...” (James 1:17).

In the parable of the talents, a lord gave his servants different amounts of money. He entrusted it to them. They did not use their own money because there is no such thing. (God helps us earn money or puts resources at our disposal; in that sense, they are “ours.”) He also gave them the time in which to exploit that money. Two of them doubled the money he gave them. For this, they were kindly commended and generously rewarded. The third one did nothing with what he was given. Even that was taken from him (and given to the highest producer). Then, that lazy and wicked servant was punished. That’s Christ’s message to you and to me. In God’s economy, ability carries responsibility, which includes accountability. Other than the unavoidable overhead [operating expenses] we don’t exist, work and produce for ourselves, but for our Maker and Master.

Treasures

“Wealth and honor come from you [the Lord] ...” (1 Chronicles 29:12).

“...God...richly provides us with everything...” (1Timothy 6:17).

Why do some people get unreasonably possessive about money? Their immediate response is: “I earned it; therefore, it’s mine!” But it’s not mine any more than time or talents are mine. The money is not mine because I am not my own, and I got the money using time and abilities that God entrusted to me. If everything and everyone is God’s, then whose am I and what is mine?

Jesus said you cannot have two masters. You cannot, at the same time, be a lover of money and a lover of God. It has to be either God or Mammon. Today, mammon means money. Originally it meant *that in which you put your trust*. God wants us to get attached – psychologically and emotionally – to him, not to money. Trust God, not money.

All the resources at your disposal belong to God; you only manage for him. Yes, you need food and clothing. You may even justify having a humble roof over your head. But you are a conscientious manager; you only spend what is necessary for yourself and for reasonable, justifiable operating expenses. The rest goes into ministry investments, good deeds and gospel outreach.

Budget

A budget is a road map, a fiscal itinerary. If you don’t know where you’re going financially, you may soon find yourself lost or even sinking in a swamp of debt.

To be a good steward, you need a good budget with built-in practical controls. (A road map is useless if it isn’t followed.) The human heart is self-deceiving and needs to face the reality of “in come” and “out go.”

Affordable debt or expense is that which I am able to pay at agreed upon intervals from my existing income. Affordable debt or expense is normal inventory or cargo. Unaffordable debt is costly overstocking or dangerous overload; in troubled seas, it can capsize or sink my ship. It’s better to go with less but keep sailing.

Credit cards and debt

- Thin credit cards have a way of mysteriously evolving into thick millstones.
- A credit card can mean money in my bank or a monkey on my back.
- I have the power to transform a credit card into either a friend or a foe.
- A credit card is only as good as its user.
- A credit card company’s only interest is my interest.
- A credit card is a slick card trick to get me to voluntarily buy liability.
- Christians will go in debt for themselves but rarely for their church.

- If you have a line of credit, don't get out of line.
- The most dangerous variety of debt is the creeping kind.
- There's nothing outstanding about outstanding debt.
- Even interest-free debt has to be repaid.
- If I can't afford it, it's not for me; if I can afford it, it may still not be for me.
- It makes good cents to maintain a cash buffer (emergency fund) for the inevitable unexpected events, changes or reverses.
- Solvency is more about business insight than about money itself.
- Even *smart money* has no mind of its own.
- Expert financial advice is cheaper than financial indebtedness.
- Basically, good money management means spending less than you earn.
- The only person I need to keep up with is myself and, sometimes, even that is not advisable.
- The only person I need to impress is my Sovereign Master.
- I will have enough, when I have enough of God and he has enough of me.

In addition to adhering to a realistic living budget, it makes sense to develop a solid investment plan. And, if you don't want your estate to fall into wrong hands, be sure you have an up-to-date Will (Last Will and Testament).

"Give everyone what you owe him...Let no debt remain outstanding..." (Romans 13:7,8).

"For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men [people]" (2 Corinthians 8:21).

Ownership: Whose am I?

A current television commercial advertises a weight loss product. The company's motto is: "It's your life; treat it right." What's right and what's wrong with this motto?

Am I my own or do I belong to someone else? Until this question is correctly and decisively settled, there can be no serious stewardship. God makes it clear he created us and he sustains us. He also makes it clear he owns us. He has never relinquished that ownership and he never will. In fact, he cannot.

A few years ago, I saw a former fashion model interviewed on television. This is how she saw things at the height of her secular career: "It's my life, it's my beauty, it's my time, it's my money. I live the way I want to." And she did. In a hospital, she was pronounced clinically dead from drug abuse. But God brought her back to life and she surrendered herself to Christ. Today, she says: "It's his life, his beauty, his time, his talents, his money." And she has never been happier.

Body, soul & spirit

Everything I am and have is from God, to be lived and used for him, not for me, because I have never been my own and never will be.

My body – ordinary or beautiful – is not mine. I voluntarily surrender this body to him not as a dead offering but as a living sacrifice – an action that is necessary, if I am going to serve the Lord correctly. (See Romans 12:1.)

My soul and spirit are the Lord's. The same is true of my mind – dull or sharp. My thinking, working and earning powers come from the Lord. My talents and skills are his. *All the abilities I have - whether inherent at birth, bestowed at conversion, learned and cultivated - are God-given.*

When the Lord gave Moses detailed instructions about building the tabernacle in the wilderness, he said: "...I have filled him [Bezalel] with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship....Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you" (Exodus 31:3-6). (See also Deuteronomy 8:17-18.)

"For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (I Corinthians 4:7).

Everything a person has on earth is given to him from heaven. "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven" (John 3:27).

This is inherited original sin: treating as our own what was entrusted to us. Always remember that only eternal life is an outright gift; earthly life is a sacred trust, carrying with it responsibility and accountability.

Managing one's Christian life is not limited to *Treasure, Talent and Time*. Anything that requires *accountability* puts it in the category of responsible stewardship. Not one area of my life is exempt from scriptural stewardship, because I am God's ransomed possession – body, soul and spirit. He purchased me with a specific purpose in mind.

And, he didn't buy back from Satan just part of me. He bought all of me. There isn't any part of me that isn't his. Not even one percent of me belongs to me. He is my absolute owner. To quote Apostle Paul: "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (I Corinthians 6:19-20).

“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 5:3).

”He [God] ...set his seal of ownership on us ...” (2 Corinthians 1:21,22).

In a local restaurant I asked a woman who seemed to be in charge, “Are you the owner?” She answered with a smile: “No, I’m just the manager.” I am thinking and acting closest to the truth, when I think of myself as “just the manager” of myself, of all that I am and all that I have.

The Bible makes it very clear that (1) we do not belong to ourselves and (2) we do not live for ourselves.

“For not one of us lives for himself, not one dies for himself. If we live, we live for the Lord: if we die, we die for the Lord, so, whether we live or die we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:7, 8 - Weymouth).

“And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Corinthians 5:15).

As the temporary ruler of this planet, Satan still has some legal claims, but all people, all property and all resources ultimately belong to God. “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Psalm 24:1, 2). Can a statement be any more inclusive or clear? Biblical stewardship begins to work correctly when this truth finally sinks in.

”She [Israel] has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold - which they used for Baal” (Hosea 2:8). We are no different from the Israelites of Hosea’s time, if we don’t use our God-given resources to serve and glorify him.

“...the whole earth is mine...[says the Lord]” (Exodus 19:5).

“...for everything in heaven and earth is yours [the Lord’s] ...” (1 Chronicles 29:11).

“[We are] ...God’s possession...” (Ephesians 1:14).

God states: “For every living soul belongs to me...” (Ezekiel 18:4).

The Lord says: “...the world is mine, and all that is in it” (Psalm 50:12).

Purpose: “...to [unto, for] him...”

Introduction

Not long ago, I heard a woman say: “Life is short. Just have fun – every day!” This is not a surprising statement coming from an unsaved person.

But, it is possible to go through life being busy *supposedly* serving the Lord. In reality, I may be doing my own thing, pursuing my own interests, making my own decisions, moves and changes. In the process, I am totally missing what God wants for me and from me. This kind of lifestyle is totally unacceptable to the Lord. If I am in this world for God, then I can be sure he has his own purpose and plan for me. I am in his service twenty-four hours a day; or, as the French express it, *24/24*. Even Christ did not do what he wanted. He said to God the Father, "...yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). "Here I am, I have come to do your will" (Hebrews 10:9).

"By myself I [Jesus] can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him [God the Father] who sent me" (John 5:30. (See also John 6:38).

"I [God] have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do" (Acts 13:22).

"That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows" (Luke 12:47). What do you anticipate at the Judgment Seat of Christ: a beating or a blessing?

Jesus said, "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35).

"If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own" (John 7:17).

"So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (Hebrews 10:35-36).

"...we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will...And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way..." (Colossians 1:9-10).

"May the God of peace...equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him..." (Hebrews 13:20-21).

Some Christians believe God's active participation in their lives is distant and indifferent. Others believe his guidance is personal and detailed. I think God works with us where we are. If we want him to maximize his disinterest and minimize his involvement, he will – to a point. I have found, from my own experience, that the Lord's leading can be as specific as I expect or allow it to be. It seems to me that Christians who do not

experience detailed divine supervision rob themselves of a priceless way of life.

In any case, we don't work for God as much as we work with him. From start to finish, it's a relationship, and it's an on-going relationship. Its intimacy is entirely up to us. The indwelling Holy Spirit wants it to be close – closer than any of our other relationships. We need to be careful not to hurt, displease, upset, grieve, hinder, shun or shut him out. "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed..." (Ephesians 4:30). (See also Isaiah 63:10.)

The same goes for quenching. "Do not put out the Spirit's fire..." (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

There are other terrible things we can do to the Holy Spirit:

- *Refuse him (See Proverbs 1:24).*
- *Lie to him (See Acts 5:3).*
- *Resist him (See Acts 7:51).*
- *Despise him (See Hebrews 10:29).*

Whatever you believe about how specifically and intimately God works in our lives, there is no doubt in my mind that the Holy Spirit wants to have a certain relationship with you. "Certain" as in particular and as in sure. First he fills you, then he leads you. It is personalized leading, because he is not only a power; he is a person – a very sensitive person.

"...be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). "...those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Romans 8:14). In this context, the Greek word "to lead," means to lay hold of, to accompany, to attach oneself to, to influence, to direct. (See also Galatians 5:16-18,25; James 4:4-5.)

Let's remember that there is no real Christian life without the Holy Spirit (John 6:63). He is our resident counselor. "...the Father...will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth...[he] will teach you all things..." (John 14:16-17,26).

"So we make it our goal to please him" (2 Corinthians 5:9).

The purpose of our existence is to praise his glory. "In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:11,12). (See also Ephesians 1:6,15.)

“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17). Nice verse, but what does it mean? To live in the name of Jesus is to make him the center and Lord of my life. I live completely for him, doing his will, doing what pleases him. I am constantly conscious of his participating presence. And my entire existence becomes a thank offering to God the Father.

Here is another “whatever/all” verse: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). What do the words “whatever” and “all” include? Is any activity exempt from being done for God’s glory? My goal is simple: *a totally God-glorifying life*.

And speaking of eating, it's not necessarily the overweight people who have the most serious struggle with food. Some of us eat too much and some of us eat too little. The conscientious and controlled consumption of food or beverage by humans is an integral part of God-glorifying, biblical body management. When we are experiencing the fullness (completeness) of Christ, eating, drinking and every other activity will be in proper perspective and proportion. So, *whatever* you do, do it for God’s glory.

For example, you will have better discernment and control of food consumption if you *eat for the glory of God*, if you take good care of the body the Lord has entrusted to you, if you treat it as his body – not yours. Don’t overfeed or underfeed God’s body. Give your/his body the right amount of the right kind of food. “I feel like eating more than I need,” or “I don’t feel like eating at all,” will be a thing of the past when I remember that I’m responsible for the condition of what belongs to him and I’m glorifying him with this body which he purchased at great cost. “...so that now as always Christ will be exalted [enhanced] in my body...” (Philippians 1:20).

“...there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (1 Corinthians 8:6). Everything came *from* and *for* God. And everything came *through* the Lord Jesus Christ (as creator) and everything lives *through* him (as sustainer).

“For by him [God the Son] all things were created: things in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him” (Colossians 1:16. Emphasis added).

“...God, for whom...everything exists...” (Hebrews 2:10). Everything exists for God. That includes God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Verses such as Colossians 3:17 and 1 Corinthians 10:31 give us the whole purpose of life in a nutshell. Or, if not in a nutshell, count it up (or down) on the fingers of one hand:

- 1. When? Always.**
- 2. Where? Everywhere.**
- 3. What? Everything.**
- 4. How? Through Christ.**
- 5. Why? For God's glory.**

Keep in mind that each absolute – always, everywhere, everything - means just that, with no exceptions or omissions. Not only do we bring our every thought under Christ's control (See 2 Corinthians 10:5) but, consequently, our every word and action. Otherwise, we are not living for God's glory.

Commendable Management

Don't think for a moment that God saved you just to save you. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter one, verse nine, Apostle Paul says they "...turned to God from idols..." Did they do this to simply enjoy salvation for the rest of their comfortable earthly lives? Not at all! They turned from idols, "...to serve the living and true God." *We are saved to serve.* Humans were always meant to serve God. Why do you think he has us here?

What is sin? Sin is serving oneself rather than God. What kind of salvation is it if I keep on living for myself instead of for the Lord?

"As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me" (John 9:4). But, Jesus is not speaking only for himself; he includes all of us.

The prodigal's father prepared a big banquet because his son had returned. What rejoicing! What celebration! And after the party was over, what do you see the returned son doing? Do you think he continued to live a self-centered life? He probably couldn't do enough for his good, gracious father. Hopefully, his father never regretted taking him back. Am I bringing joy or heartache to my heavenly Father?

A steward is someone who is entrusted with the management of property, finances or other affairs not his own; he is only an administrator, a trustee.

A steward is someone to whom something has been delegated, *not* signed over. You are only the manager. Do you know what misappropriation of funds is? It's when a manager takes (actually, steals) financial or other assets from an employer, from an owner, and uses them as though they were his own.

What words will you hear from Jesus? "Well done, good and faithful servant!... Come and share your master's happiness!" or "...throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 25:23,30).

The management of the resources entrusted to me by God, directly affects the success or failure of his mission on earth: to seek and to save the lost. My future position and responsibilities in heaven are also affected.

If you act as a steward, as a manager for God, you will carefully weigh and pray about every appeal you hear, about every need you see, and you will respond according to the Holy Spirit's leading.

If the Lord has entrusted you with money and you're not supporting a church or missions only because you don't know whom you can trust, then ask the Lord to show you to what, to whom you should give. You should be seeking divine guidance in the disbursement of "your" resources, whether or not you have a problem with trust. Some people are *too* trusting. And that's dangerous. Better let the Lord direct your giving. Do you need wisdom? Ask God **for it**. (See James 1:5). Give as much as you can to and through your church; there is safety in numbers.

Mission

Heaven will still be heaven, even though some will gain and some will lose rewards. "...the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (1 Corinthians 3:13-15). "...each man's work..." includes what he does with his money. If he gives to the poor, if he gives to the poor missionary - that is a good deed. The Lord is able to elevate temporal money to a celestial level. Jesus is able not only to turn water into wine; he can turn our money into everlasting meaning and value. And it all depends on what we do with money in this life.

How is it possible to invest in heaven? Well, we give it to God, in Jesus' name. I believe he has a very advanced system that converts and relays the eternal value of your donation directly to your account in heaven. Certain kinds of actions and transactions will yield appropriate benefits. (See Philippians 4:15-17.) Your investments in heaven are 100 percent safe.

Conclusion

"In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus....you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God" (Romans 6:11,22).

Let's be honest, realistic: an end to this life will come, perhaps sooner than we think. There is no reliving it. No second time around. Then comes the accounting to God for how we lived our earthy life. "So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). In the end, it is not what or who you were or what you had on earth that will matter. What will matter is what you did for others,

for the Lord and his earthly mission, what you did with the resources he committed to you.

Let's understand each other. God allows us to spend his resources as we choose. We can spend carelessly, selfishly and foolishly or we can spend conscientiously, wisely and for eternity. We can collect temporary toys down here, or we can store up timeless treasures up there. It's our choice. Nobody is forcing us to do anything. Just don't forget: *Our entire earthly life is a test*. God's grading (evaluation), commendation or condemnation will come at the end of our time of testing.

"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48). *And what about me? I'm not much and I don't have much. How will the Lord Jesus Christ treat me?* Don't worry about how he will treat you up there. Just be sure you treat him properly down here.

"Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2).

Jesus strongly recommends we lay up treasures for ourselves in heaven, not on earth. How is that done? It's done by giving here and getting there. Take care of the poor, of widows and orphans. Get the gospel out to the ends of the earth.

Here are two Christians. Their salvation is not in question. Both are definitely on their way to heaven.

One of them believes that everything he is and has belongs to the Lord. He endeavors to be a conscientious manager. He is supporting the Lord through his church and through various ministries, thereby storing treasures in heaven, as much as he can afford. If he is wrong in his belief about all this, what has he to lose when he gets to heaven?

The other one believes he belongs to himself - everything he is and has. And he does what he pleases. He hoards or spends his money as he wishes. If he is wrong in his belief, what kind of reception do you think is waiting for him in heaven?

It's not too late to change your thinking, your habits, your lifestyle. The Lord wants you to work with him, starting right now. He urges you to be a serious steward. It's in your own best interests.

Jesus said that I have the choice to follow or not to follow him. But, if I do choose to follow him, it must be with all my heart, with my whole being. That means he has to be first - Number One - in my life. It means he is the center of my life. Everything I am and do revolves around him, not me.

Life is transient. In this world we are pilgrims, strangers, foreigners and aliens. We are on the move, just passing through. This world is

not our home (See Hebrews 11:13; 1 Peter 2:11). We are in this world but we are not of it (See Gospel of John 15:19; 17:16).

Life is short. "You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (James 4:14). Don't be fooled. Don't act as though this life will never end and eternity will never come.

We have our hearts set on another world, on things above. (See Colossians 3:1). We do not love this world or the things in it (See 1 John 2:15).

Do you know the joy of possessing the gift of God in the person of Christ and in the form of eternal salvation? And do you know the joy of giving yourself, your abilities and your resources back to your Lord and Master? That's God's intention. That should be your goal.

The clock is ticking relentlessly. Time waits for no one. Let us not be worthless servants (See Matthew 25:30.) as one of them was in the parable of the talents. Their master entrusted them, each according to his ability. It was, after all, not their property but his. Each of them had work to do. Each of them was expected to succeed. Our own day of reckoning is definitely coming. Punishment or reward will follow. It's up to us. We ourselves decide what our circumstances will be in heaven.

Life is a God-given trust; giving it back to God is a lifetime privilege and responsibility. But, it has eternal ramifications - good and bad, positive and negative - depending on our performance.

So, yes, do give this matter serious consideration. And, of course, give it earnest prayer. Then give it your life! Correction: give *God* your life – all of it. Biblical stewardship includes relationship and resources. The quality of the divine-human bond and the quality of life management are interdependent. It's communion and commitment. It's not just the talk; there has to be the walk. The work. Good work.

"For from him and through him and to him are all things."

Chapter 6

Mega Mandates

*The Lord Jesus Christ gave us not one but two Mega Mandates. One is designed to develop a love relationship with him; it is called **The Greatest Commandment**. The other one has*

us working for and with him. It is called *The Great Commission*.

So, it's not one or the other; God wants both. Part of me needs to resemble Mary, and part of me needs to resemble Martha. We operate on two parallel tracks – *being and ministering*. We serve as we grow and we grow as we serve.

Love is an active verb. It's not just words; it's also works: do for God and do for people.

It's a dual relationship: love and action. 'If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love' (John 15:10).

Mega Mandate I: The Love Relationship

With what and how much?

"This is the first and greatest commandment" (*Matthew 22:38*). "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and all your mind" (*Luke 10:27*).

Jesus said this precept is the essence of what God is and what he is conveying to humanity through Scripture. That he loves me is a given. God is love. That's the way he is. He can't be anything else. But I can hate him, be indifferent to him, or I can love him. I don't deserve his love, but he deserves mine. He loved me so that I would love him.

This "first and greatest commandment" was stated in the Old Testament and it's restated in the New Testament. The God of love was looking for love from day one. He always expected it of his people. (See Deuteronomy 11:13; Joshua 22:5.) "...that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast [literally stay glued] to him" (Deuteronomy 30:20).

Do you want to know God's heart and mind? Fundamentally, it's found in this directive to love him with your whole being and to love other people no less than yourself. (We will explore the second part of the great commandment – "Love your neighbor as yourself" - in the Human Relationships chapter.)

The importance of this mega mandate is understood from the extra effort God makes to encompass the essential territory. If anything, he names areas that actually overlap. *Heart, mind* and *soul* are often synonymous in the Bible. Depending on the context, any one of them can mean psyche or one's self-identity. It includes our attitude, motive, spirit and intellect. It is the seat of emotions. It's the invisible but conscious self, living in and acting through a visible, physical body.

Did you notice that this particular commandment does not say, "Work for the Lord with all of your being"? It says, "Love him with all your being." So, it's not just a working relationship. Here, the emphasis is on love – on the senses, emotions, passions. It's not an impersonal religion but an intimate relationship.

Why Love?

"If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). A human being that is not energized by love has no heart. A heartless person is missing the whole meaning and purpose of life.

God is not interested in my loveless labor. He already has enough of that kind of service from his created agents (angels). Contrary to popular belief, God neither has nor wants a love relationship with angels. He wants it with humans. None of us, as born again believers, can use the excuse that we cannot respond to the Lord and to people with enough of the right kind of love, "...because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:5). We dare not disregard or limit that poured-out and poured-in love. John says God's love is in us (1 John 3:17). We will be acting like true children of God when we "...live a life of love..." (Ephesians 5:2).

God does not want worship that is only bound by intellect, theory, procedures and liturgy. He wants us to love him experientially and passionately. He deserves no less and he will accept no less. God created the complete me and he wants me to love him with all of me.

Why love? Because love is the purest, peerless, positive power in the universe. It is far superior to everything else in existence. Apostle Paul calls it the "...most excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31). "...this love that surpasses knowledge..." (Ephesians 3:19). We most accurately portray God when we do it with love.

A demonstrated love

One of the best verbal expressions of God's love (backed by action) is in the Gospel of John, chapter three, verses sixteen and seventeen: "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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

“...when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (*Titus 3:4,5*).

“We love him, because he first loved us” (*1 John 4:19*).

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that... *[nothing]*... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Romans 8:35,37-39*).

A demonstrative love

“Love the Lord your God... with all your strength...” (*Luke 10:27*). *God does not say, “Love me however you wish.” Not only does our love for God have to be total, it has to be intensely total. We serve a superlative God, and it is appropriate to love him extraordinarily.*

“Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor...” (*Romans 12:11*).

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love” (*Revelation 2:4*).

What, precisely, is *first love*? I believe it is what we experience when we are initially born again. We are overflowing with relief, gratitude and praise to God for setting us free from sin, for removing our guilt, for forgiving our sins. Our hearts are thrilled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and eternal life. In any case, we are unreservedly and unashamedly in love with Christ. As much as possible, our thoughts and conversations are about him. We talk to and about him eagerly, obey him willingly and serve him joyfully.

But, if we do not continue to nurture and enhance our love relationship with the Lord, we can lose it. If it’s neglected it can be forfeited.

If you have abandoned your initial love for Christ, there is a way to recover it. It’s not easy, but it is possible. “Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first” (*Revelation 2:5*). “...realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked...So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (*Revelation 3:17,19,20*). “And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (*1 John 1:3*). “...and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you...” (*2 Corinthians 13:14*). If you want to find lost love, go back and look for it where you lost it. *Realize! Repent! Remember! Return!*

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (*1 Corinthians 13:13*).

“Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:8).

Managing my mind

My mind is the nerve center of my personal cosmos. The mind is what makes everything happen. If the mind does not work properly, nothing works properly. The mind is one of God's most valuable provisions. It should receive extra special attention. *“Above all else, guard your heart [mind], for it is the wellspring of life”* (Proverbs 4:23).

God gave me a free will. This includes a free mind. God will not take over my mind and do my thinking for me. I am not a robot. He expects me to use self-discipline when it comes to my thought life. If I have difficulties with thought control, I can ask him for his help and he will work with me. But, I am the one who has to take the initiative. The Lord holds me responsible for my thoughts.

“But Jesus knew what they were thinking...” (Luke 6:8).

“Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled...” (1 Peter 1:13).

“Do not conform any longer 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). You can transform your whole life by simply renewing your mind!

“You were taught...to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24).

“But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16).

“...we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). *Before we started living for Christ, we thought what we wanted to think; now, all of our thoughts should be filtered through the mind of Christ. Our thoughts should be Christ-censured.*

I am adapting a computer term and function, when I ask you what your *DTS* is. By that I mean your **Default Thought Setting**. When your brain is processing nothing in particular, what kind of thoughts do you automatically revert to? Your default thought setting *should* be: **Christ-centered**. Since you're not a computer, it may take two or three weeks to get into a new pattern – if you are not already consistently thinking “*excellent*” things.

“...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things” (Philippians 4:8).

“...and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (Romans 13:14).

“...God will judge men’s (*people’s*) secrets...” (*Romans 2:16*).

What is the meaning of “all”?

The key concept in God’s prime precept – the great commandment - is the small, innocent-looking word “all.” It encompasses the whole me, my complete being, including my body. The meaning is both quantitative and qualitative. I am to love him not only with every passive part of me, but with all my active ability, with all my might. God only wants 100 percent of me and from me.

Why “with all”?

“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matthew 6:24).

How can *Money* take control of us when it has no life, mind or will of its own? How does *any* addiction take control of us? The smartest thing we can do is turn our hearts and minds over to the complete control of the Holy Spirit. His mission is to get us “addicted” to the highest “high” - Christ. Comparing the power of Money with the power of God is like comparing tiny Planet Earth with the rest of the limitless universe.

Why must I love the Lord with all of me? Because he knows that if I do not love him with my all, I will be tempted to love someone or something else more than him – be it a person (including myself), or power, or success, or pleasure, or money or whatever. Human nature is easily distracted, easily compromised, easily misled. Christ makes it perfectly clear that he will not accept even second position in my life.

Jesus said: *“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”* (Matthew 10:37-39).

He has to be in first place in my life, and at all times. I must love him more than I love anyone or anything else. He loved me with his all, so it’s natural for him to expect me to love him with my all. My gold chain of love for God is only as strong as my weakest link.

If “all” is not really *all*, then what is it? If “everything” is not really *everything*, then what is it? How do I determine what has to be for God’s glory and what does not have to be for his glory? If it’s not literally “everything,” then the commandment becomes meaningless.

The Bible says, *“There will be terrible times in the last days”* (2 Timothy 3:1).

What kind of terrible times is Apostle Paul talking about? Political and economical upheaval? Anarchy? War? Famine? Natural disasters? Such conditions may very well be part of the end times, but they are not Paul’s concern right here.

What, then, will be so terrible about the last days? Well, people's attitudes, interests, priorities and values will be the problem. *"People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power"* (2 Timothy 3:2-5).

It is profoundly important to know Christ personally, to have fellowship with him.

Focus...

**on the Miracle Maker, not the miracles;
on the Healer, not the healing;
on the Bread of Life, not on bread;
on the Comforter, not the comfort;
on the Altogether Lovely One, not on beauty;
on the Protector, not protection;
on The Friend, not friends;
on the Care Giver, not the care;
on the Gift Giver, not the gifts;
on the Anointer, not the anointing;
on the Baptizer, not the baptism;
on the Faithful One, not on faith;
on the Rewarder, not the rewards;
on the Prince of Peace, not on peace;
on the Almighty, not on might;
on the Holy One, not holiness;
on the Vine, not the fruit;
on the Blessor, not the blessing;
on the Author, not the Book;
on the Sanctifier, not on sanctification;
on the Commander, not the commandments;
on the King, not the kingdom.**

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart..."

Mega Mandate II: The work relationship

The Lord's work on earth today

God's momentous mission is to seek and to save perishing people. Jesus encourages us to store up for ourselves treasure in heaven by investing in this mission and in his other charitable concerns. The end will come only after the gospel is preached throughout the whole world. (See Matthew 24:14.)

At heart, God is a missionary (Isaiah 6:8). Basically, every Christian is a missionary. The word missionary comes from the Latin *missio*: to send; therefore, a missionary is a sent one.

Jesus said we would be his witnesses. If I am not witnessing, I am not acting like a Christian; I am willfully withholding from people the most important information in the world. How much I *share* the Gospel shows how much I *care* about God's good news and about lost souls. *Everybody* can witness about what they have experienced. If I am a true child of God, stewardship of the great commission should be at the core of my concerns.

What is Jesus' mission on earth? "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost*" (Luke 19:10).

"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." (1 Timothy 1:15).

"The Lord...is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

The Lord's consuming concern is to save as many souls as possible. He does not want anyone to spend eternity in hell. He desires converts to be grounded in his word, his children nourished and ministering both to the saved and unsaved. He has equipped the church to do all this. For his part, he has done everything he can do. He has laid down his life as payment for everyone's sin and everyone's soul. And, at the time of our new birth, he permanently placed the Holy Spirit within us. With his help we can complete the assignment.

God's Generous Offer

Once, I overheard a sister in the Lord say, "If I get any crowns or rewards in heaven, I will just lay them at the feet of Jesus." Well, that would be a very nice gesture on her part. But, first, she would have to earn or win those trophies, wouldn't she? It's not something that happens by itself, by chance or by accident. Earning or winning awards and rewards require involvement, planning and a lot of hard work.

But there is more to it than that. God wants you to use the talents he gave you and conscientiously manage whatever money and resources he has entrusted to you. You can work for a variety of prizes and payments. While you're working for him on earth, you are working for yourself in heaven! That's the way the Lord has set it up.

For His children, for those who will spend eternity with him, God has an altruistic investment plan, whereby they can be accumulating divinely protected principle and a no-risk, extraordinarily high interest rate - all redeemable upon their arrival in heaven.

These awards, prizes, rewards and wealth are not to be understood in the sense of earthly currency. God uses secular terminology because, in our finite state, we cannot comprehend what this will mean in heaven's own terms. But, we also have to

be careful not to completely spiritualize everything. Anyway, let's look at God's *reason* for this *Providential Proposal*.

God's Global Mission - *the dilemma.*

God has only one interest on earth, only one mission in this world. Although he is the creator and sustainer of this earth, he is *not* concerned about saving earth's flora and fauna from extinction. This world and everything on it will soon be destroyed and replaced (2 Peter 3:7-13). But, he does have a recovery program for endangered *humanity*. He is calling out a *people* for himself. He is rescuing the perishing. Before he can have fellowship with me, he has to redeem me.

God's Great Commission - *the mandate.*

Now he is turning to us, his followers, to help him get the good news out to the ends of the earth, starting in our own Jerusalem. And what is he saying to us? Is he saying: "Oh, by the way, you know this worldwide mission of mine...if you ever have a free minute, or if you can occasionally spare a dime, I certainly could use your help. I know how busy you are, so, if you can't, I'll understand. I'm not pressuring you. It's just a suggestion. I apologize for even bringing up the subject."

What, then, *is* he saying? In the first place, He's not just *saying* it. He is giving directives; he is commanding us. He has every right to give us orders. And there is only one right way to respond to his commands. Just because he doesn't always discipline us, here and now (if we disobey), doesn't mean he is forgetting or overlooking it. He's keeping detailed records. Our day of accounting will come, as sure as day follows dawn.

Here are our marching orders: "*As the Father has sent me, I am sending you*" (John 20:21). In so many words, Jesus is saying, "The Father sent me, *and I went*. Now, I am sending you. Start at home. Move into your neighborhood. *All* the world must hear before I will return."

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations..." (Matthew 28:19).

"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15).

"...you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The command is not simply to go to the ends of the earth. The purpose of "going" is "making." To make disciples. And not just to recruit disciples, but to teach them (verse 20). Not just to find sheep but to feed them. To teach them what? "...to obey [observe, keep, fulfill] everything I have commanded you." Teach them by example, by practical application, to live the truth. Mentor them with love. Equip the saints for ministry. It's not just proclamation; it's "Body" ministry.

Jesus gave this command two thousand years ago, just a few weeks after securing our salvation. That command has not been retracted; it is in effect at this very moment. He is still expecting you and me to carry out this great commission. It is a

great commission because *God* is great, because his *goal* is great, because - in his sight - the salvation of one priceless *soul* is of eternal importance. But, whether or not we fathom the heart of God, whether or not we understand the full meaning of his orders, there is one word we all understand: "*GO!*"

God's Grand Proposition - *the means.*

The Method of Financing

How are the needs of full-time Christian workers supplied? How is Scripture made available? How is literature printed? How is equipment acquired? How are churches built? How are church and mission ministry projects realized? Obviously, this kind of project requires money - a *lot* of money. But God has not installed himself - directly, independently and competitively - in this world's economic structure. There is no *Sovereign Securities & Stock Exchange*. There is no chain, no network of *Divinity Banks*. God is not the owner of the *Celestial Controlling Corporation*, a colossal conglomerate that operates department stores and supermarkets, staffed by his alien agents, popularly known as *angels*.

And that is intentional. Because he wants his *people* involved, he is depending on another alternative - a family joint venture. He is providing us with all the necessary resources so that, together with him, we can get the job done.

We are his investment. *We* are his work force. *We* are his managers. He is counting on *us*. Christ has no money but the money he has entrusted to us. We are, first and foremost, his organization on earth to fulfill his mission. Basically, God's work on earth has always been financed by his tenth and by people's additional gifts.

Different ways to "Go"

- **You can stay at home and be a sender.**
- **You can stay at home and be a prayer person.**
- **You can go and serve full time - at home or abroad.**

(These distinct divisions exist only on paper. In real life they often overlap. For example, a missionary also tithes to her/his church and, therefore also supports other missionaries.)

Do you have the liberty to choose your field of service? Is a soldier free to make his own choice of assignments or battlefields? Can he say? "Fine, I'll just be a prayer person; or, I'll 'stay with the stuff.' I'll help provide the supplies. That will exempt me from the battlefield. I'll stay and support churches and missions."

By the way, Jesus *did* make a distinction between the home front and the distant front. He said that those who left loved ones or loved things for his sake would be compensated a *hundred times more* - if not in this world, then certainly in the next. The Lord puts a premium price on personal *sacrifice*.

But, no, I do not have the option or the right to choose my own arena of service. Fortunately, my *Commander* makes those decisions for me. (See Acts 13:1-3) That is why we have to be in God's will at all times, in God's place for us, at any given moment. I am ready to serve him wherever and however *he* wants. God has a plan for my life. One person would *like* to be a missionary abroad, but that's not *God's* intention. Another person would like to stay *home*, but God says, "*Go!*" Are the Lord's orders negotiable? I don't think so.

If you are a soldier of the cross, you are under orders. We can trust our Supreme Commander's experience and good judgment. After all, we know that, ultimately, our side will win.

A Sender

Maybe the Lord wants you to stay at home, to provide the "ammunition" - money, resources, to be in management, to work behind the scenes. Perhaps your Commander-in-Chief wants you to be a sender. "*...how can they preach unless they are sent?*" (Romans 10:15).

A Prayer

Maybe God wants you to be an intercessor. We cannot overestimate the need for prayer. Apostle Paul, in describing the full armor of God, makes it perfectly clear that "*...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*" (Ephesians 6:12).

This kind of battle is won on bent knees and broken hearts. We need to pray for the defeat of demonic opposition, for the Lord's empowerment, for unity in the Body of Christ, for human and material resources. Eternity will reveal how many more victories we could have won if we had fasted and prayed more consistently and persistently.

"The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few" (Luke 10:2). Why are there *few* workers? Because somebody is unwilling to go; someone is unwilling to work. What will it take to make them obey or for others to take their place? *Prayer!* "Ask (petition, beseech) *the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.*" (Did you notice that God has only one field?) Are you open to engaging in prayer so that workers will go to every part of God's mission field – the world?

A Goer

Perhaps the Lord wants you to be a goer, to serve him anywhere in the world. When, at nine years of age, Betty (now my wife), accepted Christ, she made a commitment to him: he could use her "whenever, however, wherever." Maybe he wants you to go next door, or across the street, or around the corner, or around the world.

Every church should be a missionary church. Is your church self-centered or world-centered? A church with a heart for missions is a live church, a healthy church, a growing church, because it has God's blessing, because it is carrying out God's program. Jesus Christ was a missionary, sent from God. Now, in his place, we are the missionaries. *A church that is not a missionary church is no church of Christ.*

As a good steward of Jesus Christ, you are ready to serve him as he wills: with the life, talents and resources he has entrusted to you. It could be anywhere in the world. Are you where the Lord wants you, doing what he wishes? Are you AWOL (absent without leave), or are you at your Commander's service?

I encourage you, I urge you, to immerse yourself in the Lord's work, if you're not already doing so. After all, we're not going to be here forever; maybe not even tomorrow.

"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm...I am about to spit (vomit) you out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:15-16). This is the only place in the entire Bible the word "lukewarm" (tepid) is used. The lukewarmness refers to the nature of our deeds, to how we carry out our work for the Lord. If we don't perform for the Lord with a wholehearted passion, then he would rather we not do it at all. He expects enthusiasm. God and his work deserve nothing less.

"Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord" (Romans 12:11).

Let's not forget we are here as full-time, active representatives of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, endeavoring to carry out his great commission. *"...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's (people's) sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us"* (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

"Go into all the world and preach the good news..."

Conclusion

In many countries of the world, a dog is considered to be man's best friend. All of us have had or heard of dogs that do extraordinary things, including saving lives.

Many years ago, I observed an elderly, white-haired pastor communicate naturally and effectively with children and young people. There was no "generation gap" between them. When I asked him about it, he answered: "I'm still learning. I learn from young people and from children. All I need to do is observe, asks questions and listen. If we're observant and alert, we can learn from all kinds of people, animals and things. We can learn a lot from dogs, for example."

How right he was!

Yesterday, I watched a TV documentary about dogs – their personalities and their services to humans. Here are a few things I learned about them, especially about trained, *working* (shepherding) dogs. All of us can learn from them.

- They have a need to bond with one person and are remarkably loyal, even unto death.
- Their devotion and obedience are unquestioning and unconditional.
- Their only desire is to serve and to please their master.
- If you want to be cruel to them, don't give them any work. They are happiest when they are working.
- They work with their master in partnership, as one.
- They thrive on interaction with, and affirmation from, their master. All they need is attention, affection and some sort of reward.
- The deeper their devotion, the better their performance.

Chapter 7

Human Motivation For Heaven's Rewards

Don't let God's very human way of working with us humans bewilder you. Remember: God became one of us. He speaks our language. He knows our psychology. He relates to us in our present flawed condition - not to our future perfect state. (We haven't yet arrived spiritually, even though we sometimes think we have.) He works with us where we are, as we are. He knows how best to motivate us. If the Lord relied on human gratitude to get his work done, he could, at best, count on a pitifully small response. (See Luke 17:11-17.)

What's in it for me?

Peter said to Jesus: "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" (Matthew 19:27). And Jesus answered Peter with disappointment on his face and reprimand in his voice: "Peter, Peter! How could you even think such a thing?" He then gave him and the rest of the apostles a lengthy lecture on modesty, humility and true spirituality.

Fortunately, what you just read is not the gospel version, but that is the way some of us would have readily responded to our dear brother - in spite of his apostleship. Down-to-earth, seafaring Peter asked Jesus a natural, practical question: "What are we to get out of it?" And Jesus answered him appropriately.

"...you ...will ... sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. [Not bad compensation; but there's more!]. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much..." (verses 28,29). Clearly, God puts an exceptionally high value on self-denying, sacrificial service.

Here on earth, even sensitive, spiritual Christians have no reservations about providing or accepting pensions for their retirement. They hope to enjoy these provisions for a few short years. But, this world is not our home and we are here very temporarily. Christ told us to lay up for ourselves treasures in *heaven*. Then why are so many Christians not obeying his instructions? Why are we so hesitant about planning the quality of our life in eternity?

It is not unusual for earthly employers to have incentive programs for their employees. Outstanding work is compensated with special recognition, commendations, promotions, pay increases, awards, prizes, pension plans. This is acceptable and even appealing to most men and women.

It is interesting to note that a lot of the secular management philosophies and employer-employee relations take many of their principles from the Bible. (Don't lie, cheat or steal. Put in an honest day's work. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.) So, it should not be surprising that the Lord himself has an advanced and perfected work ethic and reward plan. Working well for him on earth means generous benefits in eternity. Taking your responsibilities seriously here means greater, advanced responsibility in heaven. Keep in mind that in the next life, we will no longer be hindered by our present body and mind.

Eternal work ethic

God's children are workers because they have a working Father. Jesus said, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working" (John 5:17). As God's children we, too, are to be at work for him now. God will continue to work and so will we, no matter where we are – on the new earth, in the new heaven or elsewhere in his unlimited universe. Since nothing goes to waste in God's economy, I believe God will use our experience, our expertise and our "gifts" in our next life.

It is personally detrimental to embrace the idea that we will spend a good part of eternal time in a comfortable rocking chair. We will never retire because we will never tire; we'll have new, heavenly, glorified bodies. In eternity we will have sin-free personalities. We will not want to be idle. We will not get depressed. We will not be stressed. We will not hate our work. We will not be bored. On the contrary, we will be eternally challenged and motivated. We will enjoy work. Our attitude toward work and our perception of work will probably be what it was for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, *before* they lost their innocence. (See Genesis

2:15.) God is creative and productive and we, too, will be creative and productive.

So, salvation is through faith. Prizes, awards and rewards are through deeds. God's grace will get me into heaven; my works will determine my status there. The pleasures and rewards of heaven will not be the same for all of us, just as the pain and punishment of hell will not be the same for everyone. (See Revelation 20:12-13.) In either case (or destination), the *nature, quantity and quality* of our earthly deeds will make an eternity of difference.

Is heaven ready for me?

I have a question for you. Are you ready for heaven? You might answer, "What's there to get ready? I'm saved, so I'm ready!"

This chapter is about *heaven readiness*. Heaven is only as ready for me as I am ready for heaven. Getting saved is a great step in the right direction; but it is, after all, only the first step in heaven preparedness. There is a lot that has to happen to me and there is a lot for me to do down here in preparation for up there. Yes, of course, God will *get* me there, but what *happens* to me there is up to me. So, we need to open our hearts and roll up our sleeves – for his sake and for ours.

The subject of rewards is not something a human being originated. God himself is the author of the idea. In fact, he is called "...rewarder..." (Hebrews 11:6 AV). It was he who included rewards in his dealings with people. There are many facets to the Lord's eternal relationship with us, and recompense is an especially brilliant, generous one. By the way, the divine reward provision is not an afterthought, it is not frivolous; it is not superfluous; it is not optional; it's compulsory. It is more than a slight expression of God's generosity; it is an integral part of divine-human relations. It goes to the heart of his and our personalities. Every born-again person automatically becomes part of this plan.

I reiterate. This is not the same as trying to work for one's salvation. Nor is it trying to find approval, acceptance and affection from God; you already have all this in Christ. If you do good deeds, you will receive rewards, whether you expect them or not. If you, as a child of God, decide not to lift a finger to do good deeds, he will still love you and take care of you. This is simply taking to heart the admonition of Jesus: "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven..." (Matthew 6:20). He encourages you to enhance your situation in eternity. Your eternal reward will be in proportion to your earthly effort. To do or not to do – that is your decision, your choice.

Rewards in the Bible

If you have never seen biblical reward references concentrated in one location, you may have an unexpected reaction when you do. You may be impressed or depressed, amazed or dismayed, 'turned on' or 'turned off,' overjoyed or overwhelmed. Whatever your initial reaction, it will not change the truth that rewards are an important part of God's earthly and eternal economy. Your

participation or nonparticipation in his program will affect both your present relationship with the Lord and your future situation in heaven.

The seasoning of divine rewards is sprinkled throughout the whole Bible. Apostle Paul did not write a special epistle dealing exclusively and exhaustively with rewards. It seems to me, however, that it would be profitable to bring some of the reward references together in one place. I want you to see (1) how much the Bible says about it, (2) how significant it is to God and (3) how consequential it is for us.

Rewards: on earth or in heaven?

Sometimes the Lord cannot wait with rewards. In certain situations, his material blessing or betterment can actually be realized on earth.

For example:

“Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine” (Proverbs 3:9-10). In today’s language and application, these two verses could have been written this way: “Give the Lord at least ten percent of your gross income; then he will bless you abundantly and take care of all your needs.” Jesus put it this way: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [food and clothing at minimum] will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

“One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed” (Proverbs 11:24,25).

“Test me in this [giving God his tithes and our offerings] ...and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit...” (Malachi 3:10,11).

Maybe you think God’s material blessing on earth is limited to the Old Testament, so here is some New Testament documentation.

“I tell you the truth...no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age...” (Mark 10:29,30). Sacrifice brings multiplied compensation. Jesus promises it. And he always keeps his promise.

“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap [harvest] sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap [harvest] generously...God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need [time, ability, money], you will abound in every good work...You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion...” (2 Corinthians 9:6,8,11). God is able to make you overflow materially. And when is he most likely to do this? When you demonstrate to him that you “...sow

generously...abound in every good work... [and are] generous on every occasion..."

Prosperity preachers predictably use the following verse in their promotion of health and wealth *now*. "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38). But, in this particular case, Jesus is not saying the promised results of our giving are obtained now. Given the context, I personally believe Jesus is referring to divine recompense *in heaven*. But even if I'm wrong, I know that immediate blessings can never compare with eternal benefits.

Carnal or spiritual?

Many sincere Christians distance themselves from the thought of receiving rewards for godly living and faithful service. Some of them actually believe that striving for rewards is carnal, if not sinful. Supposedly, spiritual saints should not be interested in reaping eternal benefits for the good they do on earth. In the first place, they feel eternally indebted to the Lord for what he's done for them, as though he's expecting some sort of remuneration. (He isn't.) And if they aren't trying to repay him, they act out of gratitude, as though he asked them to show their appreciation by their good deeds. (He didn't.)

Working for reward is sometimes thought to be shamelessly self-centered, as though it's a worldly idea. Nothing could be further from the truth! If Satan can't stop you from eventually going to heaven, he will try to get you to concentrate on *his* world, on earthly things. He will distract you from working on your everlasting environment. (Our faith provides us our *place* in heaven; our deeds provide us our *position* there.)

Some Christians want nothing more than to work on their association (communication) with the Lord. They are not interested in good works nor in future rewards. Well, the Lord, too, wants fellowship with you, but that's not all he wants. Worship has its place, but so does work. He expects you to be busy about his business. He has a lot of work for you to do. Yes, Jesus talked to Peter about love: "Do you love me?" But, almost in the same breath, he talked to him about work: "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17).

Respecting rewards

I do not claim to fully comprehend God's concept of awards and rewards. But, I want to be careful not to discredit, underestimate, neglect or ignore our Lord's magnanimous offer. I want to take his proposals and expectations seriously. I need to take appropriate action. Whatever my response to heaven's rewards – involvement or indifference, I ought to remember that everything I do or don't do now is related to future rewards or punishment.

The Bible makes it clear that God is a confirmed *reward giver*. He will be indebted to no one because everything comes from him in the first place. "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Romans 11:35). He enjoys lavishly remunerating

outstanding effort and work done well on his behalf. I get the distinct impression that God goes out of his way to think up ways to give out rewards - if not in this life, then certainly in the next. His bounteousness is limitless.

Rewards in the Old Testament

“...in keeping them [the ordinances of the Lord] there is great reward” (Psalm 19:11).

“Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth” (Psalm 58:11).

“...he who sows righteousness reaps a sure reward.... One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.” (Proverbs 11:18,24,25).

“See, your Savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him” (Isaiah 62:11).

“...you reward everyone according to his conduct and as his deeds deserve” (Jeremiah 32:19).

Rewards in the New Testament

Jesus enlightens us with these truths: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad...” (Matthew 5:11-12). But why should such a lifestyle make us happy? The truth is, it doesn't. We need to read on, let him finish his sentence and pay special attention to an important “because.” So, if, in any way, you suffer for Christ, “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven...” What makes us glad? The persecution? Of course not - unless we have a martyr complex. We rejoice “...because great is [our] reward in heaven...”

There is a special reward for loving and praying for our enemies. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...If you love [only] those who love you, what reward will you get?” (Matthew 5:44,46).

“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing [do it discreetly], so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:1-4). (cf verses 5-18.)

“Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.

Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12-14).

"...you accept praise [glory or honor] from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God" (John 5:44). So, what sort of effort do I need to exert in order to obtain praise from God?

"Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Matthew 10:41-42).

True prophets, honorable people and faithful followers of Christ all get rewards as standard procedure. But, the same rewards go to those who minister to any of them. Why? Because true greatness is in serving.

"For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels; and then he will reward each person according to what he has done" (Matthew 16:27).

The kingdom of heaven will be like the parable of the talents:

"You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things" (Matthew 25:14-30). Christians sometimes say they want the Lord to tell them, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (verse 21), but to be told this, you first have to do something.

The kingdom of God will be like the parable of the minas:

"Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities" (Luke 19:11-26). (cf Revelation 2:26,27.)

"...each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers... the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (1 Corinthians 3:8-9,13-15).

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat [subdue] my body and make it my slave [servant] so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). Apostle Paul is not looking out only for himself; he wants all of us to compete and strive for eternal prizes.

"Do not let anyone...disqualify you for the prize" (Colossians 2:18).

"Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully" (2 John 8). Watch out, because it's possible to lose your reward through "care-less-ness!"

"I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14).

"I have worked much harder" (2 Corinthians 11:23). Did Paul work harder than others because he was a workaholic?

"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).

"...when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account" (Philippians 4:15-17). Moffatt: "...for it is the interest that accumulates in this way to your divine credit!" What can you say about the state of *your* account in heaven?

"Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:18-19). How firm is your foundation for the coming age? What are you doing to take hold of the life that is truly life? The answers to these questions are in the treasures you are laying up right now by doing good deeds, being generous and sharing with others.

"You...joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded" (Hebrews 10:34,35). No matter what you lose on earth for Jesus' sake, God will more than make it up to you; you will definitely have "better and lasting possessions" in heaven.

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward" (Colossians 3:23,24).

"...I [the Son of God] will repay [compensate] each of you according to your deeds" (Revelation 2:23).

"The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great..." (Revelation 11:18). Regardless of what I think of divine rewards, the twenty-four elders seemed to think this (the giving out of the rewards) was a noteworthy event.

"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End" (Revelation 22:12,13). Don't you find it

fascinating that, sandwiched between such central truths as his impending earth reentry and his incredible identity, is his statement about rewards? Doesn't it say something about the significance - to him, if not to us - of eternal rewards?

We think of Moses as being a model of modesty, but even he "...was looking ahead to his reward" (Hebrews 11:26). (By the way, how did he know he would be rewarded?)

Four hundred years before Moses, God told Abram, "...your reward will be very great" (NIV footnote, Genesis 15:1). And God is telling us ahead of time that he has set up a reward plan for us. It's important to him (and to us) that we be fully aware of it.

"Rich toward God"

In chapter 12 of his Gospel, Luke relates Jesus' Parable of the Rich Fool. In verse 21, he concludes: "This is how it will be [God calls him a fool and cuts short his life] with anyone who stores up things for himself [on earth] but is not rich toward God."

What does it mean to be rich toward God? It means including God in your thinking, planning and doing. It means investing in eternity by doing good on earth. Remember that everything is from him and for him. Find out what God cares about and get involved. The more generous you are on earth, the richer you will be in heaven. But you might say you don't want to be wealthy in heaven. Maybe you don't want it for yourself, but God wants it for you. However, he wants you to work for it, earn it, deserve it. So, for your own good, cooperate with him.

Earlier, in verse 15, Jesus says, "...a man's [a person's] life does not consist in the abundance of his [earthly] possessions." What, then, does this life consist of? It consists of living the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. It means focusing on God and on what good you can do for others, for the church, the community, the world.

God tells the rich fool his soul will be taken that same night. The NIV says: "demanded." The AV says his soul would be "required." The Greek uses the word *apaiteō* – "to ask back" or "to demand back." This implies that the human soul is of divine origin and ownership. It means your soul, your life is not yours.

You are answerable to *God*, *not* to yourself. A hearing and a deposition is scheduled for you in the highest court of the universe. "...man is destined to die ... and after that to face judgment..." (Hebrews 9:27).

"For he [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice..." (Acts 17:31). (The day is coming when all the wrongs will be made right; God will see to it.)

"For we [God's children] must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

"Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13).

To the church in Ephesus, the Lord told John to write, "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance" (Revelation 2:2).

"Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does..." (Ephesians 6:7-8). Repeat: "...the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does." Repeat one more time, slowly: "The Lord... will reward... everyone... for whatever...good... he does."

For every good deed you do, you will receive an appropriate reward! Conversely – no good deeds, no rewards but certain punishment. That is divine grace and divine justice! Why punishment? Because we disregarded God's lavish proposal and because we didn't do what we were told to do.

"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48).

But, whether little or much, we were all given something for which we are responsible, for which we will give an account. Meanwhile, investing in heaven is not only allowed; it is not only encouraged; it is *expected*.

"God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them" (Hebrews 6:10). You love God when you help his people. Your action will be recorded and rewarded.

Money: power for good or evil

Some people are willing to kill for a little money; some are willing to die for it. Every day people die for their money; for example, while being robbed. A man will lay down his life for a few dollars, and not because he thinks his money is worth more than his life. He is only demonstrating how dangerously far he has progressed in his senseless attachment to it. And, there are countless destructive ways to become attached to money. How are you attached to money?

You may have money (for which you are responsible). You are free to do with it whatever you wish. You can keep it in a tattered shoebox or under an old spring mattress - and watch it depreciate; that is, if there is no fire or if no one steals it. You can put it in the bank where it might be safer and may even earn some interest. Or you can invest it in the money market – for better or for worse.

You can be a wise money manager, spending it on what you need, while distributing part of it for the needs of people and institutions. You can be investing some of it so that, later, you can support God's earthly projects with the interest you earned. Consequently, you yourself will be reaping eternal benefits in heaven. It's your decision. It's your business.

It is my privilege to inform you of God's great proposition - if you are not already aware and benefiting from it. What you do with your life, your talents and resources, is between you and him. Eventually, *you* will give him a full report of what you did with what he committed to you. And *he* will punish or reward you accordingly.

Motivation

As you were reading the preceding biblical quotations about rewards for good deeds, did you notice any reference to any kind of motivation for doing good, other than rewards? (Personally, I didn't.) This does not mean that positive feelings, such as affection and appreciation, cannot or should not be part of our doing good.

On the contrary, we should always love God and people; we're commanded to do so. Loving commitment is the "super glue" that holds relationships together. (See Colossians 3:14.) Without love, "...I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). Love is here to stay - forever.

And, of course, we should constantly be grateful. We may also feel an occasional, unexplainable surge of generosity. Some of us even experience a recurrent sense of indebtedness. And we do want to be obedient children of our Father in heaven. But God simply encourages us to do good because we will surely be rewarded for it. What can be more straightforward than "...give to the poor, and you shall have wealth in heaven" (Matthew 19:21, Weymouth)?

By the way, Jesus said those words to a young man who felt that something was missing in his life, although he was very wealthy. Jesus gave him some customized advice: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor...Then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). His selling everything and giving the money to the poor would not get him into heaven. Only his faith in Christ could do that. But his benevolent act would have proven his seriousness and his sincerity. As it turned out, he shortsightedly chose wealth on earth over wealth in heaven.

If reward is not the incentive for being good and doing good, then why does the Bible so distinctly, so repetitiously and so compellingly talk about it? On the other hand, if reward is of crucial consequence in God's economy, do you blame Satan for trying to minimize it in our thinking and acting?

I believe God's abundant blessing for doing what is right and good goes back to the beginning of human civilization. It certainly goes back to the Mosaic Law. Moses told the Israelites that he would teach them God's laws and precepts. But he didn't simply say, "Here are the commandments. Obey them, because God says so, period." The Lord wanted them to keep his commandments, "*so that.*" "So that" connects to the other side of a divine equation. God is saying to his people, "If you will do that and that for me, I will do this and this for you."

"Follow them [God's laws] so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land..." (Deuteronomy 4:1). "Keep his decrees and commands ...so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the Lord your God gives you for all time" (Deuteronomy 4:40). God was

talking to Moses about his people: “Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them...” (Deuteronomy 5:29. Emphasis added).

Then Moses said to the people, “Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days...” (Deuteronomy 5:33). “If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the Lord your God will...love you and bless you...He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land...You will be blessed more than any other people...” (Deuteronomy 7:12-14. Emphasis added). (For more examples of “so that,” read Deuteronomy 6:2,3,18,24; 11:13-14.) To sum up, God gave his people rules and regulations for their own good. Through his commandments he was actually looking out for their welfare.

God was gracious, generous and practical under The Law. Has he become mean, stingy and aloof under Grace? Not at all. His personality is changeless. Right living today will be richly rewarded tomorrow. The Lord motivated the Israelites with physical and material blessing in an earthly kingdom. He now motivates us with rewards and riches in his heavenly kingdom.

Ten percent

Before we go any further, one thing probably should be clarified. *The tithe (tenth) is the Lord's*. It's *his* money. I'm just giving God what is already his. Withholding it from him is not an option. I have no claim, no right to it. Furthermore, the amount - 10% of my income - is nonnegotiable. Nor do I get any credit for giving it. I don't even get a thank you. Whether I give it reluctantly or eagerly, with or without emotion, is irrelevant. If God chooses to bless me for tithing, that's his decision; but that's not why I do it. I do it because I don't want to “...rob God” - literally: *defraud God*. (See Malachi 3:8.) By withholding the tithe, we cheat none other than God himself! Definitely not a good idea. (See Chapter 10, “Testing the Tithe,” for an authentication of the tithe for *today*.)

I haven't actually given God or anyone anything until I've drawn from the remaining 90 percent God has entrusted to me as working capital. Consequently, I'm storing treasures for myself in heaven (See Matthew 6:20) only when I'm giving from the 90 percent.

Let's say I owe you 100 dollars. When I pay you back, you don't have to thank me. It is I who should thank you for lending me the money. I have done nothing but paid my debt. It never was my money. But, if I unexpectedly give you an extra 10 or 20 dollars, that's when I have done something commendable. I gave you my own money. For that I can be praised. That's how it works with tithes (debt) and (thank) offerings.

My treasure, my heart

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted,

where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:32-34). The more I give on earth, the more I'll get in heaven.

My heart is inseparably tied to the things I treasure. Treasure is anything that is important, valuable to me. If my riches are on earth, that's where my heart is also. If my wealth is in heaven, so is my heart. Apostle Paul counsels Christians: "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:2). What is my mind's main orientation: earth or heaven?

Jesus did not say, "Store up treasures in heaven for me." He already has his rightful share of riches in heaven. So, he wants us to enjoy inexhaustible riches along with him, when we relocate permanently to heaven. But, he does not outright give us heavenly wealth. Either we earn it or we don't get it. On earth our money can depreciate, be wasted through wrong living or bad investments, be lost through negligence, be destroyed, be stolen. But, whatever is put into the Lord's earthly concerns and projects will be safely waiting for us in heaven - with divine dividends!

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). If the first part of that statement is literal, so is the last part. Most of us would not object to being rich on earth. Why, then, are we so restrained about being rich in heaven, especially if that's what God himself is proposing to us?

"Worthy is the Lamb [Jesus Christ]...to receive...wealth..." (Revelation 5:12). He will receive wealth because he is worthy, because he deserves it, because he earned it.

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9). During my farming days, when we planted one grain of wheat we reaped up to one hundred grains. That's reaping a harvest. Are you looking forward to your harvest in heaven? You should be, if you are not weary, if you haven't given up doing good. On God's homestead, rewards follow works the way reaping follows sowing. You can't reap what you don't sow.

A more reliable incentive

To help him succeed in his global mission, God wisely does *not* appeal solely (if at all) to our emotions - to our gratitude, our devotion, our benevolence, our sense of loyalty, our sense of obedience. For those who help him get his job done on earth, he chooses a more reliable incentive. It has to do with his faithfully and fairly compensating us in heaven. In addition to property and prosperity, there will be position and power. (cf 2 Timothy 2:12; 1 Corinthians 6:2-3; Revelation 2:26-27; 5:10; 20:4-6; 22:5.)

Emotions such as love and gratitude can ebb and flow like the tide; they can come and go; they can fluctuate. But commitment and consistency are more dependable.

God has a mission to fulfill, and he has devised the best possible method of achieving it. If it doesn't work, it's not his fault. If it fails, it's because we failed to support his strategy. You can help him and, at the same time, help yourself. Are you going to be one of those who knows what to do but does nothing about it; or are you going to respond to God, even if it means drastically changing your way of life? It's your choice – for time and eternity. Your lifestyle on earth will have a direct bearing on your lifestyle in heaven. God is concerned about this. He wants you to do well, because he wants to reward you well.

Why is it more blessed – on earth - to give than to take? (See Acts 20:35.) For one thing, you get no eternal rewards for taking. Jesus taught that giving on earth is the only way of receiving in heaven.

God wants you to get. But to get in heaven you have to give on earth. Do you think this is strange advice? Here is some more strange advice: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you...Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:27,28,31).

In this world, "the name of the game" is to rub shoulders with influential people. But God's children are "...willing to associate with people of low position" (Romans 12:16).

"...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be a slave of all" (Mark 10:43-44).

Notice that Jesus does not discourage you from seeking eventual eminence or preeminence for yourself in heaven. In fact, the greater you become in heaven, the more God likes it. He relates to greatness. He wants you to be great. He even tells you how to achieve it. Want to be outstanding up there? Serve others down here. Yes, it's true: we do preach the servanthood part. But, why do we treat the stimulus part – being first and being great in heaven – as if Jesus didn't teach it?

"Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task" (1Timothy 3:1). So, it's all right for you to aspire to be a spiritual leader. But, are you able to meet and maintain the qualifications?

Why did Jesus willingly endure the shame of the cross? Because he was looking forward to becoming sin for us? Because he relished suffering on the cross? Of course not! It was "...for the joy set before him..." (Hebrews 12:2).

It's true that God gave his son to die for us because he loved us so much. That's because he *is* love. But love was not the main reason for saving us. God saved us for a *purpose*. He has a personal plan and he needs our help to fulfill it. Only we can do it.

Here are just a few selected reasons for our salvation:

“In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has given us in the One he loves...in order that we...might be for the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:5,12. Emphasis added).

“...in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace...For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:7,10. Emphasis added.)

“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose...” (Ephesians 3:10. Emphasis added.)

Anyway, God has his own unique philosophy of social interaction, resource management, motivation and aspiration. We need to know what that philosophy is, if we are to be his good and faithful servants. If we do not familiarize ourselves with God’s stewardship plan and act on it, we will have all of eternity to live with the consequences of our negligence. What little we have, even that will be taken from us and given to someone who was more conscientious and industrious for the Lord.

In addition to his restrained characteristics, I find God to be creative, energetic, forceful, aggressive and persistent. He is highly motivated. He is ambitious in a positive way; that is, he is an achiever of the highest order. He is even a risk taker. Do you think he minds if his children emulate him?

Personally, I don’t believe God wants us to practice stewardship purely out of love or gratitude. Back in the early 70s, one of my responsibilities at a church was to answer radio and TV mail. A woman wrote to say, among other things, that she had stopped tithing to the Lord because of financial reverses. Her motive for giving had been love; she said she had been tithing “out of love.” In my response to her I tried to clarify the significance of biblical tithing. Here is part of my letter.

Your letter is very positive, except for one area: you no longer tithe. I think there is a big difference between (1) tithing out of love, (2) tithing out of faith or (3) tithing out of duty.

(1) Love gives as *much* as it feels like giving - *when* it feels like giving.

(2) As for faith, it is responsible to give only when it receives the resources to fulfill its “faith promise.”

(3) However, if you believe the tithe is obligatory, you will continue to give ten percent, no matter what your income, no matter how you feel, no matter how much faith you have. In fact, if you’re convinced the tithe is the Lord’s, then you can’t afford not to give it.

God knew what he was doing when he chose the tithe as the main means of funding his work on earth. Let's not try to rewrite or amend his financial policy.

Quality control

Not surprisingly, the Lord will look not only at the quantity but also at the quality of my work. "...work will be shown for what it is...It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work" (1 Corinthians 3:13). Some people's work will turn into ashes. They will be saved, but they will lose their expected reward. Why will some deeds fail the test? Because they will not meet God's criteria.

"For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

"I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve" (Jeremiah 17:10).

Components of quality

- Our good deeds should be done "in secret"; that is, not paraded before other people, not getting recognition from people, but performed humbly and discreetly - for God's eyes. (See Matthew 6:1-4.)
 - In Colossians 3:23, we learn the *what*, *how* and *why* of everything we do.

What: "Whatever you do..."

How: "...work at it with all your heart..."

Why: "...as working for the Lord, not for men..."

Anything we do for anybody, let's really do it for the Lord. What a difference in purpose and attitude it makes!

- "Always give yourselves fully [extraordinarily] to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). Not in vain! Not without its rewards!
- Love, gratitude, obedience and enthusiasm *should* permeate every part of our *everyday Christian life*. But none of these good emotions are biblically prescribed incentives for *doing good deeds*.

Motives

"He [the Lord] will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives in men's hearts" (1 Corinthians 4:5).

"...for the Lord ... understands every motive ..." (1 Chronicles 28:9).

"All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the Lord"

(Proverbs 16:2). In other words, you cannot evaluate my motives. I cannot fully evaluate my motives. Only the Lord can do it satisfactorily.

Bottom line: Don't hesitate to obey God's word even if there is a possibility of wrong motive. Commit the process to Christ; he will keep you on the right track.

I shouldn't stop doing good, just because I'm not sure of my motives. To the best of my understanding, I should act on the Lord's expressed word rather than second-guess him or myself. *It's better to have good deeds destroyed by God's test of fire than have nothing to test.*

Proceed on the basis that all you are and have is God's. You are working. You are working to the best of your ability. You are working to the best of your ability and for his glory. You are simply carrying out his instructions. If you continue to be troubled by the fact that your motives and intentions might be less than faultless, talk to the Lord about it. He will help you, because he doesn't want you to lose time, or to lose opportunities, or to lose out. Don't be a lazy loser! Be a worthy winner for your generous but evenhanded Master! You are working for and with none other than God himself! Don't bungle.

Selfishness should not be part of your performance portfolio, but there is nothing wrong with self-interest. Selfishness is self-interest gone wrong. Self-interest is not a sin. Part of self-interest is providing wisely for one's future – on earth and in heaven. Loving oneself is not only a good idea; it's a divine decree; it's part of the Great Commandment. You honor, you emulate God when you show self-interest.

Isn't our salvation experience motivated by self-interest? Receiving Christ into our lives is part of finding genuine self-identity, self-worth, self-fulfillment and self-realization. God expects us to be busy enhancing our own status in eternity. Not to do so is an insult to our gracious, giving Lord.

Jesus Christ gave himself for us for a reason: so that we would become excited about good works. "...our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ...gave Himself for us...to purify for Himself a people who should be His own, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14, Weymouth. See also 3:14). That means we not only respond to obvious needs, but we eagerly initiate good deeds. God appreciates (and rewards) resourceful people. If you ask him, he will help you to be innovative.

"May our Lord Jesus Christ...encourage...and strengthen you in every good deed and word" (2 Thessalonians 2:17).

The main thing is that you are doing a lot of good. You are optimizing the use of your spiritual gifts within and through the Church, the Body of Christ. If you believe it is your love for God and for people that drives you to do good deeds, so be it! If you think your gratitude is what arouses you to action, fine! Just keep in mind that Jesus never said, "Love me and serve me out of gratitude." If gratitude could make us love and serve the Lord the way God expects us to, there would not have been a need for him to *command* us to do so. And it's not our love, anyway. The love God wants us to use in loving him and others is the "...love [he] has poured out...into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:5).

If love and gratitude are such reliable motivators of God's children, then why is the Lord's work always short of resources – human and material? Every born-again believer claims to gratefully love the Lord. Reality says loving gratitude is seldom translated into adequate living and giving.

Unfortunately, what the Macedonian churches did was a rare phenomenon – even in the early church. God was able to inspire them, because they *first gave themselves wholeheartedly to him*. (See 2 Corinthians 8:1-5.) But emotions are not the most dependable, not the most stimulating long-term, treasure-storing motivators. An attractive, practical, human incentive is needed. Jesus hopes to inspire you with assurances of liberal, lasting treasures in heaven for *being* good and for *doing* good. Is he succeeding?

Down-to-earth incentive

The Lord loathes love without service and service without love. Apostle Paul commends the Christians in Thessalonica for their “labor of love” (1 Thessalonians 1:3, Moffatt). But he also shows the Christians in Corinth that their love and enthusiasm are not adequate motivators. (See 2 Corinthians 8:8,24; 9:2.) He reminds them that a whole year has passed since they said they would do something for the needy believers in Jerusalem. (See 2 Corinthians 8:10-11.) Is he trying to make them feel guilty?

It seems Paul hopes to motivate them by comparing them with others and even with Christ. (See 2 Corinthians 8:8,9.) He tries to shame them into action and even makes practical provisions for the pickup of “...the generous gift [they] had promised” (2 Corinthians 9:4-5. See also 1 Corinthians 16:1-4.)

I do not know if Paul's appeal produced the desired results in the Corinthian Christians. If God's incentive of sure rewards doesn't motivate us, what will?

It is possible that Apostle Paul's particular approach to the church in Corinth was aimed more at the “brothers” (husbands who held the purse strings) than at the “sisters” (wives). Most men, responding in the natural, in the flesh, need to be convinced there is a practical, justifiable and credible reason for something. They respond to impressive organization, to compelling presentations, to persuasive strategy, to concrete plans, to recognition and, yes, to awards, prizes, gifts.

Women tolerate all that, but they, generally, are more trusting, more compassionate. They get a great deal of satisfaction from the act of giving. They are interested in the process; whereas men are interested in the bottom line. Women enjoy the trip; men anticipate the destination. Men are impressed with the results; women are impressed with persons.

Women rely more on intuition, men more on logic. Women are usually unquestioningly devoted; men have conditions, requirements. When all the rest of the apostles (men) became disillusioned with Jesus and abandoned him (with the exception of John), women accompanied Christ all the way to the cross. “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene” (John 19:25).

Men do not activate love or express gratitude the way women do. God made both man and woman; both are essential. A balance between fervor and restraint is needed. All too often, the Kingdom of God is not prevailing on earth because the question of stewardship in Christian families is unresolved. Spouses do not understand each other; they are not in agreement; they are not pulling together. The Holy Spirit is not always invited, not consulted in the process. When men and women, husbands and wives, are motivated correctly, God's mission on earth can't help but be revitalized.

By the way, while upgrading our status in eternity, our good deeds also bring a lot of *glory to God* on earth. Letting our light shine by way of personal, verbal witness is good, but it is not enough. The unsaved have to see something that will cause them to praise God. "...let your light shine before men [people], that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Are people praising or profaning God because of me? (In this verse, Jesus tells us what it means to let our light shine. It shines when we do good works.)

On earth I represent my Father in heaven. People will glorify him because of me, depending on the quantity and quality of my godly deeds. What opportunity! What privilege! What responsibility! What reward!

But don't "put the cart before the horse." Don't go out with the sole purpose of getting rewards. Watch your motives. You go out to do good deeds and, as a consequence, you will be rewarded. It isn't that you sit there and selfishly, narrow-mindedly say: "Now, what can I do to lay up more and more treasures for myself in heaven? Instead, you are saying: "How can I assist and please my Lord today? How can I uphold and fulfill his mission? How can I bring help and hope to people?" You can still be aware of the rewards, but do your good deeds selflessly, not selfishly. Do it all as unto the Lord. That way, your good works will survive the Lord's test by fire.

If I enthusiastically take care of God's work, God will gladly take care of my rewards. You do your job and he will do his. Concentrate on pleasing your Lord with a good life and good deeds, and rewards will surely follow - to a large extent in the form of responsibilities.

"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom...the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:13,17).

Chapter 8

Divine Direction

**There is no easy,
instant solution to serious stewardship.**

**No quick fix.
Attitudes and lifestyles will need to change.
This takes time.
Commitment.
Effort.
Determination.
Sacrifice.**

Introduction

Before we can start working on our spiritual superstructure, we first need to dig deep, excavate an appropriate amount of settled soil and put down a solid footing. That means establishing and securing our connection with God. There can be no rewarding biblical stewardship without a reliable relationship with each member of The Holy Trinity.

By the way, I define Christian stewardship as managing the entrusted life - all of it, every part of it. Only eternal life is an outright gift; our earthly life is a sacred trust. This means (1) present responsibility and (2) eventual accountability to my Maker.

“Natural instincts”

Daily, we are confronted with unpredicted circumstances and unexpected developments. In spite of obvious personal limitations, we are compelled to make on-the-spot decisions and instant yet crucial choices.

How do we handle life's tests and temptations? Do we respond with whimsical situational ethics, with vague moral relativism and, as Jude in his short epistle expresses it in verse 19, with “...*mere natural instincts*...”? Does God want us to struggle through life by endless, frustrating and painful trial and error? Or, does the Bible provide a clear, changeless code of conduct to steer us safely and successfully through the hazards and challenges of each uncharted day? Has God given us a map for living?

Fortunately, God does not expect us to limit ourselves to our human handicaps or follow our flawed inclinations and remain in our deep-rutted habits. He has supplied us with a simple blueprint. If observed conscientiously, it will help us build our lives on a fixed foundation, using the right materials recommended by *The Supreme Architect*. Contrary to the opinion of many people, life *does* come with directions.

My personal need

Thirty-plus years after my conversion to Christ, I felt a personal need for a manageable yet adequate *handful* of ideals that (with persistent practice) could easily be absorbed and unhesitatingly applied to *all* of life's situations. I suspected they could be gleaned from between the covers of God's Travel Guide – the Bible, if I was willing to find and file them. (Actually, the Bible is much more than a guidebook; it's a Great Commandment book, a "Thou Shalt" book.) Months of biblical research went into the development of what I now share with you in this short chapter.

We all know that guidelines do not work by themselves, even when we are well aware of them. In addition to knowing, they need doing. Performance! Learning and practicing are part of an inseparable, progressive cycle. You can start the process by reading the principles three times, back-to-back. (Studies show that, on average, if you read something once, you will retain ten percent. Twice back-to-back: thirty percent. Three times back-to-back: seventy percent!) Periodic review is also helpful.

Even though it can never take the place of habitual private and public Bible study, this simple compilation has been an enormous help to me. These spiritual specifications can restructure your orientation, readjust your attitude, recondition your disposition, renew your thinking, refresh your philosophy of time and eternity and, of course, rework the nature and quality of your interaction with your Lord and with your "neighbor." *Once assimilated, these dynamic truths can become the driving and directing force behind all of your initiatives and responses.*

Your choice

When you travel, you have a purpose and a destination. That's important, unless you're happy moving around aimlessly and haphazardly. In order to get to your destination, you need not only to *set* a course but to *stay* on course. In order to stay on course, you need to know your present location. These biblical guidelines will always tell you (at any given moment) where you are spiritually.

You can, of course, take an alternate route. You are not, in any way, obligated to change or adjust your manner of living after reading the following biblical concepts under the subheading, "*A Relationship with the Trinity.*" That is your choice.

But, whether or not you need to or want to change your lifestyle, I'd like you to know why I have put these biblical truths on permanent public record. I don't want you to miss out on what God is offering you -- both on earth and in heaven. I want you to be fully aware of what he expects of you during your relatively short stay on earth, while you prepare for an endless next life. We need to be as knowledgeable as possible – well in advance – about the significance of standing at the *Judgment Seat of Christ.*

In any case, you can build your "house," your life, on biblical principles, on the immovable Rock – the Word of God. Or, you can try to build it on the constantly shifting sands of situational ethics, of moral relativism.

A well-meant bracelet

Some years ago, there was a WWJD fad among Christians in America, especially among young people. They wore the WWJD wrist bracelet to remind them to ask the question, “**What Would Jesus Do?**” in certain circumstances. (“What Would Jesus Do?” is the subtitle and main thrust of Charles M. Sheldon’s well-known novel, In His Steps.)

Why do we want to know what Jesus would do in a particular personal predicament of ours? If we actually knew what *Jesus* would do in a specific situation, is that what *we* would do? Is that what he would want us to do? It’s easy enough to ask the question, but how do we arrive at the right answer? Can we *know* what Jesus would do?

Personally, I don’t think I can know or need to know what Jesus would do. Aren’t we really asking: “What does Jesus want *me* to do in this particular situation”? If so, then why not simply ask the Lord: “What do you want me to do?” What he – my Creator, my *Lord and my Master* - would do in a given situation would probably be very different from what he would have me do - his *servant and his slave*. After all, he is God. When he needed to pay taxes, he got the money from a fish. When he had to catch up to his disciples, he walked on water. He could reprimand, counsel and comfort people accurately because he saw their hearts; he knew their attitudes, motives and thoughts. We humans normally don’t have such knowledge.

The Lord doesn’t lead even us humans in the exact same way. Let’s remember he works with us as unique individuals. The principles are the same for all of us, but approaches and expectations vary from person to person. In other words, he customizes the test, the treatment or the task to the personality and to the emotional, mental and spiritual current state or orientation of the individual (See John 21:20-22).

God had four different disciples chronicle the same earthly life of Christ - in the gospels - from their own personal perspective.

Why did the Lord send layman Philip from up north to minister to the Ethiopian official, while any number of apostles (only half as far away) were available in Jerusalem?

I will know how Jesus wants me to act - anytime, anywhere - only if I (1) carefully *investigate* the Bible for basic behavioral principles and (2) *maintain* a positive, persistent and productive relationship with the Holy Spirit. Biblical principles simply elucidate God’s character and reveal how he wants to relate to me. As part of his job description, God’s Spirit will (1) familiarize me with Christ’s basic nature and (2) advise me about what I should do in a given situation. We are to be *led by the Spirit*; we are to *keep in step with the Spirit*; and we are to *live by the Spirit* (Galatians 5:16,18,25).

A relationship with the Trinity

I believe God wants to connect directly, personally with each one of us. Many Christians don’t believe this to be true. They see no miracles, nothing extraordinary in their lives. At best, they believe we are guided throughout our

lives by reading the Bible, because they think God no longer talks directly and personally to people. Some Christians are chronically critical of the experiences of others, primarily because they themselves have not experienced the same or similar thing.

I agree with Apostle Paul that in God I breathe, move and have my being. God lives in me in all his fullness. The Christian life can be lived only supernaturally. So, in human terms, I am living a "miracle."

Does God want to communicate, interact with people today? I believe he does. Although I read the Bible every day, I cannot have a relationship with a book. I am not saying God cannot or does not "communicate" with us through his word. But, it is still God the Spirit who gives the word its life; it is still the Holy Spirit who *speaks* to me through his word; it is still the Spirit who conveys biblical truth to me. He personalizes his message to each of us, depending on our current orientation and need.

Not only does God "speak" to us through his *written* word, he does so through people and circumstances. *But all this can never take the place of his personally and directly communicating with us.*

By the way, regardless of who reads it, the Bible does not change its wording to suit the individual, even though a person is free to interpret the word as she or he wishes. Hopefully, the reader is looking for the *Spirit's* interpretation, since only he knows the right meaning of what he has inspired godly men to write on God's behalf.

The Christian life is not a religion; it's a relationship – a living, loving relationship with the three Persons of the Trinity. The resurrected Christ did not ask Peter, "Do you love my words?" He wanted to know, "Do you love *me*?"

Fellowship - a relationship - requires on-going, consistent communication. That's what the Lord wants with his people. Apostle Paul knew God's word well. He penned a large part of it. But, he wasn't satisfied with writing or knowing Scripture. In Philippians 3:10, he says, "I want to know *Christ...*"

To be of optimum value, this divine initiative has to work in both directions. The Spirit lets us know we are the children of God. We are led by him. He works within us and with us. He guides our personal lives individually and, therefore, differently, because we are all unique – one of a kind. I can get a clear sense of his leading only if he is somehow communicating with me - personally.

Not only that, but he will lead me to only the spiritual depth and breadth that I allow. If I permit him to lead me only in general rather than in particular, that is the way he will do it. He works with me where I am. He respects my restrictions. But if I want (and allow) him to lead in itemized detail (with nothing too small or insignificant for his personal attention and involvement), then that's the way he will lead me.

In reality, the one who sees every hair fall from my head (and knows how many are left), is very interested in every detail of my life. Life is made up of details and

my life (every bit of it) is what God is interested in. From God's perspective, how we deal with details is just as important as how we handle what we think are the outstanding, significant events of life.

Fellowship with God: on whose terms?

However you handle your relationship with your Lord, his commitment to you is constant. He provides you with nonstop complete care. He doesn't carry out his responsibilities intermittently (on again, off again). If there is a lapse in my connection with the Lord, it's not *his* fault.

His working in and through The Church – the Body of Christ – is another matter although, even in that setting, he uses individual members. The Body of Christ is made up of members, all of whom are fitted with the mind of Christ. There is a body only because there are individual members. Throughout human history, even while God dealt with entire nations, he always communicated through individuals.

I may not hear God with my physical ear. That is not necessary. His Spirit can communicate with me using his "multiple-media," all-purpose spirit mind and voice. I am able to recognize it as his voice because it is always distinctive, always the same, always consistent with God's character, wisdom and word.

Jesus said, "*They* [my sheep] *hear my voice*" (John 10:16). I believe Jesus is saying: "You will hear my voice. You will hear my voice." (See also verses 3 and 4.)

If you want to listen to a particular radio program, you need to have a receiver that is in good working condition. It has to be ON. Not only that, but you need to be in the right waveband. But that's not enough; you have to be on the right frequency. The volume has to be turned up and you have to be hearing and listening. These are the things you need to have and do if you want to hear a certain broadcast.

The problem is not from God's side. He's trying to get through to me. But am I tuned in? Am I hearing? Am I listening? Am I paying attention? What is the condition of my spiritual ears? Are they blocked with the cares of this world? Am I distracted by the pull of this present age? Am I listening to my flesh or to his Spirit? *Yes, we can have communication with the Lord, but it has to be on his terms, not ours.* We need to learn what those conditions are and then embrace them wholeheartedly. We may have to pay a high price for a connection to God but, whatever the cost, it's certainly worth it!

God started a direct relationship with me in my early childhood. (It was not my idea, not my initiative.) In principle, I have kept that same simple, unsophisticated impression (of who God is, what he's like and how he acts) right up to the present moment. It never crossed my mind that I should change my understanding of him as I grew older. On the contrary, he encourages me to maintain an expectant attitude toward him - my heavenly Father. Unlike pseudo intellectualism, innocent faith and child-like trust are free of skepticism and self-importance.

"I come to the garden alone/While the dew is still on the roses/And the voice I hear, falling on my ear/The Son of God discloses...He speaks, and the sound of His voice/Is so sweet the birds hush their singing...And He walks with me/And He talks with me/And He tells me I am His own..." Poetic license or experiential fact?

A relationship nurtured by love

God is an incurable communicator. He wants, craves and needs individual, reciprocal interaction with his created beings. The Great Commandment says he desires a love relationship with me. I "love" the Bible, but I am not "in love" with it - a book. I am in love with the *author* of the book. Love, joy, peace and the rest of the fruit of the Spirit are not the attributes of the written word but of a living *Person*. "The Truth shall set you free," because Truth is a Person: the Lord Jesus Christ. Scripture has no life apart from its life-giving source - the Triune God. Yes, God's word is truth (John 17:17) and we must know (John 8:32) and remain in the truth (John 15:7). But that's possible only because the Lord himself is truth (John 14:6); he himself is the living word (John 1:1,14).

"But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). The *word* will not guide me into all truth; he, the *Spirit*, will. Why will the word alone not guide me into all truth? Because, without God's Spirit, I will interpret God's word in my own human way. That is why there are so many different teachings of the word of God. But God's Spirit does not contradict himself, he does not disagree with himself. He is always consistent; he always teaches the same thing.

God created Adam and Eve for fellowship with him. *"And [today] our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ"* (1 John 1:3).

As far back as I can remember, I have had to believe my life is a heartbeat-by-heartbeat miracle. That's all I have ever known. I have always experienced God's personal, direct and evident activity in my life. Since this began at a very early age, I had no reason to think I was different from others, especially Christians who claim they believe in a God who communicates with humans who are made in his image and likeness.

I think of myself as a living, walking, talking miracle. But, I am not unique in this respect. I believe all of us are miracles of God. I see God's miraculous power in and around me. For some reason, some people just don't recognize or experience this.

I naturally expect the supernatural. I *expect* miracles. That is the way God has worked in my life from day one. God can no more stop acting miraculously than he can stop existing. It's his nature. It's normal for him. He can't stop being himself. That's the only kind of God I have ever known.

The fact that I am sitting here writing this, in the flesh, on earth, is thanks to God's intervention, protection and preservation. I believe in nothing if I do not believe in a God of on-going miracles. *"You are the God of miracles and wonders! You still demonstrate your awesome power"* (Psalm 77:14, LB).

The experiences I've had, the numerous "close calls" I've survived, the inherited genetic and hereditary factors I'm strapped with, the sicknesses and diseases I've survived, all tell me it is God himself and God alone who keeps me alive. Add to all this the personal communication with God - often instigated by him - and the certainty is complete.

In all of life, *how* we act and react depends on *who* we are. Conduct flows from character. The following biblical truths are not an end in themselves. They are a means to right action and reaction, which are the direct result of a right relationship, *a loving relationship with the three Persons of the Trinity*.

You will notice that no biblical references are given - intentionally so. One of the purposes of this particular chapter is to keep it as concise as possible. In fact, the material is presented in capsulized form. Another aim is to stimulate Bible study, to encourage you to be proactive and reactive. As you daily partake of the "Bread of Life," you will come across Bible references that will support the short statements under each of the following three subheadings.

Allow each stated truth to burn into your mind and heart. Before long, Truth will sweep away spiritual fuzziness. Ethical and moral grayness will progressively become black and white. Why? Because you will be "brainwashed" by biblical principles. Because the Holy Spirit himself will be your instructor.

Here, then, are the biblical principles that guide my life.

God the Father

"God so loved us"

He loves me unconditionally.

He cares for me unreservedly.

He forgives me completely,
when I repent (change my conduct).

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart"

God's superiority, sovereignty and sinlessness are *unquestioned*.

He is faultless.

He is believable.

He can and should be trusted without reservation.

Everything he allows into my life can be beneficial - immediately or ultimately.

I simply trust him, whether or not I understand.

It is more important that God understands me than that I understand **him**.

“He who promised is faithful”

Many of God's promises are proposed, not imposed.

They are there, but I have to accept and activate them for myself.

“Love the Lord your God”

God commands me to love him with *all* of me – all of my *body*, all of my *energy*, all of my *feelings* and all of my *mind*. Withholding nothing. I must always love *God* primarily and totally. *One hundred percent!* All of the time.

When I love God correctly, I will love others and myself properly.

However, I will need to use not human but divine love.

“Jars of clay”

I can be valuable to God. I am the Lord's instrument, to be used by him whenever, wherever, however *he* chooses.

I should take *God* seriously, take his *word* seriously, take his *people* seriously and take his *work* seriously. But, I should not take *myself* too seriously – as though I am indispensable, as though everything depends on me.

“For the glory of God”

I exist for only *one* reason: God's glory. Glorifying God is a divine decree.

My constant concern should not be what he can do for me but what I can do for him. I was not born to please myself but to please him. Even Jesus did not please himself.

I ought to obey the Lord decisively and precisely, whatever the condition, whatever the cost. Surrender, submission and obedience to him should be constant, consistent, total and unconditional.

He incessantly craves my (preferably sin-free) fellowship. I can avoid sin by keeping Christ - not myself - at the center of my life and in obedience to him, doing things God's way rather than my way.

I will properly be pleased with myself only when I please my Maker.

Part of glorifying God is praising him. A constant attitude and expression of joyful praise is essential. My sincere, unconditional praise proves I trust God.

I should give *thanks* in all of my prayers and in all situations.

“Serving the Lord”

I cannot be possessive or controlling of *anyone or anything*, because everyone and everything is a *sacred trust* from God. I only *manage* things and relationships for him.

It is imperative that God be my *Lord and Master*, not just in name but in attitude and action. Above all other vital earthly commitments, I must be *his reliable servant*.

God the Son

“Apart from me you can do nothing”

- My spiritual birth starts an intimate relationship with Christ. Whether or not I remember the precise moment, my eternal relationship with Christ consciously began the day I was born again.
- *He* provides me with salvation, certainty, security, safety and serenity. Human relationships and earthly things are temporary.
- I should be living for him every second. I cannot live without him for a moment. He is the source of my ongoing life - physical, as well as spiritual.

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus”

- I am encouraged to keep my eyes on *Jesus*. He alone is my perfect role model.
- People will disappoint me as surely as I will disappoint them.
- I look to Christ to be my Example, my Strength, my Insight, my Wisdom, my Life. *I focus on him* - not on others, not on myself. Not on the lifestyle or behavior of others. Not on my personal predicaments.
- I can confidently count on him in absolutely *all* circumstances. There is no situation beyond his control.
- I am on round-the-clock display to the human and spirit world. Christ is eager to show the universe what he can do in me, for me, with me and through me – if I let him.

“When I am weak, then I am strong”

- I need to take full responsibility for my actions. I have a free will and I make choices. I should not make excuses for myself or blame others for my sins, mistakes and failures.
- I have to realize that my advancement in the Christian life will go only as far as I can forgive others *and* forgive myself.
- It's OK for me to acknowledge my own imperfections. God's power is perfected in human weakness. I should not be strong in “the flesh” but, rather, strong in the Lord.

God the Spirit

“You are not your own”

- I am God’s holy habitat. His Spirit has moved in – permanently, forever. I am the temple of the Holy Spirit. A temple is a place dedicated to worship.
- I am wholly his – by origin, by purchase, by possession, by empowerment. By any biblical definition, I am not my own. It’s not my life, not my body, not my abilities, not my resources, not my time, not even my space.
- Everything good that I am and have has been entrusted to me *by* him and *for* him – in this life and in the next.
- Whether or not I recognize or acknowledge it, I am inseparably, uninterruptedly and irrevocably connected to and dependent upon my Maker and Maintainer.
- The Christian life calls for supernatural performance, which requires a supernatural power source.
- The Holy Spirit wishes to be my teacher/interpreter of God’s word and will. He wants to be my personal, permanent consultant/counselor – never too easy, never too hard on me. He understands me entirely, perfectly.
- He will direct me into a right relationship with the Godhead, with people and with myself.
- God’s Spirit desires to control, lead and guide me 24 hours a day and every minute in-between.
- I must constantly be aware that his thoughts and ways can be quite different from mine. The two natures – old (sinful) and new (sinless) - inside me are

always at odds with each other. Christ's nature provides me with needed understanding and with good judgment.

“Be holy”

- God's intention for me is to be pure – in every thought, in every word, in every act and reaction.
- He is holy and he expects me to provide him with a consistently wholesome abode and environment.
- I should always behave as though my thoughts, words and actions are clearly, completely and constantly audible and visible to him - *because they are*.

“The way of truth”

- The residing, presiding Holy Spirit is remarkably sensitive. I can easily grieve or gratify him.
- He is truth, and he expects me to be truthful.
- I can fool myself and I may fool others, but he cannot be fooled. He sees through my hypocrisy. Any attempt on my part to deceive the Holy Spirit is harmful to me and to my relationship with him.
- When I am *not* living a lie, I can pray ceaselessly, confidently, energetically and effectively. The Holy Spirit is my prayer partner and my prayer assistant.

“Clothe yourselves with humility”

- God's Spirit wants me to co-operate, to co-act with him. He urges me to exercise courage, determination and daring.
- But, I need to remember that biblical boldness is modest, not arrogant. I should boast about the Lord, not about myself.
- I am not always right.
- There is much I do not know. There is much I do not understand.
- As long as I live, I will be learning. I continue to grow and develop.
- I have not arrived. I am still on *The Way*.
- *Divine direction* will not work without *self-discipline* (self-control), which is a characteristic of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Concentrate on character and you will not need to worry about conduct. Think relationship, not rules. If you can unreservedly embrace “Divine Direction,” you’re probably ready for bona fide biblical stewardship.

I like what Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States of America, said about God’s leading. “I am satisfied that when the Almighty wants me to do (or not to do) any particular thing, He finds a way of letting me know it.”

There are many myths when it comes to knowing and doing God’s will. So, it is in everybody’s best interests to identify some of these misleading misconceptions.

Here are ten scenarios that have *nothing* to do with *divine* guidance:

- 1. Agreement.** Just because *Christians* agree on something, does not necessarily mean *God* is in it. It can be misleading to seek *God’s* approval for *man’s* choices or decisions.
- 2. Fleece.** We should avoid using "fleece" in God's dealings with us. We should be willing to believe his word, his instructions, his calling -- without personal conditions. God had already shown Gideon a sign in response to his request (Judges 6:17, 20-21). For some reason, that was not enough for Gideon. But God was very patient with him.
- 3. Usefulness.** Some people are useful no matter where you put them; they seem to do well no matter what their assignment. But God does not always put us where he can most *use* us; he puts us where we will best *glorify* him. Sometimes he puts us in situations where we don’t minister but, rather, are ministered to.
- 4. Advancement.** Just because a *promotion* is proposed, doesn’t mean God is in the change, in the move.
- 5. Suitability.** God often chooses the *least* likely person. When the Lord called Moses and, later, Jeremiah, both of them insisted they couldn’t do it: they had no talent, no training, no experience, no speaking ability. But, the capability – if it’s at all needed - comes with the calling.
- 6. Liked.** You don’t assume you should stay in one place forever just because no one is asking you to leave. When the Lord is leading, people’s love, hate or indifference has nothing to do with your going or staying.
- 7. Logic.** God doesn’t think the way humans think. What was logical about Noah being ordered to build the ark or Abram commanded to sacrifice his son? And what was humanly logical about the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ?
- 8. Rank.** The Lord’s leading puts no significance on a person’s organizational status or seniority.

9.Need. God's guidance has nothing to do with humanly perceived need. Need is a relative, subjective concept. Philip was told to leave the crowds of Samaria to minister to one individual on an isolated road between Jerusalem and Gaza.

10.Success. God will move you whether or not you are, or will be, successful. The Lord called Ezekiel to a special task and told him, in advance, that his efforts would be futile, that the project would be a failure. *We* tend to focus on success; God focuses on purpose.

What, then, is divine guidance? Not surprisingly, it is *Divine* Guidance - not *human* rationale or strategy.

- Divine guidance is usually not clear from start to finish. More often it's one phase at a time. (That encourages walking by faith and with dependence on God.)
- Family and friends may not understand or approve of your divinely-directed actions.
- You yourself may not initially agree with God's call or direction. You may not understand, you may not see any sense in it.
- There may be an organizational, financial, relational, or personal price to pay.
- A Christian who is out of place in God's scheme, may be displacing others.

We do not go looking for God's will; it comes looking for us. We do not *find* God's will; we find ourselves *in it*; it's a way of life; it's being consistently led by the Spirit. Apostle Paul encourages the Galatian Christians to walk in the Spirit; that is, to abide, to stay, to live in the Holy Spirit. You don't dial for Divine guidance; instead, you yourself are on call 24 hours a day. God isn't required to consult with you before he directs you. He doesn't ask you if it's convenient or practical for you to follow him.

Do you know the difference between (1) *self* leading, (2) *Satan's* leading or (3) the *Lord's* leading? I'm especially talking about major moves or changes. Let me share with you how it works for me. You decide if it will work for you.

When self leads, the urge, the compulsion, is not consistent. It fluctuates. It comes and goes. It's on again, off again.

When the devil leads, it's always very urgent, very pressing. No time to think. No time to pray. It's now or never. If you delay, it will be too late.

When the Lord leads, he gives you time. It's not exceptionally urgent, but it is there, it never goes away. He is considerate and patient. He gives you space. There's time to think, talk and even to disagree with it. He hopes you will go along with him, but you have the ability of turning him down.

Divine guidance is *not* complicated or confusing, unless we ourselves complicate and confuse it. The Lord isn't out to give us a hard time; he doesn't play games

with us; he isn't "out to get us"; .On the contrary, he is always thinking about our best interests. Solomon said it so well in Proverbs 3:5-6 (MOV). *Trust the Lord wholeheartedly. Don't depend on your own intelligence. Identify with him in all your ways; don't leave him out of anything. You not only put him in everything; you put him first in everything. Then, and only then, he will direct your whole life.* You can't go wrong, if you want God's guidance half as much as he wants to give it to you.

Chapter 9

Testing the Tithe

Is the tithe bad news for the Good News?
Does "the 10th" figure in the Plan of Salvation?
Since it has to do with money, we cannot afford to be illiterate on this subject. You know the saying: "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." When it comes to the tithe, you wouldn't believe how much there is to gain...or lose!
So...shall we venture? Who knows, it may very well turn out to be an adventure!

The tithe *before* "The Law"

The tithe did not come into existence when the Mosaic Law was established, nor did *The Law* ever have a monopoly on it. Historians tell us *The Law* appropriated a custom that was already in universal use. Pagans gave tithes to the gods they created; children of God were tithing to the one who created them.

- **In the beginning, Cain and Abel brought the first fruits of their labor to God (Genesis 4:3,4; 1 John 3:12).**
- **About 600 years before the giving of The Mosaic Law, Abram gave Melchizedek (King of Salem and priest of God Most High) "...a tenth of everything" (Genesis 14:20).**
- **About 500 years before The Law was instituted, Jacob knew about the tithe and gave it to God. "...of all that you give me I will give you a tenth" (Genesis 28:22).**

God heard and blessed Jacob's vow. Jacob worked hard and prospered *miraculously*, in spite of his father-in-law's (Laban's) double-crossing duplicity. In Sunday School we teach our children all about Jacob's *ladder* (stairway).

But who will teach them about Jacob's vow, made by him early the next morning after he saw the ladder in a dream (verses 20-22)? We can't climb Jacob's ladder, but we can claim Jacob's vow. And, if we would do that, what a difference it would make in our personal lives and in the life of our church!

Anyway, the tithe seems to stand on its own, doesn't it? What basis do we have to believe otherwise? And if it was in force before *The Law*, why shouldn't it be obligatory after *The Law*?

If anything, the pre-Mosaic tithe seems to be of greater significance than it was under *The Law*. Speaking of Melchizedek collecting a tenth from Abraham, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews (7:7-10) says: "And without a doubt the lesser person [Levi] is blessed by the greater [Melchizedek]. In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die [the priestly tribe of Levi]; but in the other case, by him who is declared living [Melchizedek]. One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor."

Today, "He [Christ] has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 6:20). Since Christ is today's ever-living Melchizedek, it seems to me that tithes should continue to be paid to him more than ever.

The tithe *after* "The Law"

The tithe was in use before and during Moses' Law. If, at some point, it was terminated - when, and by whom? Not by the Apostolic Church. Jesus seems to give it his support. "You give a tenth...but you have neglected the more important matters - justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Matthew 23:23).

In the strict context of currency (two sides of the same coin), Jesus taught: "*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's*" (Matthew 22:21). What kind of money is Caesar's? The tax? What kind of money is God's? The tithe? *Do not withhold your money from either entity. You have an on-going horizontal and vertical monetary obligation.* Is that what Jesus is saying?

The tithe today

Explicit

Under *The Law*, the tithe was *explicit* - meticulously spelled out. The unregenerate heart, the uninstructed mind needed to have the concept spelled out in no uncertain terms. Eventually, most of God's Chosen People gave much more - if you add their voluntary offerings. And God blessed them when they faithfully gave him his tenth and their offerings.

Implicit

Under *Grace*, I believe the tithe is *implicit* - presupposed. If the pre-Law tithe to Melchizedek was of greater significance than was the Mosaic tithe then, certainly, the post-Law tithe to the current Melchizedek is of even greater

importance. In order to justifiably ignore the tithe today, we would need clear Scriptural instruction to do so. The tithe cannot be convicted and evicted without evidence beyond a reasonable doubt. However, I find no proof (or even evidence) that God has repealed the tenacious tithe.

Interdependence

In today's world, we normally give our government far more than ten percent of our income for the services it provides. God's percentage stays the same. Is it wrong for God to remind us (via the tiny tithe) that we depend - totally - on him? But, more importantly, the same tithe also reminds us that he depends totally on us, when it comes to financing his church and his mission on earth.

It comes from and belongs to whom?

King David spoke highly perceptive words when the tribes of Israel "...gave willingly toward the work of the temple." "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand. O Lord our God, as for all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name, it comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you.

"And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you. O Lord, God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Israel, keep this desire in the hearts of your people forever, and keep their hearts loyal to you" (1 Chronicles 29:14-18).

Were David's words - "...everything comes from you..." and "...all of it belongs to you..." – true only for the duration of *The Law*? Of course not! Were tithes and offerings practiced only for the duration of *The Law*? Of course not! Basically, nothing has changed. God's provisions for us are ongoing and so are his expectations of us. He provides for our needs and we for his. It's called collaboration (co-laboring, co-working).

Can I afford *not* to give the tithe?

The New Testament continues the same fundamental idea; only the perspective and terminology are different. Human nature needs the discipline of budgeting and planning. "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money, in keeping with his income" (1 Corinthians 16:2). I know Apostle Paul is talking about a special situation here, but it is still an all-around sound principle to live by.

Note that Christians met "On the first day of every week..." (See also Acts 20:7), because Christ arose on the first day of the week (See John 20:1,19). The Sabbath was instituted exclusively for the earthly Jewish nation. "The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath...It will be a sign between me [the Lord] and the Israelites..." (Exodus 31:16,17).

God's work - starting with the local church and ending with his church worldwide – cannot operate efficiently and effectively on capricious and sporadic giving. If

we operated family and business finances the way we generally run God's work, we would soon be bankrupt.

Let's get serious about why we are here and about the most important mission in our lives. Let's get our priorities straight. We're thinking backwards if our primary concern is for personal survival and our secondary concern is for the state of God's work. The biblical way is still, "*But seek first his kingdom [his work] and his righteousness [his truth], and all these things [food and clothing] will be given to you as well*" (Matthew 6:33).

God is reasonable. He only asks for a tenth of what you *have*, not what you don't have. The shortsighted question is, "Can I afford to give God his tenth?" The farsighted question is, "Can I afford *not* to give it?"

"I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner" (Ecclesiastes 5:13).

"One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty" (Proverbs 11:24). There are assorted reasons for this. In any event, do not envy the people who happen to stay rich even though they give nothing to anyone, not even to God.

Satan can provide well - when he wants to - for those who serve him well. They *have* their reward, although very temporarily. The faithful child of God is accumulating rewards that will be enjoyed forever.

Looking at money through God's eyes

Tithing will give you God's outlook on money. You will consult with your *Personal Financial Advisor* - the indwelling Holy Spirit - about money matters. He will help you manage your money more responsibly. You will get your priorities in tune with God's. (See Chapter Eight.)

Ancient Israel's tithe was tied to funding tabernacle or temple operations: priests, personnel, sacrifices, worship, benevolence. Tithing today underwrites God's concern for the bodies and souls of people worldwide.

Tithing will stretch you spiritually. If giving is a burden, it will become a blessing. You will permit Christ to set you free from feelings of possessiveness, greed and legalism. Nor will you have an attitude of superiority. On the contrary, you will stay humble, knowing that without the Lord, you would be nothing, have nothing, do nothing. You will keep your eyes on Jesus, on lost souls, on the needs of God's people, and on God's needy people in general.

God has never stopped needing the tithe. Considering his global objectives and the present world population, he needs it now more than ever.

So, what should we do with the tithe? I personally believe we should give it. How you give it is up to you. You can give it grudgingly, or you can give it gladly. Since you should give God what is his, why not do it agreeably rather than resentfully? Don't miss giving because of misgivings. Better to be safe than sorry,

although that is not the best reason for tithing. Yes, we should give the tithe because we want to obey and please the Lord. But, most importantly, we give it because we don't want to rob him!

Some Christians maintain that since the tithe is the Lord's, we are not really giving him anything until we dip into "our own" 90 percent. Maybe it isn't quite that simple. Don't forget what David (under *The Law*) said: "Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand."

The truth of the matter is, we ourselves are his. And if we are his, then everything we are and have is his. "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). So, why don't we start from the one hundred percent end of the spectrum, rather than from the minimum ten percent? Wouldn't that be the graceful way of doing things?

But we do need to make a far-reaching distinction between the ten and the ninety percent. By surrendering the tenth, we are not yet gaining any equity in heaven. When we submit the tithe, we are only turning over to God what is his. *For that we get no credit.* We have not yet touched "our" operating assets.

Some Christians say they are not concerned about the tithe, because they give *more* than a tenth. If they have an on-going way of verifying this, then the end result is the same. But, God knows most people need a specific system, especially when it comes to how they handle "their" money.

The only way you can safely ignore the tithe is to give God more than ten percent of your *gross* income, whatever it's shape or form. If you are skeptical about the validity of the tithe or you outright reject it, you can still - on a regular, predetermined basis - *give God as much as you think he and his work are worth.* The level and quality of your giving and the general managing of your life will also determine how much *you* will be worth in heaven. (Jesus promised you a *place* in heaven. What *position, possessions* and *power* you will have there depends on what you're doing about it right now.)

By the way, it is Scriptural (Matthew 7:1-5) first to analyze your own operating practices before you scrutinize and criticize churches, missionary societies and para-church organizations for what it costs them to manage their ministry. You, too, are in business with/for the Lord. What percentage goes for your overhead? All of us will be audited and evaluated at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Not one of us will be exempt from this procedure. Whether the process will be pleasant or painful for us will depend on how we handled "our" God-given earthly resources for our Lord and Master.

It's true that we will benefit eternally if we invest in the Lord's on-earth endeavors. But, tithing also brings us blessing here and now. Christians around the world testify to this. This should surprise no one. The Lord promised his blessing - in this life and in the next - to those who put him and his concerns above their own.

“Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits (tenth) of all your crops [gross income]; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine” (Proverbs 3:9-10).

We usually think of the 23rd Psalm in terms of what God does for *us*. And that certainly is an accurate observation. “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not be in want.” However, that's only part of the shepherd-sheep scenario.

The Lord takes care of me. But, *why*? Is it because he enjoys pampering and humoring me? Maybe. Am I his pet sheep? Maybe that, too. Why do shepherds have flocks of sheep? So that they (the sheep) can take care of *his* needs and help him achieve his goals. Healthy sheep regularly provide their owner with a thick coat of wool. The mature Christian thinks in terms of generously providing for *God's* needs which, after meeting *the deductible* (the tithe), lays up treasure for her/him in heaven.

When we give God "our" money (out of the 90%), is that the last time we see it? Not at all! We have reason to believe God will give it all back to us with interest, up to a hundred times as much. That seems like a lot. But, that's how important, how urgent God's work is. And that is how he has chosen to finance it – with his mandatory tithe and your voluntary offerings. The tithe is an obligation; the offering is an oblation – a gift.

"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:7-9).

"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:17-19). What a divine proposition! What a no-risk opportunity to invest in the Kingdom of God and reap eternal dividends!

Under Mosaic Law, God financed his interests in the little Hebrew nation with the modest but mighty tithe. Today, believe it or not, he is still able to underwrite his local, regional, national and international affairs with the tenth - if it's given. This is partly due to his efficiency, and partly because he does not look at money the way we do. God can get by on his tenth. Do you think you can support your earthly lifestyle on the remaining 90 percent? He knows you can, or he would never have instituted the 10/90 proviso.

Just keep in mind that if you spend all 90 percent on yourself, you will have nothing to look forward to in heaven. You'll be saved, but that's about all. How disappointed you will be when you see others receiving impressive possessions and prestigious positions! But, there, it will be too late to do anything about it. No second chance. You will hear the Lord say to them (Matthew 25:21,26),

"You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" To you the Lord will say: "You wicked, lazy servant!" And, you will be properly punished.

Whatever the percentages, good and faithful servants (stewards, managers) are heavily involved with God. They are delighted to help the Lord now, and themselves later. What an honor to be asked by him for help, to be his partners and, if that isn't enough, to be storing riches for oneself in heaven!

What to do?

Wasted years cannot be returned, but maybe they can be made up for - especially when it comes to investing in the Lord's work, particularly if love of money was not the reason for our lack of involvement. But even if greed did play an active role in the past, we can now replace it with grace.

It is not entirely clear what the Lord will do with Christians who, over the years, have *not* tendered the tithe. His action will probably take into consideration things like ignorance, confusion, attitude, deliberate disobedience. If we want to know how God feels about not getting his tithe, we have only to read the third chapter of the Book of the prophet Malachi.

"Will a man [human] rob God? Yet you rob me. How? In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse because you are robbing me...Test me in this and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit."

By the way, the Greek word of the Authorized Version "*Render*" (to give God what's his) is actually *apodid mi*. It means *give back!* (And, if you are an etymology enthusiast, our word *tithe* literally means *tenth* in Hebrew and Greek. *Tithe* is Middle English for Old English *teogotha* - tenth.)

Tithe on the gross or the net?

The answer to that question is not easy to define in today's society, but we do have general Old Testament guidelines to go by. (That's where we first learn about giving the tithe.) And, when in doubt, it's always the more prudent thing to give God more than less.

Today, the average Christian's first concern is satisfying "Caesar," because the government makes it quite clear how much we owe it. And it also makes clear what the consequences are if we don't comply. Only then (if at all) we turn our attention to God and what we sometimes think are his vague expectations. But in the OT, it was not so. God's plain requirements always came first. After that came the king's (government's) demands. Whatever was left belonged to the individual.

The Jews not only gave God a tenth of everything they earned, they also gave him the firstfruits of their produce (Prov. 3:9) and their firstborn animals. (Exodus 13:2)

Anyway, if I understand it correctly, the Lord's tithe was based on one's gross income.

"Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year" (Deut. 14:22).

"I [a Pharisee]... give a tenth of all I get" (Luke 18:12).

Work it out

Why not talk it over with your Lord and Master? Between the two of you, you should be able to arrive at a mutually acceptable arrangement. If you're married, include your spouse in this exercise. In the process, you may be in for quite a revelation. You may find out how much you trust God, how much you believe his promises, how much you value his word and his work.

You may even determine exactly how much you *love* him. Doesn't the intensity of your commitment *to* him determine the scope of your work *for* him? Whatever you do, don't let a little money – "yours" or "his" - come between you and him.

___ Of what importance is Levi's giving the tithe to Melchizedek through Abraham?

___ What significance does Christ's eternal priesthood have? Heb 6:20

___ Give to God ...what is God's?

___ If the tithe existed from the beginning (even before The Law), why did God through Moses find it necessary to explain it so explicitly?

___ Is there proof in the NT that God repealed the tithe?

The only bank account God has on earth is in my name.

___ On what basis, by what method do we tithe?

- Out of love, gratitude
- By faith promise
- Out of obligation.

___ Should I keep a record of my giving?

___ How, when, do I lay up treasures in heaven?

Chapter 10

Spiritual Leaders Teach Tithing & Giving

If you are a pastor, a preacher, a teacher, an evangelist or a missionary, you are God's servant, and a servant of the people - in Christ's name. Teach New Testament tithing and celestial investing only if you yourself tithe and give, and you do it with *pleasure*. Helping Christians to be "...rich toward God..." (Luke 12:21) is definitely something to get *excited* about! With few exceptions, church members will not become any more zealous about storing up treasures for themselves in heaven than you do. If you do decide to teach biblical giving, be sure to do it with the conviction and enthusiasm it deserves.

Introduction

Anytime you talk about money, you are touching a raw nerve of many a carnal Christian. You might be menacing the most protected area of the lives of an undetermined number of God's dear children. So, be sensitive, be wise, be understanding, be careful, be sympathetic, be creative, be positive.

But, never apologize for speaking on the topic of giving. God doesn't, and it's his idea, his plan. The message is his; we are only his messengers. (And role models.)

Your spiritual leadership

You are in a position of Christian leadership because God has ordained, called and gifted you. People give to (support) the Lord and his work, and he - via church administrators - provides spiritual leaders and full-time workers with a salary out of *his* (God's) money. Never forget that you are on *God's* salary - not the church's payroll. You are paid to speak for God. You are not paid to agree with or voice the opinions of the people. If you are there to please people, you are in the wrong occupation.

Under normal organizational, political and economic conditions, I personally believe a senior pastor's salary should be close to the average of what the members of his church earn. This arrangement results in mutual respect and acceptance. The

amount of a pastor's wages indicates how much the members value him, his family, and his ministry.

In any case, every full-time, church-supported spiritual worker should be able to take appropriate care of his family and cover his financial obligations at home and in the community. But, each worker should know how to live within a realistic budget. If he cannot, he should get outside help with how to handle money. How can he talk to others about money management if he himself doesn't know how to do it? Generally speaking, 30 wage-earning, tithe-paying members can begin to take care of a church's operating expenses, pay their pastor a salary and (to an appropriate extent) support evangelistic and missionary outreach.

Your world view as a leader

Put God - not yourself, not your members - in the center of your church finances. You are more a conveyor than a custodian of God's money. Don't get in the way of what God wants to do in, for and through your church.

Don't think *local* church only; think big; think world - the way God does. Don't worry about "*your*" church money being diverted to other worthy causes. Be generous to God's other sheep and he will more than meet all your needs. Give in the name of Jesus and for his sake. Your members will eagerly vindicate your generous disposition.

Your good example

Personally be a true portrayal of what it means to be "*...rich toward God*" (Luke 12:21). Prove to your members that you yourself believe that "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts of the Apostles 20:35). If you are a credible example, they will follow your cue, your leadership, your guidance.

"Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money" (your church's money or your own money) (I Timothy 3:2-3).

Your teaching

You don't necessarily have to bring in a guest speaker to introduce your people to biblical giving. If *you* wholeheartedly believe it, practice it and teach it, that is all they need. An outsider will not necessarily have better results than you will. If you do bring in an outsider who has more experience in this area, be obviously, actively supportive of your guest speaker.

Even after you have been a good example and have faithfully taught biblical stewardship, don't expect to see an immediate, miraculous change in members, especially if they have been Christians for many years. This sort of thing takes time. (Of course, there are always exceptions.)

You can't go wrong by concentrating your teaching/training efforts on children, young people and new converts. Youth – physical or spiritual – is pliable, sensitive and idealistic - *if* fully informed and committed.

From personal observation, I see that a recent convert tends to be an activist, while a believer of long standing tends to be a pacifist. A new convert is geared for doing, not just hearing. He has in zeal what he lacks in knowledge. Knowledge is the locomotive; zeal is the fuel. Fortunate is the person or the family that has both. But, this is why the body of Christ is there; this is why you are there.

It's important for veteran Christians to remain teachable to the end of their life. In this life, spiritual growth never stops. All of this has something to do with retaining (or regaining) one's "first love" for the Lord. When we love *him* correctly, we will love to obey his word and do his work.

It's also important to maintain a childlike trust toward God and toward his generous offers. Ironically and sadly, old believers (age-wise and faith-wise) are least motivated to store riches for themselves in heaven even though, statistically, they have the least amount of earth time left to make a difference in the Lord's work on earth and in the quality of their eternity.

Make it clear to your members that God is not *forcing* anybody to lay up treasures in heaven. But also make clear the consequences of non-involvement. You can say: "You don't have to give a dime; but neither will you have anything in heaven. In fact, God will take away from you what little you do have." Definitely do an in-depth study with them of Jesus' parables of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) and of the Minas (Luke 19:11-26).

Be more concerned about what *God* thinks of your financial teaching and less about what members think and say. Don't second-guess your members. "But what if they think this or say that?" That is not your concern. That should not stop you.

Don't avoid teaching unpopular or little known biblical subjects. The reason tithing and the whole subject of biblical stewardship is unpopular in some Christian circles is that it (1) hasn't been taught, (2) hasn't been taught in a positive manner or (3) hasn't been demonstrated correctly.

Back in the late 70s I spent several months among Slavic believers who lived in neighboring countries outside North America. Some of them had migrated there in the late 20s and early 30s. They established churches and had annual conferences and invited North American Bible teachers and spiritual leaders. I was one of those conference speakers. I taught biblical stewardship. At the close of the conference, the president of the association of churches said to me: "No one has ever taught us biblical stewardship before; after all these years, you are the first one!"

Your first loyalty is to God's Word, not to popular opinion, popular preference or popular ignorance. Be sure to declare "*...the whole will of God*" to your members (Acts 20:27).

Teach New Testament financial responsibilities and opportunities regularly throughout the year, so that you don't have to preach extensively about it just before making a major financial appeal. In fact, if total stewardship is taught consistently, no financial appeal will be of major proportions. It's important that members are properly prepared - psychologically and emotionally; otherwise, you will only add to their stress.

There is hardly a more important topic - the biblical concept of money - in which Christians should be well versed. The wheels of God's global mission move with only the resources his children choose to tithe and to donate to him. Without money, you cannot assign a full-time national worker anywhere. Without money you cannot buy a paper clip for your office.

Throughout the Bible, God talks a lot about money. Jesus and the apostles talked a lot about money. Outside the church walls, our members talk a lot about money. If money is good for our church members, it's also good for the church. The same money that pays *their* bills, pays the *church's* bills.

Who are these members who say it's not good, not appropriate, not spiritual, to talk about money in church? Let's face it, money is what makes our world go around. God knows it. We know it. The open, unapologetic discussion of money is *not* off limits for the people of God, in the church of Christ and of God.

The only members who take offense when money is brought up in church are the ones who don't want to part with what they call "their" money, even when it would go to God's work. They would rather spend it on themselves than on the Gospel. Fine, but they do not speak for all the other members. They are not the ones who should decide or dictate when and how money is talked about or spent by the church. You could promise them (half-seriously) that you will stop talking about money when they start tithing. It's one thing when members do not significantly support their local church, but stay quiet about the matter. It's quite another thing when they publicly find fault with how the money is raised and spent. If they give nothing, they should say nothing.

And you can identify those who are giving God's money and those who are giving "their" money. Those who give "their own" money often try to dictate and control how it is used. They have their own narrow purpose, their own personal agenda, which has no relationship to the church's true mission. They are Christians in name only. They do not have the Spirit of Christ. I, myself, belong to God. My *money* belongs to God. My *church* belongs to God. Woe to the church that is motivated by politics - personal or group - and not by the Holy Spirit!

Faithfully challenge your members to prove the truth of Matthew 6:33. "*But seek first his (God's) kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things (food and clothing) will be given to you as well.*" It's God's promise, not yours; so, don't hesitate to pass it on to your members.

Mention giving money in as many ways as you can. Do Bible readings on giving. Quote others on the subject. Indoctrinate! Make it natural, normal - for yourself, for

your people. Your members will feel comfortable about talk of money if, in your own mind and heart, you have converted it from being worldly to being consecrated.

Your presentation

Be sensitive to members who are hurting financially. Say "ouch" along with them. (And I hope you, as a church family - Ephesians 3:15 - are helping them materially if there is a real need.) Prepare them for an offering or a special appeal the best possible way. Disarm, defuse a fund-raising event. Put the people at ease. Maybe you can say, "I personally think this is a project worth investing in. But don't feel *obligated* to participate. Do it only if you are inwardly prompted to do so."

If you take good care of the Great Shepherd's "sheep," they will not mind when their wool is sheared. When you do shear the sheep, learn to do it skillfully: firmly but gently. Don't forget the sheep are not yours and you're not doing it for yourself; you're doing it for your Master. You are only an under-shepherd.

Don't worry about asking people for a lot. They either have it or they don't. Some do, some don't. Many people take it as a compliment when they are asked to give more than they are able. And some Christians, to the delight of the Lord, gladly (but sacrificially) give "...*even beyond their ability*" (2 Corinthians 8:3). So, never underestimate or limit the power of God and people's ability to give.

Your joy and privilege

Instruct about money consistently, confidently, humbly and, yes, humorously. Do not use trite jokes but only appropriate, applicable, what I call "natural" humor. Have a happy disposition. If the Lord loves the cheerful *giver*, he must also love the cheerful *instructor* of giving. Never nag. Never beg. It is an honor, a privilege, to give to God. Your responsibility is to provide just enough of the right information and inspiration.

However, there is nothing wrong with good-natured biblical reminders: "*Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and whoever sows generously will also reap generously*" (2 Corinthians 9:6). Point out that they will be eternal losers if they do not wisely invest in the *Kingdom of Heaven*.

In principle, the only members who don't need to tithe are the ones who have zero income. But, as I have said elsewhere, tithing on earth is not yet investing in eternity. Heavenly investment starts only with what is given over and above the tithe.

I personally believe that the church, as a legally registered not-for-profit entity, should not own and operate for profit commercial, unrelated businesses. (Let the individual members do that, if they can or wish.) Let's adhere to God's already-established methods and means of fundraising. If his plan (tithes and offerings – money, material or time) is properly promoted and implemented, there will be no need for church businesses or gimmicks. (There is also the ethical question of unfair advantage over competitive businesses who are not tax exempt.)

Are your church members still untaught about biblical giving? You can have the joy and privilege of enlightening them on the subject. In fact, it is your responsibility to instruct them and to show them how it's done. What they do after that is *their* responsibility. But, they shouldn't have to say to Christ at his Judgment Seat, "I feel terribly left out and cheated. Why didn't my church leaders tell me about the importance of giving you your tithe or about how I could be storing up rewards and treasures for myself in heaven?"

Chapter 11

The Church – A Mystery

As members of Christ's spiritual body, we do not belong to ourselves. "...each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:5). Why? "...so...that its parts should have equal concern for each other" (1 Corinthians 12:25).

If you don't go to church and you don't interact regularly, realistically and practically with other believers, you cannot function properly as a member of the Body of Christ. Others need your ministry and you need the ministry of others.

What does "church" mean?

The Greek: *ekklēsia* (translated *church*) means *that which is called out or, called out ones*. The Greek *kiriakon* comes from *kyriakos* - people of the lord.

In the New Testament, the church is made up of people called to conform to Christ rather than to this world. They are spoken of as the church of God. For example, Apostle Paul addresses his first letter to the Corinthians (1:2) like this: "*To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy.*" They are also referred to as "*...churches of Christ...*" (Romans 16:16).

The church can be one local body of believers or it can be the combined total of all assemblies or congregations worldwide. The New Testament puts absolutely no importance on the kind of buildings the people of God meet in.

Not of this world

If we are "called out," what are we called out *from* and *to*? We are called from a worldly life to a godly life - while we still live in this world, while we still have a job to do here. Jesus prayed, "*I have given them your word and the world has hated*

them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified" (John 17:14-15,18-19).

"Do not love the world or anything in the world. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world" (1John 2:15,16).

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world..." (Romans 12:2).

Jesus said to the Pharisees, *"What is highly valued among men (humans) is detestable in God's sight"* (Luke 16:15).

"...you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world" (Colossians 2:20).

"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14).

"...you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

While we are busy fulfilling our Lord's earthly assignments, we are also earnestly looking forward to his return (See Matthew 25:1-13).

"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await [the] Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ..." (Philippians 3:20).

Building

"...you are...God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:9).

In the Bible, the church is not a man-made building; it is a "house" in a living, spiritual sense. *"And we are his house..."* (Hebrews 3:6). *"As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by men (humans) but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 2:4-5).

"...the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?' says the Lord. 'Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?'" (Acts 7:48-50).

Temple

Believers in Christ (Messiah) in both the Old and the New Testaments make up one universal temple. "Consequently, you are...fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and

prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Christians are also *individual* temples. "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you...God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16,17. Also 1 Corinthians 6:19). So, whether jointly or individually, people are the "temple" in which God now lives. Where these people meet to worship is immaterial. Do you want to please God? Don't build him a temple; be one.

Prior to the New Testament era, importance was placed on God's presence in certain earthly locations: various monuments, mountains or the "Holy of Holies" - both in the Tabernacle in the wilderness and in the Temple in Jerusalem. It was his way of making his presence apparent among the people of the earthly nation of Israel. The Lord said that the manmade temple was meant to be a house of prayer, not of commerce. (See Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11; Matthew 21:13.)

But to the Samaritan woman Jesus said: "...a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain [Gerizim] nor in Jerusalem" (John 4:21). He also explained to her the kind of worship God is looking for. "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (verse 23). Jesus did not say to her, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must go to worship him in the temple in Jerusalem." Instead, he said: "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (verse 24).

When Apostle Paul was evangelizing in Athens, Greece, this is what he was teaching: "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men [humans] life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:24-25).

The Old Testament "house of prayer" is no more, nor is God asking to be worshipped in specially designated manmade buildings. He wants to be worshipped in our bodies, no matter which building we happen to be in. We sanctify and dedicate *ourselves*, not some sort of building. The material, physical building is not important to today's true worshippers, to the spiritual body of Christ. We ourselves, our bodies, are now God's holy temples and God's prayer houses - no matter where we are, no matter what day of the week it is, no matter what we are doing.

"For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people'" (2 Corinthians 6:16).

First century Christians did not have church buildings; they met together to pray and to worship God wherever they could: in the Jerusalem temple, in local synagogues, in private homes and outdoors (Acts 5:42). What counts is people, not places. Jesus Christ said, "For where two or three come together in my

name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). Followers of Christ do not go to church; they *are* the church. Christians do not come to church; the "...church comes together..." (1 Corinthians 14:23).

Nowhere in the New Testament do you read that believers built a physical structure specifically for worship or for any other ministry-related activities. That was not important to them. They, themselves, were the "building," the "temple." Jesus was not thinking brick and mortar when he said, "...on this rock [not Peter himself -- but his *declaration* that Jesus was the Christ] I will build my church..." (Matthew 16:18). He was talking about saving souls.

I don't think it's wrong for Christians to own buildings expressly for worship, instruction and fellowship. It is often a question of ability and availability, of whether to buy, build or borrow. I am simply trying to make two points: (1) Christians can meet anywhere. The building does not sanctify them; they sanctify the building. (2) Christians should be wise managers of the Lord's money. The value of their real estate should not be out of proportion to the cost of their outreach. Each local body of believers decides what that proportion should be. It's a matter of good stewardship.

Body

The Church is also spoken of as a *spiritual body*, of which Christ is the *Head*.

"Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:4,5).

"...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" (1Corinthians 12:25-27).

"...the church, which is his [Christ's] body..." (Ephesians 1:22-23).

"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body" (Ephesians 4:25).

"...Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior" (Ephesians 5:23).

"And he [Christ] is the head of the body, the church..." (Colossians 1:18).

Today, I am working with my two hands. I notice that they depend on each other. They are helping each other. Work gets done better and faster when both hands are equally active.

At the moment, I have restricted movement in my left hand and arm. I tend to favor my left arm. If I'm not careful, the right hand ends up doing most of the work. But, if I force my left hand to do more, it will. That's good, because if one hand is not doing its fair share of the work, the other hand has to do the work of

both. That is not good for either of the hands. We, as Christ's Body, function the same way.

Bride

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ calls himself the bridegroom (See Matthew 25:1; Luke 5:35) and the Church his bride. (See Revelation 21:2,9. Read also Ephesians 5:25-32.)

Family

Family plays an important role in most cultures, even though many families are dysfunctional. Even the best families have their share of problems. Then there is "the family of God" (1 Peter 4:17). God's family is bigger and better than the best of earthly families. And, the family of God will never stop existing. (See Ephesians 3:14-15.) The Church is God's family. (See Hebrews 2:11.) In eternity, it will be the perfect family.

The Church's Organizational Composition

The early (First) Church was structured, and the structure is not of human origin. *The Lord himself decreed it, even though some of the formation resembles that of the secular world. It had apostles, has pastors, overseers, teachers, deacons, etc. Different members exercise different services and ministries. The system does not work perfectly because the old sinful nature inevitably imposes itself on the church body. That is normal, considering the inherent handicaps. But, then, nothing goes to waste in God's economy.*

Today, not a few Christians are abandoning the flawed organized church, believing it to be hopeless. They see spiritual leaders of established churches abusing their position and leading the church down a non-biblical path. They lament the comatose state of respectable congregations. They 'drop out' or look elsewhere for life and vitality – certainly for something less structured. However, we need to be careful not to throw the 2000-year-old "baby" out with the bath water.

In their present condition, human beings cannot cooperate and operate efficiently without organization. No direction can be given, no strategy can be implemented without cooperation, without interaction.

To a certain extent, The Church must take on the *form* of human institutions because it is composed of humans. God has chosen to work through imperfect earthlings. Sheep don't do very well without a caring shepherd. A large part of the believer's ministry would be impossible outside the framework of regular meetings – business, educational and inspirational. The Church's task of evangelizing the world cannot be accomplished without a close-knit, communicating body. These days there is even a great deal of ministry

networking between denominations and para-church organizations, with emphasis on cooperation instead of on divisive doctrine.

“It was he [*Christ*] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (*Ephesians 4:11-13*).

Spiritual leaders, pastors, have a job to do, “...so that the man [and woman] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17).

“...speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up in him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Pastors and teachers are “gifts.” Why did Christ give them to the Church? “...to prepare God’s people for works of service...” (Ephesians 4:12). So, church leaders should be teaching and training members who, in turn, serve each other and the community.

When Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, visited him and the Israeli nation in the wilderness, he watched how his son-in-law dealt with people’s problems. Moses may have thought he was doing a good job, but Jethro said to him: “*What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone*” (Exodus 18:17-18).

After Jethro gave Moses some sound advice, “*Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves*” (verses 24-26).

Each body part has its God-given function. The Lord will not commend me for doing other people’s work. He will evaluate me on how I did the work designated specifically to me. Did I do it or did I not? How well did I do it? When I’m doing someone else’s job, there are at least two negative results: (1) I’m depriving others from carrying out their divinely assigned duties and (2) my own job is improperly done or not done at all.

Apostle Paul writes to his spiritual son, Timothy: “*And the things you have heard me say...entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others*” (2 Timothy 2:2). Spiritual leaders, workers and other members of the *Body of Christ* should help us discover, develop and dispense our gifts. “...you...are...competent to instruct one another” (Romans 15:14).

Overseers, elders, pastors will give an account to the Lord for their performance. “*Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as*

men who must give an account” (Hebrews 13:17). “...we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1).

In Titus 2:1-10, Apostle Paul instructs Titus *what, who and how* to teach, “...so that no one will malign the word of God” and “...so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (verses 5 and 10). In 1 Timothy 3:1-12, in 2 Timothy 2:24-25 and in Titus 1:6-9, Apostle Paul clarifies the personal, family and social qualifications of church leaders.

Christian Leadership

“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth [spiritual] ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:8-12).

As I understand it, *we are all brothers and sisters in the Lord* – not more and not less. We may do the ministry of pastoring, but our *title* should not be “Pastor.” We are reverent, but not Reverend, least of all – “The Very Right Reverend.” We teach, but we are not to be called Teachers. Worldly people love titles; Christ’s disciples are to shun them. There is already far too much self-centered pride in the church, without our giving each other ostensibly prestigious, ego-inflating titles.

“...the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves .I [Jesus Christ] am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:26,27).

“...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26-28).

“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... he humbled himself...” (Philippians 2:5-8). If the King of kings and Lord of lords humbled himself and became a servant, where does that put us?

We serve each other but, in reality, it goes beyond that. *“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23-24). “...live as servants of God” (1 Peter 2:16).*

“If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 4:11).

“To the elders among you...Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers... eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you,

but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (1 Peter 5:1-4).

Spiritual leaders are to be examples of what it means to be a Christian. They are to live in such a way that they earn respect. They are to do a conscientious and thorough job of teaching/training and do it with unassuming authoritativeness and not with arrogant authoritarianism.

“Command and teach these things...set an example for the believers...” (1 Timothy 4: 11-12). “Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you” (Titus 2:15).

It’s hard to serve others unless our service is poured out with a lot of love – not with limited, capricious, biased human love, but with God’s dependable, limitless love. *“...God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:5).*

“...serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13).

“Do everything in love” (1 Corinthians 16:14).

“Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” (1 Corinthians 10:24).

Then there is a purely practical side to all this. I know professing Christians who avoided church life when they were younger, when they were financially secure, when they had their health. Today, they are old and ailing, without material resources and without human contacts. They are alone, friendless, with no one to help or encourage them. They are reaping what they have sown. Now they are too old and too weak to help with church work.

When we are *in Christ*, “ [our] attitude should be the same as [his]...” (Philippians 2:5). We should *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit...”* (verse 3). Rather, we should serve, encourage and comfort each other. We should have close fellowship with one another, showing tenderness and compassion to all the members of Christ’s body, *“...being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose”* (vv 1-2).

The only way we can all be like-minded is for all of us to have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16; see also Phil. 2:1-3). The early church had such a mind. *“All the believers were one in heart and mind”* (Acts 4:32). This means they consciously set aside their own carnal ideas and deliberately subordinated themselves to the mind of Christ. They did this with the help of the Holy Spirit. In this state, God was able to bless and use them to accomplish mighty and miraculous deeds. Many souls came to Christ. When Christians were right with God, right with each other and good examples in the community, *“...the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved”* (Acts 2:47).

Divine, supernatural love, which has been entrusted to us by God, is indiscriminate. Some people are so unlovable that my old, sinful nature does not want to serve them. But, with God’s great love at my disposal, I am able to serve

them. *“Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does...”* (Ephesians 6:7-8).

“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17).

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” (Acts 20:28).

In “The Revelation of Jesus Christ,” the Lord dictates letters to seven churches in what then was Asia Minor. Today it is Turkey. These were actual churches with whom the Lord had ongoing contact and for whom he was greatly concerned, in spite of the fact that they had lost their first love, had fallen spiritually, had false teachers, and were badly in need of repentance. In the church in Thyatira there were instances of immorality. Still, all he expected from the rest of them was “...hold on to what you have” until his return. He informed the church in Sardis that it was “dead.” Yet he encouraged them to repent. He saw that the church in Philadelphia had little spiritual strength, yet he was pleased that they kept his word and had not denied his name. The Laodicean church was lukewarm, self-sufficient and spiritually blind. But the Lord did not give up on them.

The Gifts

Every (“each”) true child of God has received at least one gift with which to serve the Lord, the church, the community and the world. The Spirit of God gave each one of us a gift when he came to live in us. So we already have our gift(s); we do not have to pray or plead for a gift. We have not been given all this built-in equipment to use selfishly, but for God - for his purposes, for his honor and glory. It has been entrusted to us. We will give an account to him for how we used everything.

“...to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: ‘When he ascended on high, he...gave gifts to men [humans].’” (Ephesians 4:7-8).

“...each man [person] has [her] his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that” (1 Corinthians 7:7).

“And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues [*literally*: spoken languages]” (1 Corinthians 12:28).

“We [*all*] have different gifts, according to the grace given us ... prophesying... serving...

teaching...encouraging...contributing...leadership...showing mercy”
(Romans 12:6-8).

“There are different kinds of gifts...There are different kinds of service...There are different kinds of working...Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1Corinthians 12:4-7).

“Each one should use whatever gift [she] he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (I Peter 4:10).
(Emphasis added to the six references above.)

No Christian should have to stand before the *Judgment Seat of Christ* and say that s/he did not have a gift, or did not know what her/his gift was. That would be a tragedy with eternal consequences. These gifts, ministries and works *must* be recognized, fostered and put into service immediately. It’s not enough to *have* a gift; it has to be *used*. The Body of Christ cannot function properly, if you and I are not fulfilling our God-given assignments. That is why “...*there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other*” (1 Corinthians 12:25).

If you *don’t* know what your gift is, carefully and prayerfully study Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4 and I Peter 4. Ask your church to help you identify your gift. You can suggest a gift or gifts you think you might have. But don’t insist. See if your pastor and members agree with you. There is safety in numbers. We do not necessarily have the gifts we think we have or wish we had. The Holy Spirit knows best with which gift or gifts to entrust us. The gifts he gives us are best for the church. If your local church does not have teaching in recognizing, nurturing and employing spiritual gifts, ask your leaders to start such a program.

Here is a list of some of the skills, abilities and gifts needed in churches:

Administration (organizational structure, strategizing, supervision, leadership)

Investigation (research, fact/information gathering/compiling/analyzing, records, paper/office work – by all means, including computers)

Distribution (sale of or sharing information via communication media)

Intercession (effectual prayer, spiritual warfare)

Preaching (mass evangelism)

Teaching (group/class Bible and related instruction)

Witnessing (personal evangelism)

Music (composing, directing, participating)

Healing (spiritual, mental, emotional, physical)

Tongues/languages

Deliverance (occult, evil spirit world oppression, possession)

Faith (divine intervention for personal, business and social problems)

Visitation (private homes and nursing facilities, hospitals, jails, institutions)

Discipline (exhortation, reproof, correction)

Help (practical).

Benevolence (material, financial assistance)

Counseling (insight into personal, marital, family, social, business problems)

Hospitality (meals, lodging, hosting, entertainment)

Comfort (encouragement, compassion, understanding, listening)

Converts (instruction, guidance)

Discernment (of spirits)

(You may be able to think of other gifts.)

Every local church should be organized so that the gifts are operating efficiently around the clock. There should be one or two members responsible for the functioning of each gift, at any given moment, whether it's personally convenient or not. Of course, self-denial and personal sacrifice are a big part of body ministry. But that's what true Christianity is all about. If you think Christianity is a religion of personal comfort and convenience, you are woefully mistaken. Your faith has to cost you your life! The Bible calls it self-crucifixion. Get used to it; it's *The Jesus Way*.

Christians are to be known not for their intentions and promises but for their dependability and performance. I should be able – immediately - to get in touch with a gift supervisor (trained and appointed by my church). S/he, in turn, gets in touch with those who have a particular gift, be it (1) *intercessory prayer* in a physical or spiritual emergency or (2) *practical help*, such as providing transportation, a meal or cleaning a house. The first entity I turn to in time of need is my church. My church should be my primary human caregiver. It is, after all, part of my "body."

Gift-related Bible reading: 2 Samuel 6:5; 2 Chronicles 29:25; Job 29:15-16; Psalm 95:1; Psalm 150:3-6; Proverbs 2:3-6; Proverbs 31:20; Daniel 2:21; Gospel of Matthew 16:24; Gospel of Matthew 25:31-46; Gospel of Luke 14:33; Acts of the Apostles 20:35; Acts 22:14-15; Romans 8:26,27; Romans 12; Romans 14:1; 1 Corinthians 9:10-13; 1 Corinthians 12 & 13; Galatians 6:1-3; Ephesians 4; Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; Hebrew 13:2; James 1:5; 3:17; James 2:14-16; 1 Peter 4.

Good Works

In General

God has always been concerned about the poor, the needy, the widows and the orphans. Much is written in both Testaments about good deeds. But, in this chapter we will limit ourselves to New Testament expectations.

"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

"...spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24). Are you known for your eagerness to do good? You are made of the right spiritual stuff if you are enthusiastic about doing good. "Jesus Christ...gave himself for us ...to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:14).

"And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work... You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God" (2 Corinthians 9:8,11).

"And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:16). Not only share, but share sacrificially! It's not a sacrifice if it costs you nothing.

Caring for church members

"Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Matthew 10:41-42).

"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:17, 18).

"...they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints" (1 Corinthians 16:15). (In the Old Testament, saints were simply devoted, godly people. In the New Testament, saints are people who are "set apart" to serve the Lord. That includes all God's children.)

"Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality (that is: befriend strangers)" (Romans 12:13).

"Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Peter 4:9).

“Let us not become weary in doing good... Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:9-10).

The first-century church provided for all of its needy and disabled members. The government was not involved. Nor was there tax-deductible giving, as there is in some countries today.

Orphans and Widows

Do you remember what James (1:27) says about true religion? *“Religion [piety] that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress...”* A widow or an orphan can be in distress for material or emotional reasons. In either case, they need help - *our* help. However, the church should not help all widows. Apostle Paul explains the conditions and requirements in 1Timothy 5:3-16.

The Poor

In Galatians 2:10, Apostle Paul writes, *“...continue to remember the poor...”*

Finances

Supporting Jesus

Jesus' earthly ministry had to be financed somehow. After Jesus left the carpenter shop, he and his apostles lived off money people happened to give them. The existing religious establishment certainly did not underwrite Jesus, and the new church organization was not yet in place. To our knowledge, no one made a pledge or a “faith promise” to support Jesus and his disciples.

So, what kind of people helped him? Probably those who were most helped by him. Women. The Gospel is societally liberating to women and makes them equal with men in the Kingdom of God (See Galatians 3:28). It seems, also, that most women are more sensitive and responsive to people's physical and spiritual needs than are most men.

“Many women... followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs” (Matthew 27:55). “These women were helping to support them [Jesus and the apostles] out of their own means” (Luke 8:3).

You may be thinking: “If I had been there, I would have helped Jesus.” Well, it's not too late. You can still do it. He wants you to help him today. *“...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).*

Financial support of church leaders and workers

“Paul...set apart for the gospel of God...” (Romans 1:1).

Now we come to the financial support of church leadership and staff. Should they be self- or church-supported?

In some countries, Christians believe pastors and evangelists should be self-supporting. This viewpoint can be created either by national culture or by foreign influence. These convictions are hard to change. And change can come only gradually. Plus, it is not always easy to differentiate between tradition and Scripture. In any case, we need to be open-minded and flexible. Much depends on circumstances, situations and, yes, customs.

Some Christians think and talk like this: "I like Apostle Paul! He supported himself. If he could do it, so can everybody else." But it isn't quite that simple. He didn't have to, but Paul chose to be self-supporting *some* of the time and in certain situations. At times he refused help (See 2 Corinthians 11:7-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10). At other times he not only accepted it; he encouraged it (See Philippians 4:14-18). In any case, God's principles and provisions do not change.

Even today, if a minister or a missionary wants to and, especially, if he needs to, he is usually free or permitted to support himself. Many preachers and missionaries would like to be self-supporting, but the surroundings do not always allow this, nor is it always best for the church or for the ministry.

As we read the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we learn that Paul did not make tents while he was in Philippi. First, the new convert, Lydia, and her family housed and fed him and Silas (See Acts 16:13-15). (Have you ever taken in and taken care of a pastor, an evangelist or a missionary?)

Later, the *church* took care of them. That way, they were free to give all their attention to the preaching of the Gospel. The Philippian church continued to support Paul when he went to Macedonia and when he was in Thessalonica (See Philippians 4:10-18).

The Church's responsibility today is to make sure the Gospel is preached and that those who declare the Good News have the material freedom to do so. When Jesus sent out the 72 disciples, he stated: "...for the worker deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7).

"Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk?... If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?...the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel " (I Corinthians 9:7,11,14). Repeat: *"...the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel."*

And there is more. "Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor" (Galatians 6:6). "...*must share all good things...*" means money, goods or services. "God bless you; I'll pray for you" is a good *beginning*.

And more. *“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages’”* (1 Timothy 5:17-18).

Blessed is the church that makes it possible for workers to devote their time - without distraction - to service.

However, it's not just *minister* support; it's *ministry* support, church-related outreaches: all the expenses, such as travel, equipment, housing, buildings, supplies. Should the Christian church take worse care of its work and workers than does the government or the business world? On the contrary, the church should be the example.

In any case, finances play a legitimate and indispensable role in the life of church and missions. But, since covetousness is the source of all evil, income and expenditures in any ministry should always be closely and carefully supervised by a number of individuals who are known for their honesty and integrity.

“We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer [finances]. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men” (2 Corinthians 8:20-21).

This leads us to the dirty side of Gospel finances. Right from the start there were plenty of deviant opportunists who made a business out of the preaching the Gospel. *“...men of corrupt mind...who think godliness is a means to financial gain”* (1 Timothy 6:5). *“Unlike so many, we [Apostle Paul and his associates] do not peddle [Greek: kapēleuō, to commercialize] the word of God for profit”* (2 Corinthians 2:17). Did you get that? *No commercializing the Gospel for personal profit!*

That was in the first century. And today? Today, more than ever, there are unashamed exploiters of the word of God. These individuals, in the name of God, have become wealthy from the sale of the Gospel of Grace. Wherever possible, they have set up tax-exempt, “not for profit” (!) corporations that are either answerable to no one or have a handpicked rubber-stamp board of directors. Ironically, some of these Gospel merchandisers are highly respected in some Christian circles. As God is just, the day will come when they will have to give an account to their Maker (See 2Corinthians 11:13-15).

But, for the moment, I personally think the Lord is deeply displeased with the unbridled financial and material inequity he sees in Christendom. Some brothers and sisters have much more than they need, while others do not have enough to make ends meet. The more wealth the Lord entrusts to some Christians, the more they simply spend on themselves. This is not the biblical way.

“Our [Apostle Paul and his colleagues] desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality [equalization]. At the present time your plenty will supply what they [Christians in Jerusalem] need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as

it is written: 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little'" (2 Corinthians 8:13-15).

I am not saying that every Christian who personally profits from the sale of the gospel is corrupt or does so for monetary gain alone. S/he may sincerely believe that's the way it should be. And I am not saying the gospel should not be sold to reimburse expenses. But, I believe no one should personally profit from it, other than a modest allowance or wage, if there is no other source of income to cover living expenses.

In other words, I believe it's wrong to use divinely endowed abilities, gifts and talents for personal advantage, aggrandizement and prestige. To say the least, I think it is shoddy stewardship. To say the most, I believe it is mismanagement and misappropriation of funds.

"There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of workings, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1Corinthians 12:4-7. Emphasis added.) "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8).

Membership

In many cultures, especially in the West, the focus is on personal independence and individualism. Unfortunately, this self-centered, secular mentality has also infected the Church.

Christ takes it personally when we ignore, neglect or mistreat members of his Body. *"When you sin against your brothers...you sin against Christ"* (1 Corinthians 8:12).

"Love the brotherhood of believers..." (1 Peter 2:17).

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:10).

"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day [of Christ's return] approaching" (Hebrews 10:25).

It's impossible to do all this if we don't meet together.

When a person identifies with Christ (the Head), s/he also identifies with the people of Christ – the rest of the Body. Our attitude toward the church should be that of Christ: love and self-sacrifice. Ephesians 5:25-27 tells us, *"...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."*

As part of that body, I cannot live and perform if I'm not in constant contact with it. One body part cannot function by itself, much less survive. I need the Body; the Body needs me. God has called believers in Christ into a direct relationship with himself and with each other.

In some ways, membership in the church is like being part of an orchestra. Every player has to be in tune with the first violin, play her/his own part and be synchronized with the rest of the orchestra. The orchestra cannot perform well if the members don't come together for practice (training), if they don't harmonize (get along with each other), if they do whatever they wish (are independent), if they don't pay attention to the conductor (don't follow their Leader).

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). *Attending* church is good but not good enough. You need to be *joined* to a church body. You need to join, identify yourself with a local church. (See Acts 17:4,34; Ephesians 2:21; 4:16; Colossians 2:19.) You need to make a *commitment*. You need to become *responsible* and *accountable*. You are an active member of a body of believers or you are not a well-instructed believer.

Jesus said: *"...I will build my church..."* (Matthew 16:18). Can he do it all by himself? Never! He is the Head, but we make up the rest of the Body. I'm either contributing my part or I'm withholding it. Either I am building the church with/for Christ, or I am deterring or destroying it. I am *with* it or *against* it. I cannot be neutral or noncommittal.

There is no provision for an independent spirit in the Body of Christ. What is the church body for if not for mutual support and service? If you can't get help from the Body of Christ, where can you get it? Thanks to the shed blood of Christ, the family of God is closer than blood relatives.

No one can be built up or be a builder of others if s/he does not meet and work with the members of the Body of Christ. (Of course, there are exceptions, such as the chronically sick and permanently disabled. But healthy members of Christ's body can and should visit the sick members.) Christ is counting on me to help him build his church. How is the church to be built?

The following functions pretty much cover the life of the church:

- *Glorifying* God through worship.
- *Proclaiming* God's Gospel of grace in Christ to all people.
- *Teaching* members about what it means to be a Christian.
- *Serving* people in the area of their needs.
- *Fulfilling* all of God's word – personally.

Two Ordinances

Baptism

What does the word “baptism” mean?

The word “to baptize” means: to dip under, to submerge, to immerse. Immersion – lowering the person under water – fits the symbolism of death, burial and resurrection used in Colossians 2:12, “...buried with him [Christ] in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up [ascended] out of the water” (Matthew 3:16). When Philip baptized the Ethiopian VIP, both of them “...went down into the water...” (Acts 8:38). They were on the desert road, going from Jerusalem to Gaza, but they found enough water (perhaps an oasis) even there. Why did both of them descend into the water if not for immersion? Surely, the government official’s entourage was traveling with enough water for a poured or a sprinkled baptism.

It is hard for me to imagine a situation where baptism by immersion would not be possible. However, I do know of instances in certain countries when - for lack of appropriate facilities - converted death row prisoners have been baptized by pouring. Unlike the penitent thief on the cross, these modern-day converts often do have a choice to be or not to be baptized.

Some church leaders go so far as to say it’s better not to baptize at all, if not by immersion. Personally, I believe that if immersion is not possible, the desire of the convert to be baptized should be honored with an alternative method. But, each local or regional church has to decide how it will perform baptism, especially in unusual circumstances, keeping in mind that it is, after all, a symbolic act.

Is baptism necessary?

Jesus himself commanded that all converts be baptized. “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Gospel of Matthew 28:19). “...Jesus was baptized too” (Luke 3:21). Jesus himself set the example when he was baptized by John the Baptist, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15).

When 3000 people accepted Christ on the Day of Pentecost, Apostle Peter commanded them to be baptized (See Acts of the Apostles 2:38,41). He did the same when Cornelius (a Gentile) and his household responded to the Good News (See Acts 10:47-48).

Who can be baptized?

In his Great Commission, Jesus clearly stated: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16).

So, only those who are old enough to understand the Gospel, who believe and receive it, should be baptized. We call it “believer’s baptism.” But we’re not talking about adults only. Let’s be careful not to limit the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of children. I was four years old when I consciously, rationally and deliberately renounced my agnosticism and became a theist. I was seven years old when I began to ask question’s about God’s plan of salvation.

A person must be born again before baptism can be worthwhile. Baptism should not come before a person declares that Jesus is Lord. (See Romans 10:9-10.)

What is the right timing of baptism?

In some countries and cultures, converts to Christ must go through a waiting period before the church agrees to baptize them. The church believes it has good reasons for this practice. In other countries, converts are baptized without having to wait.

In the first century, baptism followed immediately after a person received Christ as Savior. Philip baptized the Ethiopian official minutes after his conversion to Christ (Acts 8:38). In one verse Lydia of Philippi responds to Apostle Paul’s salvation message. In the next verse she is baptized. (See Acts 16:14,15.) Paul and Silas baptized the Philippian jailer and his family the same night they believed (See Acts 16:33).

Baptism is an outward sign of an inward spiritual awakening. Baptism is for those who are taking their very first steps as newborn Christians. It has nothing to do with worthiness, spiritual understanding, growth or maturity. But it is important that the person requesting water baptism has obviously had a genuine born-again experience. Just knowing the correct evangelical language is not enough.

The first-century churches made baptism a condition of church membership, which was a reasonable rule since baptism is God’s own idea of initiation into Christ and into his spiritual body.

What are baptism’s practical benefits?

- A confession of faith has more value if it is public, symbolic and audible.

- A solemn public exhibition makes it more meaningful and memorable.
- It can serve as the first act of open witness.
- It identifies us with a special group of people – the Body of Christ.
- The unsaved observer finds it easier to understand the spiritual significance of what is visibly happening.

What is baptism's spiritual significance?

Immersion stands for death – Christ's death for our sins and our death to sin and self.

Coming up out of the water stands for Christ's resurrection, for victory over the power and penalty of sin and for our coming alive to God alone. It also typifies victory over physical death. Christ arose and we will rise.

Baptism is the symbolic grave of our sinful life and the birthplace of a life that is pleasing to God. When a person is buried with Christ in the waters of baptism, s/he agrees with God that her/his sinful nature deserves death (See Romans 6).

Baptism is a symbolic washing, cleansing, purifying of sin, giving us a clear conscience toward God, with no feelings of guilt remaining (1 Peter 3:21). "He [God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit..." (Titus 3:5).

Baptism is not salvation. Only the blood of Christ cleanses sin (See Ephesians 1:7; 1 John 1:7; Revelation 1:5) and only faith saves (See Ephesians 2:8; Galatians 2:16). We are not baptized to be saved; we are baptized because we are saved. "...what counts is a new creation" (Galatians 6:15).

Baptism focuses on me, the believer. It concentrates on a pivotal point in my life. It highlights my conversion experience, my decision to follow Christ, my commitment to him.

The Lord's Supper (Communion)

(Read: Matthew 26:17-29; Luke 22:13-20; 1Corinthians 11:23-32.)

The Eucharist (Greek: gratitude, joy) focuses on Christ, on what he did on the cross, on his suffering, death, burial and resurrection. We regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper; otherwise, we are prone to forget what the innocent Christ experienced for our sakes, for our sins, for our salvation. The Lord's Supper is a constant reminder.

What it is not

At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread and said, "...this is my body.' Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood...'" (Matthew 26:26-27). Notice that he does not say, "This wine will

now change into blood.” He is holding the cup of wine and says, “This [wine] is my blood.” He is breaking the bread, but he does not say, “This bread is now becoming my flesh.” He says, “This [bread] is my body.” And all this was said and done before he bled and died. “...a will [covenant] is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living” (Hebrews 9:17).

Not only that, but after they all ate the bread and drank the wine, he said that the next time he drinks “...this fruit of the vine...” along with them, it will be “...in my Father’s kingdom” (Matthew 26:29). Did his blood turn back into wine once again? Rather than understand his choice of words as being literal, it seems to me that it’s best to think of the bread and wine as symbols of his body and blood.

I believe that just as the terms building, temple and body are figures of speech for “the church,” so Communion and Baptism are also symbolic ordinances. Jesus is not really a door or a gate. And we are not sheep literally. Jesus is not really a vine; we are not real branches. Christ is not really a cornerstone, nor are we real building stones. He is not real bread, water and wine. In order to clarify spiritual concepts to our material minds, Scripture uses endless allegories, parables and similes.

Even fellowship with Christ is no longer on a human, physical level; it is now purely spiritual. “Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more” (1 Corinthians 5:16 AV). “But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:17).

“Is not the cup of thanksgiving [Greek: eulogy, praise] for which we give thanks a participation [communion] in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in [communion of] the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf [bread], we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf [bread]” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Do you see the metaphors? Cup...loaf of bread...body. Do you see the spiritual analogies?

“They [the Israelis in the wilderness] all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:3-4).

“Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty (Will never go hungry and never be thirsty how: physically or spiritually?)...I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever [If an atheist or a Christ-rejecter eats “this bread,” will s/he have Christ’s eternal life in her/him?]

“I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him...Does this offend you?...The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts

for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (John 6:35,51,53-56,61,63. Emphasis added).

In any event, it is forbidden in Scripture to eat or drink blood of any kind. “... the life of every creature is its blood. That is why I have said..., ‘You must not eat the blood of any creature, because the life of every creature is its blood...’” (Leviticus 17:14). (cf. Genesis 9:4.)

“...The flesh counts for nothing.” There is no material or physical advantage or purpose. So, since the meaning and the benefit are spiritual, there is no need for actual bread-to-flesh, wine-to-blood transformation, and vice versa. But the analogy is clearly there: Christ is to us spiritually what blood is to a physical body.

What it is

- The bread represents Christ’s incarnation (his body).
- The wine represents Christ’s death. (Life is in the blood: Leviticus 17:11.)
 - The purpose of the ordinance is to remember and to proclaim the laying down of his life for us, to show what a great price he paid for our redemption. (See 1 Corinthians 11:24.) We also recall and celebrate his whole life and all he did for us. That might be why Apostle Paul calls it “...the cup of thanksgiving...”

The elements and the cup

The *symbolism* of the Lord’s Supper allows for the use of alternative elements. I have taken part in Christian communion services in many countries, in all sorts of cultures and conditions. In some situations, wine and grape juices are not available. (Many converted alcoholics will not touch wine, even if it is available.) Christians have substituted whatever fruit juices are available. In some countries and situations milk is used.

And there is no end to the assortment of breads that are used throughout the world, even though unleavened bread may be preferable (See Luke 22:7-8). There are many interesting and important parallels between the events of the Passover and the events of the crucifixion. But, celebrating the Lord’s Supper should not be canceled or put off for lack of unleavened bread. It is, after all, symbolic.

What kind and how many communion cups should be used? You would be amazed, if not dismayed, if you knew how much discussion, dissension and division this humble, innocent container creates. But it, too, is a symbol and, as such, it’s shape, size and composition is of no consequence.

There was nothing special about the cup Jesus passed around. Since we do not use the cup Christ used, and since the New Testament does not give cup specifications, we use whatever is available. There is nothing special or sacred about material things. We must try to focus our attention not on the *means* but on

the *meaning* of communion. “*The Spirit gives life; the flesh (the physical, the material) counts for nothing*” (John 6:63).

Who and how should we participate?

We must partake in a worthy *manner* (1 Corinthians 11:27-28). Apostle Paul is not saying we can or should be worthy. (Who of us is worthy?) He refers to the *way* in which we participate. In the previous chapter and in the first half of chapter eleven, Apostle Paul rebukes the Corinthian Christians for participating in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy way. Some did not understand the spiritual significance of the occasion. Some were even getting drunk during the love feasts immediately preceding the Communion service. The Eucharist is not to be treated lightly, superficially, thoughtlessly. It is a profound celebration.

God expects us to partake and do it with an appropriate attitude and demeanor. Needless to say, worthiness also means having a right relationship with the Lord and with people. How can you have fellowship at the table of the Lord, if you are out of fellowship with him and his Body?

True children of God – those who have been born of the Spirit – *should* take part whenever communion is served. I say “should” because we have no right to abstain. What does the Bible say? “*Let a man examine himself, and having done that, let him eat the bread and drink from the cup*” (1 Corinthians 11:28 – Weymouth. Emphasis added). So, Apostle Paul urges self-examination before participation; nowhere does he permit abstinence.

Abstinence only postpones our getting right with God and man. Abstention only adds sin to sin. This is not right; this is not scriptural. To delay getting right with God and man, to delay partaking in the Lord’s Supper, is to open the door to the devil. He is the only one who benefits from your broken fellowship with the Lord and with people. To break fellowship with the Head of the Church and Body of Christ is to invite the influence of Satan.

Spiritual leaders have no Scriptural grounds to recommend *refraining* from participation in the Lord’s Supper – for *any* reason. On the contrary, they must encourage *taking part*, having first expressed the proper concerns and precautions. That, after all, is the purpose of the event – *to participate*. Furthermore, the New Testament gives no *biological* reasons for abstaining. A woman’s physical “uncleanness” has nothing to do with participation. It’s purely a spiritual event.

Getting right with God means confession and repentance for sins of commission and omission. Getting right with man means making things right with the person against whom you have a grievance, or vice versa. (Matthew 5:23-24; Mark 11:25-26; I Peter 3:7.) I say, “*making* things right,” because *ignoring* the problem is not a biblical option, not a scriptural solution. And the strained or broken relationship needs to be repaired quickly, so that you can participate in Communion in a worthy manner.

Don’t wait until just before the Lord’s Supper to settle your differences with God and man. Make things right before *today’s* sun goes down. If you don’t get

reconciled with your “brother” or “sister,” God will not accept your “gifts” of prayer, worship, service or resources at his “altar.” We have to be at peace with each other, as much as it depends on us. We must treat each other properly - with forgiveness, consideration and respect. It’s far better to judge ourselves, than to wait for God’s judgment. (See 1Corinthians 11:31.)

In many Western evangelical churches believers are invited to participate in communion even though they are not baptized and even though they are not church members anywhere. I personally believe it would be much better if a church would insist on baptism and church membership after conversion, “repentance.” Otherwise, there is too much independence. There needs to be camaraderie and accountability.

No longer a mystery

Well, that, in rudimentary form, is the Church of God and of Jesus Christ – its composition, its nature, its function and its mission. I hope you are part of it, because it is a universal phenomenon, a pet project of God and a jewel in his crown of accomplishments. Apostle Paul speaks of the church as “...*the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations...this mystery, which is Christ in you...*” (Colossians 1:26-27). This is *The Church: Christ in you!*

Apostle Paul writes about the believers in Laodicea: “*My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*” (Colossians 2:2-3). What is the mystery? *Jesus Christ* – his birth, his life, his death, his resurrection, his everlasting church!

“...*we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it...*” (1 Corinthians 2:7-8).

“...*this grace was given me (Apostle Paul): to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Ephesians 3:8-11).

- How am I helping to fulfill God’s glorious intentions and eternal purpose?

Chapter 12

Human Relationships

If humans are anything, they are relational, social beings. God made us to associate with him and with people. That is how we grow and develop – intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. Every day we are challenged to solve human misunderstandings, confrontations and difficulties – at home, at church, at school, at work, at play. These are life's arenas of practical biblical stewardship.

Getting along with each other

Biblical stewardship is always performed in a social setting. I cannot be a good steward, a good manager for my Lord, if I don't have the right societal skills. Human life is all about getting along with others, doing for others. Living an isolated life is not normal, not natural for a human being. Libraries and stores are full of books and audiovisuals about interpersonal relationships.

We all have our own philosophy or theory about this subject. *But, so does God!* His nature is radically different; therefore, his concepts are radically different. He has the best approach to how we should interact with each other, because he created us. And, as those who have received his nature, we are equipped to activate his mind and heart. Our stewardship will be God-oriented, God-energized and God-guided.

Loving service

God calls us (1) to *serve* one another and (2) to do it with *love* - no matter what or who is involved. "...*serve one another in love* (literally: *through love serve one another*)" (Galatians 5:13). That's the essence of human relationships from our Lord's point of view. Service without love or love without service is not the Christian way. Your relationship with people is just as important to God as your relationship with him. If that were not true, it would not be part of the Great Commandment. (Read 1 John 4:20-21.)

In the Gospel of John 15:9,12, Jesus explains the nature, quality and activity of the love of God: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love...Love each other as I have loved you." Notice that he says, "Now remain [continue, abide] in my love." (Emphasis added.) Our own love is inadequate. We need his love to love the way he loved. How did God the Father and God the Son love us? "...God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God wants his love in us to be demonstrated to him and to others.

The love that God gives us for our daily use, goes far beyond normal human love. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?" (Matthew 5:44,46). Our rewards in heaven depend, to a great extent, on how we handle our relationships on earth. I think a Christian's life motto could very well be: "Loving Service!"

Does Jesus care?

God takes to heart how humans treat each other, because he created us in his image, in his likeness. He takes it personally. He feels responsible. "Then why doesn't he take better care of this world?" someone asks. He certainly can and he certainly will. Right now, though, Satan and stubborn rebellious humanity insist on doing things their own way on Planet Earth. They really don't want God's intervention or participation, except perhaps in times of great trouble. So, for a limited time, God is allowing them – within limits - to see how well they will manage without him.

When things get really bad in this world (and they will), God will take high profile, hands-on, complete control once again. So, let's be patient. God has a timetable and he's right on schedule. In the meantime, we – Christ's followers - are to "...stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose [us]..." (Philippians 1:27-28).

Our Father in heaven may still want us to experience some hardships - for a variety of reasons. One of the primary reasons is to make Jesus Christ *Lord* of our lives. Establishing and maintaining the Lordship of Jesus Christ is synonymous with biblically correct stewardship.

"Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.' But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:13-18).

Just because God seems distant at times, doesn't mean he's not involved at all. He does intervene on behalf of his children more often than we think, especially

when we pray. Then, too, there is always the truth of Romans 8:28. *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* Of course, this takes total trust in God on our part. And we have no valid reason to distrust him. Even when people and things are taken away from us, it’s to demonstrate God’s preeminence and sufficiency.

Not limited to human love

Anyway, human existence is about relationships – with God and with our “neighbor.” It’s the Great Commandment. All of life is contained in the Great Commandment. And it’s all based on love. As I’ve already said, it’s not limited to human love, but it is unlimited divine, superhuman love. God poured his love into us when the Holy Spirit came into our hearts at the time of our spiritual birth (See Romans 5:5).

God will judge us not only on how we treated him but also on how we treated each other. “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:14).

(The first part of the Great Commandment – loving God - is discussed in the sixth chapter: Mega Mandates.)

Family management

There is a passage in an old Jewish Prayer Book that reads, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hast not made me a heathen. Blessed art Thou...who hast not made me a bondman. Blessed art Thou, who hast not made me a woman.” But, in the new (spiritual) creation, in the Body of Christ, there is no longer a distinction between men and women. *“In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God”* (1 Corinthians 11:11-12). *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Galatians 3:28).

Men and women are instructed by God to play different organizational roles in the human, earthly family unit. God, knowing the man and the woman as well as he does, has made the man the responsible person in a family. We – men or women - make a big mistake if we think we are more knowledgeable than God is about these matters.

A wife should not resent being under her husband’s authority because:

1. The male member of the human race did not ask for this leadership role.
2. The husband himself is subject to Christ.
3. Even Christ has authority over him.

“Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and that the head of woman is man, and that the head of Christ is God” (1 Corinthians 11:3). (cf Ephesians 5:23.)

Husband

- An able-bodied Christian husband or father provides *materially* at least for his wife and for his children. *“If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8).*

Very often, in today’s world, both parents have incomes because, otherwise, they cannot make ends meet. Or the wife works outside the home, while the husband does the housework and cares for the children. I think the goal is to provide for one’s family – one way or another. I also think it’s ideal if the *husband* supports his family financially; but I know this is not always possible. If he does have an outside job, he will want to spend time with his children when he is home.

- He is responsible for the *management* of his family. *“...and must manage his... household well” (1 Timothy 3:12).* This means he is obligated – by example and word - to teach ethical, moral and spiritual principles and values to his wife and children. (See Ephesians. 5:23) He is the “priest” of his household.
- A husband *loves* his wife, *“...just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...” (Ephesians 5:25).* So, a loving husband is prepared to die for his wife. A loving husband is also kind and gentle. *“Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh [sharp] with them” (Colossians 3:19.)* If a husband treats his wife in a Christ-like manner she, in most situations, will respect him and will accept his authority.
- A husband needs to ask himself where he got his personal beliefs and behavioral patterns in relation to how he treats his wife. Is it a self-made philosophy? Is it the influence of his parents, society or tradition? *Is it biblical?*

Don’t wait for your wife to respect you and accept your authority. The best way to *get* willing respect is to *win* respect. Give her *reason* to respect you. Give her reason to respect your authority. It’s hard enough for some wives to respect and submit even to model husbands. Don’t make your wife’s life miserable by your misrepresentation of Christ. Why should you expect her to respect you, if you don’t respect her and if you don’t love her as Christ loved the church?

- Eve was created as a *suitable helper* for Adam. The two became *one flesh* (See Genesis 2:20-24). *“...husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself” (Ephesians 5:28).* If he doesn’t love his wife, he doesn’t love himself correctly. So, a husband and wife are a

team, a partnership. The husband is the team leader. God did *not* put the husband and father in a position of *power*; he put him in a position of *trust*. He didn't do it to inflate a man's ego; he did it to teach a man how to model godly character and behavior.

Usually, the problem is not with the wife; it's up to the husband to set the example. You may be expecting her to take to heart what Scripture instructs her to do, without your taking to heart what the Lord expects of you.

A biblical husband and father always thinks and acts obligation and responsibility - not domination and control.

- A good husband maintains a caring, courteous relationship with his wife, so that his prayers are not short-circuited (See 1 Peter 3:7). If you as a husband want the Lord to listen to your prayers, be sure to listen to your wife – sincerely, patiently, lovingly and appreciatively.

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Wife

- A wife loves her husband and children (See Titus 2:4).
- A wife respects and submits to her husband (See Ephesians 5:22-24,33; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1-5).
- A wife has no authority over her husband (See 1 Timothy 2:11-14). Two reasons are given:
 1. The man was formed first (verse 13).
 2. The woman was deceived; the man wasn't (verse 14).

Child

- Children are to respect, honor and obey their Christian parents, if they want to please the Lord and enjoy long life. Fathers, on the other hand, should not exasperate, discourage or embitter their children, but “...bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1-4; See also Colossians 3:20,21; 1 Timothy 3:4; Titus 1:6). Fathers (and *all* adult Christians) need to be Christ-like in their attitude and treatment of children (See Mark 10:13-16).
- The gospel not only liberates the woman and makes her equal with the man, but it also has the ability to “...turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers...” (Malachi 4:6. cf Luke 1:17). I believe this applies not only to generations of Jews, but also to individual families. God's power can perform miracles and transform lives. God's supernatural love can remove hostility and barriers that plague many homes. The Gospel has the capability of transforming dysfunctional families.
- Much of the world's philosophy, psychology and behavior drive a wedge between parents and children.

- When parents live hypocritical Christian lives, children not only lose respect for them but, very often, they lose respect for the God their parents are misrepresenting. In the child's mind, the misconduct of an earthly father is a reflection on the heavenly Father.
- Divorce plays a big part in straining and even destroying parent-child relations. Divorce is usually twice as hard on a child as it is on a parent, if for no other reason than that the child is torn between two parents. Add to that the unwarranted guilt the child feels; it erroneously takes the blame for what happened. The child is punished for something it didn't do.
- If children are to become well-adjusted individuals, they need to grow up in a family where both parents are present, involved, firm but loving. A woman can never be a father no matter how hard she tries, and vice versa.

God gave children two parents – one male father and one female mother - because children need one of each.

“For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting...” (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

Our children need constant attention, attentiveness, affirmation and praise. It's important not only to love them but to show and tell them that we love them. It's one thing to bring children into this world; it's a much different thing to help them prepare for life.

I believe Jesus would have said, “Children should be seen *and* heard.” They need to be talked to and listened to. If you don't talk and listen to your child, somebody else will. If you don't talk to your young children, they may not want to talk to you when they are older. And communicate with them individually. Give them personal attention. This includes making a child feel wanted, needed and appreciated.

Parents should be careful not to go to extremes with their children: neither pampering them nor making them cynical. The Lord wants parents to build up their children, not tear them down. *Parenting is one of the most important occupations in the world – the building of a human life.*

“...children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children” (2 Corinthians 12:14). Parents are materially responsible for the lives they bring into this world, until children are old enough and well enough to work and support themselves.

The church connection

(Human relations *within the church* are treated in greater detail in the preceding chapter entitled, *The Church – A Mystery*.)

A large percentage of the New Testament epistles are devoted to church member relations, but here are just a few of the areas the Lord addresses through the gospel writers.

Don't judge each other

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” *(Matthew 7:1-2)*.

“Stop judging by mere appearances...” *(John 7:24)*.

“Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you – who are you to judge your neighbor?” *(James 4:11-12)*.

“Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes” *(1 Corinthians 4:5)*.

“Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters...each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way” *(Romans 14:1,12-13)*.

There is one good reason why I should give others the benefit of a doubt: I'm not God.

Forgive each other

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” *(Colossians 3:13)*.

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times’” *(Matthew 18:21-22)*. *In other words, continue to forgive until there is no one else and nothing more to forgive.*

Accept one another

“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” *(Romans 15:7)*. *Here, acceptance means completely and unreservedly opening one's heart to other members of the Body of Christ. By doing so, you will bring glory to God.*

Be kind to each other

“Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other [in the Body of Christ] and to everyone else” (1 Thessalonians 5:15).

Esteem one another

Honor one another above yourselves” (*Romans 12:10*).

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves” (*Philippians 2:3*).

Suffer with each other

“Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” (*Hebrews 13:3*).

Bear each other’s burdens

“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (*Galatians 6:2*). *The law of Christ is: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” One way to love your neighbor is to help carry your neighbor’s burden, whatever it may be.*

Encourage one another

“Therefore encourage [*help*] one another and build each other up...” (*1 Thessalonians 5:11*).

Serve one another

“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...” (*Philippians 2:5-7*). *Want to be like Jesus? Be a servant.*

Love one another

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. (Romans 12:10).

“Love the brotherhood of believers...” (*1 Peter 2:17*).

“For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (*1 John 4:20*).

...let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (*1 John 3:18*).

Die for one another

“This is how we know what love is; Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought [*are indebted*] to lay down our lives for our brothers” (*1 John 3:16*).

Employer-employee relations

Many Christians around the world look at employer-employee relations in a purely secular way. The biblical approach is totally foreign to them. To respond to employers and employees in a Christ-like way is difficult, if not impossible, for them. But, with God's love, strength and wisdom, it can and should be done.

"Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to" (1 Corinthians 7:20-24).

During Christ's earthly life, slavery was practiced universally. This system could be changed only gradually, because of the tremendous political, economic and cultural ramifications. But, while emancipation was not something that was legislated right away, the liberating power of the gospel was able to go to work immediately in the hearts of converted slave/servant owners. *Without* the gospel, you can remove slavery from society but not from the individual heart. In any case, Christian labor principles and work ethic, as taught by Apostle Paul, apply equally to us today.

"He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need" (Ephesians 4:28). When we work to produce income, it is not just for ourselves or our families. We do it with others in mind, especially those who need help.

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men...It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Colossians 3:23-24).

"Slaves (AV: servants), obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves [servants] of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is a slave or free.

"And masters, treat your slaves [servants] in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him" (Ephesians. 6:5-9). (cf Colossians 3:22-24). No matter what I am doing or for whom, I do absolutely everything with all my heart, because I'm really doing it for Jesus.

"Masters, provide your slaves [servants] with what is right and fair..." (Colossians 4:1).

“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands...so that your daily life may win respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). *What should be your ambition?*

- 1. Lead a quiet life.**
- 2. Mind your own business.**
- 3. Work with your own hands.**

Doing this, you will win the respect of both Christians and non-Christians. And you will not be materially dependent on anyone else - be it family, friends, organizations or governments. (This does not apply to you if you truthfully are not able to work.)

“In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us... We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have a right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat.’

“We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12).

Neighbor

Who is my neighbor?

In the Gospel of Luke (10:25-37), “an expert in the law” asked Jesus: “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus responded by telling him the story of a Jewish man who was robbed and beaten while on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho.

A priest and a Levite - both Jews - saw the victim as they passed by, but did nothing. However, a Samaritan – a gentile - stopped and helped him. He dressed his wounds, took the time to check him into an inn and paid all his expenses.

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” Jesus asked him. “The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’”

The law expert asked, “Who is my neighbor?” That’s being defensive. That tends to excuse noninvolvement. But Jesus asked, “Who acted neighborly?” That puts the shoe on the other foot. That puts the ball in my court. That changes the perspective and the position. That allows no room for inaction. I need to act

offensively. I need to take the initiative. There really isn't any need of trying to figure out who your neighbor is; just be neighborly to everybody. (By the way, the original Greek word for "neighbor" is *ho plēsion*: the person close or near by.)

In general terms, we may know who our neighbor is and what it means to be a good neighbor. But the Bible gets specific about how we treat each other. There can be no excuse for neglect, bias or mistreatment – of anyone. We may not agree with a person's beliefs and we may not approve of a person's lifestyle, but we are to love everyone – by disposition and by deed - with God's indiscriminate love. *"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people..."* (Galatians 6:10).

Do what to others?

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). I know a boy who knows this verse. But he only remembers the part about what others should do for him. The teaching, however, is first you do to others what you want them to do to you. In other words, don't wait for others to take the initiative; you take it. In every good way!

Jesus taught that we should feed the hungry, clothe the poor, take in strangers, look after the sick and visit the imprisoned (See Matthew 25:34-36). In a word, we are to be as concerned for others as we are for ourselves.

The purpose of human life is not only to please God but also to please people. "Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up" (Romans 15:2).

Apostle Paul writes, "Do not cause anyone to stumble...even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:32-11:1). Let's not be self-centered!

"...let us do good to all people..." (Galatians 6:10).

"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8).

Do right

"So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man" (Acts 24:16).

"We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one" (2 Corinthians 7:2).

"For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men" (2 Corinthians 8:21).

“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God...” (1 Peter 2:12).

“...so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault...” (Philippians 2:15).

An exemplary Christian “...must also have a good reputation with outsiders...” (1 Timothy 3:7).

“Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody” (Romans 12:17).

Flexibility and adaptability

“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make 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 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 men 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).

Make peace

“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18).

“...that we might live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Timothy 2:2).

“Remind the people...to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate and to show true humility toward all men” (Titus 3:1-2).

“Blessed are the peacemakers...” (Matthew 5:9).

“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position” (Romans 12:16).

Forgive

You can forgive if you want to, or even if you don’t want to. To forgive or not to forgive is a choice. That’s true with other emotions (hate, love). God wouldn’t tell

us to forgive, if it couldn't be done. He chose to forgive us in Christ, although he had more reason not to forgive than we do.

There are two reasons you should forgive God, others and yourself:

- Your unforgiving spirit will eventually destroy you – first soul, then body. Unforgiveness hurts the unforgiving person more than the one not forgiven.
- If you don't forgive others, God will not forgive you. (See Matthew 6:15;18:35.)

As Jesus hung on the cross he said, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”* (Luke 23:34).

As Stephen was being stoned to death, *“...he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’”* (Acts 7:60).

“And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (*Mark 11:25*).

Enemy

The biblical attitude and behavior toward an enemy is unique in this world.

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28). These are commands, directives; they are not options.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse...Do not repay anyone evil for evil...Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.

“On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head’” (Romans 12:14,17,19-21). This is retaliation Christian style!

People of the world often avenge themselves; they “get even.” Or they suffer passively; they bear it – patiently or impatiently. But our Father in heaven does not want us to avenge ourselves or to be passive. On the contrary, he *expects* us to react - constructively and creatively, always returning good for evil! Doing nothing in return is not good enough for the followers of Jesus.

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). If we are true children of the heavenly Father, then we will be merciful. If we are not merciful to others, God will not be merciful to us. (See Matthew 5:7.)

Conclusion

The biggest troublemaker in relationships is self-centeredness. The solution is to be Christ-centered, to have the mind and attitude of Christ (Phil. 2:5). We will never find our true identity through self-seeking. Our real self will be realized only *in* and *with* Christ. He is what has been missing in our lives.

I am convinced that if our relationship with Christ is right, most of our human relational problems will be resolved – at least from our side. Everything and everyone is out of place in our lives until Christ is in his proper place. The more I'm in tune with him, the more sensitive I am to people around me and the easier it is to get along with them.

Apostle Paul was able to be all things to all men because he first gave his all to Christ. We don't have to be apprehensive about any human relationship if our contact with the Lord is active and stable. We, as God's representatives on earth, have a built-in *Public Relations Director* – the Holy Spirit. Let's not ignore or neglect God's indispensable provision. God is very concerned about how well we get along with others.

The second part of the Great Commandment is: "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" (Mark 12:31). I can do this only if I first love the Lord with my whole being, with my whole personality, with no area of my life withheld from him.

We know that neighbor means "Everyman." No exceptions. But before I can love others as I love myself, I must first understand what it means to love myself. How does God want me to love myself?

It helps to remember that I am not my own. God owns me. I must take good care of what belongs to God. I am created in God's image; I must respect that resemblance. "We are his offspring [Greek: *genos* – race]" (Acts 17:28). I am expected to bring glory to God in and through my body, my soul and spirit.

I must not love myself selfishly. I should not focus on just myself, or just my family, or just a small circle of friends. God's concern must be my concern, and that includes the whole world.

I should love people as genuinely as I love God: purely, profoundly and pragmatically. But I still cannot love a human being the way I love God; that is, with all my heart, soul, mind, strength. Only the Lord gets that kind of devotion. God is always first in my life. Furthermore, I worship God but I do not worship human beings; I do not worship God's creation. God is our creator; we are all his created beings.

There is something special about Christian love, because there is something special about the love of Christ. Jesus said to his disciples, "*A new command I give you: Love one another*" (John 13:34). They had already discussed the Old Testament Great Commandment. Part one is: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart...*" Part two is: "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" (Mark 12:30,31).

So, what was new about Jesus' command? Well, he goes on to say in the same verse, "*As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*" What was different about his love? Apostle Paul says, "*...Christ loved the church and gave himself*

up for her..." (Ephesians 5:25). Jesus adds in John 15:12, "*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*" So, the Greatest Commandment tells us to *love* our neighbor as ourselves; Jesus' *new* command goes much further; we are to be ready to *die* for our friends.

I believe the shortest yet best interpretation of "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" is what Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew 7:12. "*...do to others what you would have them do to you.*" Jesus did not say, "*Think* about others..." He said, "*Do!*" Nice thoughts and good words are not enough. In the Great Commandment, the word *love* is not a noun; it's a verb. Love equals action. Love is only a theory until it's activated. No action, no love. You will truly love others if you (first) treat them the way you want to be treated. What can be simpler? What can be more profound?

Chapter 13

The Christian And Government

Introduction

Individually and collectively, we enter and exit a world order that is out of order, unstable and unpredictable. We tend to accept these circumstances as normal. And, for most people, they are. Before us and after us, humans continue to muddle through an endless assortment of political theories, ideologies and civic values. Ever seeking, never finding; ever wandering, never arriving; ever changing, never stabilizing. Furthermore, the longer it proceeds, the worse it becomes. In contrast, God's truth is impeccable, immutable and universal. Christians have the awesome responsibility of demonstrating these timeless truths - regardless of country, culture or century. That is one of the main reasons for the born-again believers' continued presence on this planet.

When the principles and practices of Christianity were committed to us by Jesus Christ and his apostles, our interaction with *governmental officials* was also elucidated. If our relations with earthly authorities are that important to the Lord of the universe, they should be important to us -- his appointed representatives on earth. If we are not proficient in divine diplomacy, we will definitely distort and disable our Lord's current mission on earth. We cannot be good stewards of the entrusted life, if we do not correctly give to God what is his and to Caesar what is his. This *includes* money; but it's much, much more than that.

It is natural for deprived, repressed and abused citizens to resent, hate and struggle against what they perceive to be bad government – their own or occupying forces. Therefore, it is consequential for Christians to know the teaching of the Bible on this subject, because *God's view and treatment of government (good or bad) happens to be radically different from that of human beings.*

The kingdom of God & of Heaven

Before we can discuss the topic of a Christian's relationship with earthly governments and human administrations, we need to grasp – at least in part - the meaning of a superior sovereignty, of a much more significant authority and rulership – the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven.

We will never appreciate the reason for temporary earthly governments (and how we, as disciples of Christ, are to behave among them), if we do not understand the place of divine sovereignty. And we will never be good stewards for the Lord until we see the enormous difference between earthly and heavenly kingdoms.

Countless sermons have been preached, copious essays have been written and numerous books have been printed about the Kingdom of God and of Heaven. Everyone has easy access to more than enough of this material. (Of course, the Bible is the central source.) So, for this chapter's purposes, I will make only a few comments about God's supreme rulership, as embodied in the biblical term "kingdom." (The brevity of my remarks in no way downgrades the prominence of this subject.)

I believe the writers of both the Old and the New Testaments chose to use the equivalent of the word "kingdom" because that kind of comparison is what those people understood best. In today's world, we understand kingdoms in a revised and reduced way, because the prevalence of kingdoms has proportionately dwindled and the authority of kings has diminished.

In the past, most emperors, kings and monarchs *owned* their subjects, including their children, their possessions and their property. This was true not only under pagan rulers but also under the Hebrew sovereigns. (See 1 Samuel 8:10-17.) However, when we talk about *God's* political and spiritual administration, especially about his ultimate, exclusive, absolute, and perpetual reign, we are talking about something outside the realm of human experience.

Occasionally, Jesus and the apostles did use the terms "Kingdom of God" and "Kingdom of Heaven" interchangeably. This may be because these two "kingdoms" eventually will merge into one entity. But, for now, the names usually refer to two separate state of affairs.

The current Kingdom of God

As I understand it, the Kingdom of God means that he is now living and ruling *spiritually* in the lives of individual people. It is associated with the preaching of

the gospel and with the establishment of his “mystery” church. (See Mark 1:14-15; Luke 17:20-21; John 18:36 AV; Ephesians. 5:32; 6:19.)

The preaching of the Gospel, which leads to the establishment of The Church, also leads to the spiritual and social influence of The Church on the general public. How social should God’s Gospel be? The balance between evangelism and social work, between saving souls and caring for bodies can, in part, be seen in Mt. 25:36-40.

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10).

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” ([Gal. 6:10](#)).

The future Kingdom of Heaven

The Kingdom of Heaven is not yet in place. (See Matthew 11:12.) It is associated with the future *political* (social) rule of Christ. (See Matthew 5:34-35.) It means that heaven will rule over earth, with no more rebellion, usurpation or independence.

**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders,
and he will be called Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

**Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne
and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. - Isaiah 9:6-7**

The Conflict of the Ages

The span of human life on earth is epitomized by a person’s taking sides either against good or against evil. God is good. Satan is evil. We actively support one or the other side. *Neutrality is not part of the scenario.* To do nothing, to make no

conscious choice, is to strengthen the side of evil. Jesus said: “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters” (Luke 11:23).

When we lie, cheat and steal; when we live ungodly, unholy lives, we encourage Satan and support what he believes in, what he stands for. We are “for” the devil and “against” Jesus Christ. Our pious profession means nothing; our behavior means everything. Our actions indicate whose side – God’s or Satan’s -- we are aiding and abetting.

So, the struggle for souls (Kingdom of God) and for nations (Kingdom of Heaven) continues. Satan’s defeat is assured. It’s only a matter of time. *God’s* time. God’s direct and complete takeover of governments on earth is on schedule. (Read Psalm 2.) When the war between good and evil ends, God will rule the entire universe - fully and forever.

If Satan “...knows that his time is short” (Revelation 12:12) and that his defeat is imminent, why does he continue to fight “a losing battle”? Because, from his perspective, it is far from a losing battle. And he’s right. He is the one “...who leads the whole world astray” (Revelation 12:9). Yes, he knows he is going to hell, but he’s going to take as many human souls with him as he possibly can. The sad truth is, a lot of people will choose to believe and follow him. (See Luke 12:32; Matthew 7:13-14.)

Satan will not succeed in defeating his creator but, in the process, he will do a massive amount of irreparable damage. His greatest triumph will be his ability to deceive much of humanity. More people will believe his lies than will believe God’s truth. (Matthew 7:14) But the Lord continues to give humans that choice, because he has given us a free will. However, that endowment – a free will -- carries with it responsibility, accountability, consequences.

Meanwhile, whenever God intervenes in human affairs, he does it for his own purposes. Whenever he allows Satan to take certain action, he does it for good reason. It is part of his celestial strategy.

As Christ’s ambassadors, our primary occupation is with the Kingdom of God. Although God expects us to interact with human authority, it should not be at the expense of God’s kingdom and Christ’s cause. First and foremost, I pledge allegiance to the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Author of authority

“[King] David praised the Lord in the presence of the whole assembly, saying...’you are exalted as head over all...you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all” (1 Chronicles 29:11-12).

“From one man [Adam] he [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (Apostle Paul, in Acts 17:26). *God* designed the nations, *God* designated their geographical location, *God* determined their duration. So, *all* nations are “under God.”

Consistently, the Lord uses both godly and corrupt governments to fulfill his plans. “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases” (Proverbs 21:1). “... [God] sets up kings [literally: *sovereigns*] and deposes them” (Daniel 2:21). That includes all the rulers of all human history – past, present and future. (See Daniel 2:31-45; Isaiah 45:1-7.)

Pontius Pilate said to Jesus: “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” Jesus answered him: “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” (See John 19:1-11.) God gave pagan Pilate power over Jesus. God allowed Pilate to have Christ crucified. Human tragedy or divine strategy?

After he read the handwriting on the palace wall, the prophet Daniel said to Belshazzar, King of Babylon: “O King, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him...

“But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory...until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes” (Daniel 5:18-21).

Daniel continues speaking to Belshazzar: “But you ...have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this...you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways” (Daniel 5:22,23). Because Belshazzar knew all this, the Lord’s handwritten message meant both his *reign* and his *life* would come to an immediate end.

The Lord establishes an endless variety of authorities in the countries of our world. And, I believe nothing goes to waste in God’s economy. Every earthly situation has a heavenly purpose. For the child of God, everything can work together for good. This includes life under authority that has gone godless.

God wants us to be a testimony under all kinds of administrations. He watches how we act, react and pray in various circumstances. While the Lord was testing Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and Darius, he was also testing Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and Daniel. And, God is testing *us*. He is testing our *government*. *Everybody* is being “...weighed on [God’s] scales...” (Daniel 5:27).

Currently, there are some strong beliefs (1) that God establishes only the authorities that are sympathetic to Christianity and (2) that hostile authorities are not from God and interfere with and harm Christianity. But these ideas contradict biblical teaching -- in *both* Testaments. We need to pay less attention to the character and strength of governments and more attention to the supremacy of God. Our Lord is *above* human governments and, as his children, we need to view them from his perspective.

When we accept the truth that God institutes *all* authority, our perception of repulsive powers will become more farsighted and our attitude toward them will be more judicious. We will not think of rebelling against them any more than we would rebel against God. We will not take God's affairs into our own carnal hands. We are here to facilitate *his* long-term plan and purpose – not our selfish, shallow and shortsighted predisposition. Our prayer should always be: "...your will be done on earth..." (Matthew 6:10).

How does this teaching integrate with the fact that Satan is the current ruler of this world and earthly authorities are his to influence? *The Bible makes it clear that the devil is subject to and restrained by God; he is not allowed to do anything without God's permission.* (See Luke 22:31; Revelation 13:7.) The Lord has put limits on him. (See also Job 2:6.)

Satan promotes chaos and anarchy; God prefers law and order. We are encouraged to pray for peace - not for our convenience and comfort, but "...that we may live peaceful lives in all godliness and holiness" (1Timothy 2:2. Emphasis added). *Prayer plays a pivotal role in the Christian's relationship with governmental officials.*

"... for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" (Romans 13:1). Notice that even though Apostle Paul makes the effort to state one important truth two different ways in this verse, still, not a few Christians manage to read it this way: "Authorities that revere God are from God; atheistic authorities are from Satan. Therefore we will respect and obey only godly rulers. We will have nothing to do with godless governments, nor will we comply with their laws." But this line of reasoning raises the following question: What objective criteria does a critical Christian use to ascertain when a government is godly or godless?

Christians who have an indelible antigovernment attitude routinely disrespect and disobey *all* government – bad *and* good, in part or in whole. For example, some of these people not only refuse to pay taxes on their (undeclared, of course) income but they also eagerly apply for (often deceitfully) and receive financial assistance from those same authorities. This is making a mockery of the biblical way of life and of scriptural stewardship. These people pervert Christianity and give it a bad name.

"For by him [Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him" (Col. 1:16). So, it is clear that *governments* – all of them – were created *by* and *for* Christ.

But, *agreeing* that all authority is from God is only the first step in our dealings with the people who rule over us. *There is specific, significant action to be taken.*

1. Respect and honor the authorities

Speaking of authorities as God's servants (Romans 13:6), Apostle Paul continues: "Give everyone what you owe him... if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" (v. 7).

How is it possible to respect and honor a ruler who, in our opinion, doesn't deserve it? Well, we respect the *office*, though we may have personal reasons for not wanting to respect the individual. We obey him (if he clearly doesn't make me disobey God's Word) because of his *position*. We submit to him because of his *authority*, because of his God-given responsibility. We respect and honor him because God tells us to do so. His symbol of authority? "...he does not bear the sword [badge, uniform, arms] for nothing" (Romans 13:4). We are not subject to a man; we are subject to divinely placed authority. Whoever rejects the existing powers rejects God's institution. The earthly ruler is God's servant.

According to Apostle Peter, we should fittingly honor *everybody*. "Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king" (1 Peter 2:17).

Everyone should be suitably respected, because everyone is created in God's image. If I do not respect the visible likeness of God, how can I respect God himself, whom I cannot see? However, in this verse, Peter singles out authorities when he says, "honor the king" (literally: *sovereign*). The statement is short and simple. It's in the form of an order, not an option. So, we are enjoined to respect authorities in our hearts and honor them in our speech. That's a good beginning.

2. Obey authorities

"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king [sovereign], as the supreme authority, or to governors....For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men" (1 Peter 2:13-15). This one verse alone declares and clarifies the following:

- **We submit to human authority.**
- **We submit willingly.**
- **We submit to every human authority.**
- **We submit for the Lord's sake.**
- **It is God's will.**
- **It is doing good.**
- **It silences ignorant talk.**

Question: Must we, in fact, submit to *all* the demands and laws of our government?

In dialoging this kind of question, two Bible references are usually cited in defense of civil disobedience: "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God" (Acts 4:19) and, "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29). *In both instances, the apostles were not speaking of, or*

to, the occupying Roman authorities. They were addressing the members of their own Jewish Sanhedrin – a unique, ethnic council that had religious, civic and criminal jurisdiction over its own people. And the apostles' response was to the council's specific order "...not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18).

In principle, I believe the Lord expects us to disobey the civil authorities when they order us, or try to force us, to do what is clearly contrary to God's Word and Will. But, the obvious problem is that, among us Christians, we differ not only in our understanding and interpretation of God's Word and Will, but also in what is right or wrong with our government.

In recent years, here in Denver, Colorado, Christians disagreed on whether or not the motto, "In God We Trust," should be prominently displayed in our public (municipal) schools. Some citizens asked the question: "*Whose God?*" What if my classmate serves a God different from mine? What if a pupil and his parents do not believe in any kind of god? (By the way, no one was curious about *God's* opinion; no one was asking, "But, does my God *want* the motto posted in a public school?")

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established... Consequently, *he who rebels against the authorities is rebelling against what God has instituted*, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves... Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right...He is God's servant... Therefore, it is *necessary* to submit to the authorities..." (Romans 13:1-5. Emphasis added). We rebel against God when we rebel against human authority. And God himself will judge us for it.

"Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient..." (Titus 3:1). Apostle Paul does not distinguish between godly or godless rulers and authorities. We have no right to rewrite God's policies.

3. Pray for the authorities

"I urge [entreat], then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority... This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved..." (1 Timothy 2:1-3).

We have the honor, the privilege of praying for those in authority – for *all* of them - the good and the bad. God does not differentiate; neither should we. Why should we pray for those in authority? Why does that kind of prayer please God our Savior? *Because God wants to see them saved. Do we?*

Apostle Paul says our prayers should be *for*, not necessarily *with*, rulers. We are closest to our leaders when we pray for them. Prayers are primarily for God's ears, not the ears of rulers. We need to get close to God, not necessarily physically close to our civic leaders or politicians. In the same way, we can get extremely close to evil rulers. They need our prayers as much as good rulers need them.

Do you want to influence rulers, politicians? *Pray* for them. God can change rulers' hearts, if he wants to. He can change circumstances, if he chooses to. He can replace rulers, if he needs to. I believe God will take care of our government, if we will take care of his Church. We need power in *prayer*, not in *legislature*. We need to lobby the throne of grace, not the corridors of capitals. We need to fight evil *spiritual* powers, not bad flesh and blood. *Our actual enemy is invisible.*

Only eternity will reveal how things could have been different if we had used our energies to influence God for government's sake, rather than to influence government allegedly for God's sake. I say *allegedly* because I don't believe for a moment it's for God. Pure and simple, it's for us. We fight carnally because we think carnally. We think carnally for carnal reasons. We deceive ourselves if we think God supports us in these purely human efforts – whether they succeed or not. We can never hope for God's automatic stamp of approval on our own well-meant, well-planned tactics.

“Contend for the faith” (Jude 3)

Some of us want to be recognized as some sort of fighters for the faith, some sort of modern-day crusaders. Fine, but we need to do it in a biblical manner, with a Christlike attitude.

My Webster's dictionary says that “to contend” means “to strive or vie in contest or rivalry [as in sports] or against difficulties.” That's the meaning in Jude 3. *It simply means moving ahead, making progress in our personal spiritual development.*

We strive, we contend (Gr. *athleō*) as those who want to win. (See 2 Timothy 2:5.) It certainly does not mean being argumentative or contentious. (See 2 Timothy 2:23-26.) And it certainly does not refer to political action.

In his short letter, Jude exposed the “godless men” who “slipped in among” the members of the true church. He talks about their immorality and apostasy and instructs the saints: “But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh” (verses 20-23). *Not a word about governments or politics!*

Apostle Paul did “defend” (Gr. *apologia*) the gospel; that is, he explained it. (See Philippians 1:17.)

He worked hard at being faithful and he kept (guarded) the faith by committing it to faithful men and by establishing churches. (See Philippians 1:16; 2 Timothy 4:7.) He finished the “course” (a lap in a relay race) that Jesus Christ assigned to him.

Apostle Paul fought the good fight of faith in the strict context of (1) living a godly life, (2) being a good testimony and (3) taking hold of eternal life. (See 1 Tim. 6:12.)

We fight, we struggle in *prayer*. (See Col. 2:1.) Living the Christian life is a struggle. (See Philippians 1:29-30.) We do not struggle "...against flesh and blood [human beings]..." (Ephesians 6:12). We don't even rejoice over the misfortunes of other people, not even those of our "enemies." Instead, we try to help them. (See Obadiah 12.) But we do struggle (1) against our own flesh, (2) against the principles of this world and (3) against the devil. (See 1 John 2:14-17.)

A politically powerful Church

At different times, the Church, in the name of Christ and of God, has gotten too close to government – ideologically, physically and materially. In every case, the relationship was never healthy – not for God, not for government, not for citizens. Christians (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant) became carnal, high-minded, high-handed and abusive when they became powerful. In every case, minorities were discriminated against, or beliefs and practices were forced upon them. "And of all plagues with which mankind are cursed, ecclesiastic tyranny is the worst." - Daniel Defoe

We know all too well that very few humans – individually or collectively – know how to use power properly, especially the religio-political blend. God is the only being who can handle power properly - even absolute power – because he is inherently good.

When the church gets too close to government, it's hard to tell them apart. At that point, the church is in the wrong business. Our job is to live and preach the Gospel, to see *individual* lives changed. *Individuals* are Christians, not *nations*. The gospel, not legislation, changes lives.

Laws do not root out sin (lying, cheating, stealing, hatred, bigotry, adultery, etc.). Russian philosopher Sergei Soloviev wrote: "It is impossible to improve morals by decrees." And it happens to be true that Jesus never told us to go into the world to legislate the gospel. Yes, of course, you can legislate morality to your heart's content, but you can't enforce it. God is in the business of changing *hearts*, not laws.

A few years ago, the State of Colorado tried to legislate political morality. Bill SB 95 was passed by our state Senate but was killed in the House of Representatives. If passed, it would have been a tool to "Outlaw Lies." People could have been fined and jailed for making false statements, in order to influence political campaign outcomes. Obviously, Bill SB 95 would not have prevented lying anymore than fire insurance can prevent fires. That particular bill could only *threaten* to punish prevaricators. *And only during campaigns!*

Try as it might, the UN will never turn the world around. Neither a one-world government nor a one-world religion will change human nature. Hypocritical human righteousness will not overcome evil in this world. It's a losing battle. We see it happening before our eyes. And, times that are more terrible are coming. (See 2 Timothy 3:1.) I suggest that instead of preparing for the best of times, we

prepare for the worst of times. This is not personal pessimism – just biblical truism.

Prophet Nehemiah's scribe, Baruch, son of Neriah, voiced his disappointment about his personal earthly future after hearing and writing down the Lord's terrible predictions. (See Jeremiah 45.) Baruch had hoped for bigger and better things, for the good life; but all he had to look forward to was trouble and anonymity – if not premature death. He was concerned for his personal wellbeing and for his reputation.

God responded to his concerns and complaints. "...do you expect smooth fortunes for yourself? Never expect that! Only, I promise you, as I bring doom now upon all mankind, I will let you escape with your life, wherever you go" (verse 5, Moffatt). Baruch was concentrating on this world, on the here and now. He had great expectations of this life. And he wanted to be exempt from hard times. He may have wanted to make his mark on this world. But all this was not to be. *With God's permission*, this world will go from bad to worse. (See 2 Timothy 3:13).

In Revelation 22:11, Christ goes so far as to say, "Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile..."

Even with the Holy Spirit's presence on earth, things are getting worse. "For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way" (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Whose job is it to hold back lawlessness? *The Holy Spirit's*. When "...he [the Holy Spirit] is taken out of the way," all hell will break loose. There will be no restraints. It will be universal anarchy. Violations against God's laws have been powering up for a long time. The trend is irreversible. The "mystery of iniquity" proceeds on schedule. Things have to get a whole lot worse before God will bring a stop to all of it.

You cannot *force* religious leaders to practice what they preach. You cannot *force* government leaders to be honest. You cannot *force* police to keep the laws they are supposed to enforce. You cannot *force* a brother to love his brother. Human nature will always be itself.

Only the implanting of a new nature can change people and, consequently, the environment. Every effort at peace – national or international – will continue to fail for one simple reason: there is no peace in the human heart. There will be no permanent peace on earth until the Prince of Peace – the Lord Jesus Christ – establishes peace along with *us* -- his special "Peace Corps."

Theocracy or democracy?

Personally, I believe in a discernable, realistic separation of church and state – in any country, in any situation, in any era. The last thing Christ wants is a State Church or a Church State – or any likenesses thereof. He's concentrating on recruiting standout citizens for his unearthly kingdom. And if he can't accomplish this with the help of "good" governments, he will achieve it with the help of "bad" governments.

The original Hebrew nation was probably the closest thing to a theocracy. If any theocracy should have succeeded, this was the one. It was something the Lord himself initiated, instituted and implemented – for and with his own Chosen People. He himself personally wanted to lead the nation. (See Judges 8:22-23 and 1 Samuel 8:4-9.) He wanted a special relationship with them. He wanted to be glorified in them and through them. “...everyone who is called by my name, whom I have created for my glory, whom I formed and made...the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise” (Isaiah 43:7,21).

It could have been a magnificent experience. They started out as one nationality, one religion, one culture. They had every advantage. What stopped them? Outside forces? Not at all; it was their own inherent human nature.

They rebelled against God’s leadership and demanded a king – a *human* leader. (See Nehemiah 9:17.) Consequently, that attempt at theocracy didn’t work out very well. At one point, they split into two nations. They began to kill each other and turned their backs on God and his laws and, ultimately, ended up being scattered to the ends of the earth. That particular theocratic experiment quickly disintegrated. And, as long as humanity is guided by its fallen nature, theocracy will always fail.

Since our Lord wants us to be *in* the (whole) world (though not *of it*) and to permeate all of society, self-contained Christian communities are not an option. (See Matthew 5:13-14; John 17:14; Luke 16:15.) If they do exist, they are, customarily, held together not by Christ’s love and liberty but by legalistic coercion. They live together for their own convenience and contentedness. They hope to protect themselves from outside influences but forget they cannot protect themselves from themselves. In addition, they are ignoring the Great Commission of – personally – going and sharing the gospel with the whole world. (See Acts 1:8.)

We, as individuals and family units, need to live in such a way – conceptually, physically and materially – that we are ready, at a moment’s notice, to be deployed to any part of the globe. That could mean separation from a church, from a group, from a family.

A day will come when theocracy will work - universally. It will happen when the Holy City (the New Jerusalem, the bride, the wife of the Lamb) comes down to the new earth. “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Revelation 21:3). Meanwhile, only individualized theocracy works - to a certain extent. You and I can choose to live out Deuteronomy 30:20. “...that you may love the Lord your God, listen to [hear] his voice, and hold fast [literally: stay glued] to him. For the Lord is your life...”

Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States, in his “Gettysburg Address,” acknowledges God’s existence but goes on to define the system of USA governance this way: “...of the people, by the people, for the people...”

So, the USA can never be an authentic theocracy (of God, by God, for God) - not even formally. And, constitutionally, it is a republic; it is a cultural and religious potpourri. Individual citizens can be Christian; the country cannot. A nation is only as “Christian” as its individual citizens. (A true theocracy is ruled by God’s laws – not man’s. No discussion, no compromise. God needs no advisors - least of all, the “experts.”)

Pastor or politician?

Governments and churches must make a choice. *Organized* religion should stay out of politics as much as official government should stay out of The Church. In some countries the government actually gives churches tax exemption if they promise not to get involved in political affairs.

I personally believe that individual church members, as good citizens, can be politically involved and even run for office. Separate Christian citizens should speak out regarding what they perceive to be government’s ethical and moral misdeeds.

I am not against legislating civility. Laws may deter crime but they don’t change minds and hearts like the gospel does. *That’s the essence of the Great Commission and that’s our primary mission on earth.*

If God really expected Adam and Eve to stay sinless he would not have said, “Thou shalt not.” He would not have given them a free will; he would have made them robots. He knew we’d break his Ten Commandments even before he wrote them. Then why did he write them and try to impose them? I believe it was to show how desperately deceitful humans are and that we require a new nature – his nature – to live holy, obedient lives.

So, what should society do about homosexuals, for example? What should Christians do about them? In the Old Testament, what did “righteous” Abraham and Lot – individually or together - do about them? (Read Genesis 18 and 19.) God was responding to someone’s outcry against this sin, this wickedness. (See Genesis 18:20-21; 19:13.) *Who* cried out, to whom, and how? Whoever it was, nothing is said about their approaching any kind of politicians; instead, they directed their concern to God.

What did God do to Sodom and Gomorrah? He “...rained down burning sulfur...” (Genesis 19:24,29), not only on those two named cities but also on the surrounding region. Except for Lot and his two daughters, everybody and everything was destroyed.

In the New Testament, what did *Apostle Paul* do about homosexuals? He *wrote* about them. What did *God* do about them? For now, “...he gave them over [literally, *surrendered them*]... to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another ...[and] to shameful lusts...[and] to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done” (Romans 1:24,26,28). Unless they repent (change their lifestyle), they are doomed. “Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them” (verse 32). That’s it.

I see nothing wrong with individual Christians helping to legislate good laws, but without sectarian overtones. In a free, *secular* society, what is “best” for a country should be decided by how the majority votes. For better or for worse, that’s how constitutional government – democracy - works.

Individuals, churches and denominations certainly should take a public stand on ethical and moral issues. Sadly, however, I have heard ministers of the gospel, while standing in the church pulpit, attack political systems and promote candidates for public office. But some of these same pastors never take a stand – publicly - on unscriptural divorce, illicit sex, euthanasia, abortion and fraudulent business practices. In fact, pastoral obligations, such as exhortation and rebuke (reproof), are no longer performed by many so-called ministers. Maybe they don’t want to offend and lose members, who might take themselves and their money elsewhere. That the Head of the Church might be offended and may have abandoned their church does not seem to be a concern of these self-serving hirelings.

Church leaders can’t have it both ways. They cannot be private individuals while they are public figures. They represent their church, denomination, organization or institution 24 hours a day. Yes, of course, they can vote as they please. But they should refrain from pursuing or promoting partisan politics, as long as they represent the church or any other biblically based entity. In the USA, it’s the law!

Back in the 1950s, quite a few American evangelical clergymen left their pastorates to fight Communism in our midst. I personally believe that Christian pastors, churches and denominations should not be diverted from their high and holy calling, that of being ambassadors of another kingdom - the Kingdom of God. We hardly have just enough time, energy and resources for this specific assignment. Spreading ourselves thin will negatively affect everything else for which we are biblically responsible. Nowhere do I find in the New Testament that the church should become an activist for any political person or party of any government in any country. For the kingdom of God, politics are not an issue; they are not even on The Church’s Agenda.

I cannot think of one reference or incidence in the NT where either John the Baptist, Jesus or one of the apostles spoke or wrote disparagingly of the secular Roman laws or politics, argued about them or protested against them. It just isn’t God’s approach and it should not be the mindset or concern of his earthly representatives. It’s none of our main business and it’s a waste of our precious time and energy. It’s a distraction we should shun and a diversion we should avoid. We don’t fight for earthly ideologies; we fight for lost souls. Jesus never ordered us to raise saline voices; he told us simply to *be* salt. That’s hardly a copout. It’s a lot easier to dispense salt than to be salt, to talk about light than to be light. Fundamentally, the only message we need to be voicing is the Gospel.

If we only make or dispense salt, we are just putting on a religious front, we have a dead faith, we’re self-righteously professing but not possessing. It’s not biblical Christianity; it’s secularized, politicized Christianity.

But if we are salt, we are using ourselves up, we are giving ourselves away. We are allowing Christ to live his life through us.

Scriptural “salt” has two functions: preservation (Matthew 5:13) and seasoning (Mark 9:49,50; Col 4:6). That’s what Christians are: preservation and seasoning. The way Christians promote morality is by being moral themselves. While they are not high profile political activists, they are heavily involved in benevolence – to the poor, to widows and orphans and to the needy, starting with the family of God.

4. Live exemplary lives before authorities and before the world

No matter where Christians live, they should always be good examples, as emissaries of a holy God. Their exemplary conduct starts in their homes, goes out into their community and, sometimes, ends before the authorities.

Apostle Peter admonishes us to live upright lives in our society. “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God...” (1 Peter 2:12). *Living faith is visible.*

Peter’s thoughts are corroborated by Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonian believers (4:12), “...that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders...” He says the same thing to the Philippian Christians (2:15): “... become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe...” We are God’s “stars” when we are blameless, pure and faultless in our private and public lives. *That* is definitely part of our calling. *That* is good citizenship and good stewardship!

5. Pay the authorities

Although he was above and over all governments, Jesus Christ, while in a human body, paid whatever taxes were due - civic or ecclesiastical, and he expects us to do the same. He tells us not to do anything to offend the authorities. (See Matthew 17:24-27.)

How important is it to our Lord that we pay taxes? He was willing to perform a miracle so that he could pay his and Peter’s taxes! (See Matthew 17:27.) He taught us to “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s...” (See Matthew 22:15-21.) We respect authority and, therefore, we respect authority’s taxation. Normally, private citizens do not determine the amount of taxes to be paid; the government does that. Will a man rob Caesar?

What belongs to “Caesar” is whatever taxes my government has established. They can be on both regional and national levels. They can include a tax on all personal and business income. God expects us to pay these taxes. Failure to pay our taxes is robbery and a federal crime. Godly Christians obey the laws of the land. “...you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants... Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue...” (Romans 13:6-7).

The authorities are God's servants. What is my attitude toward God's servants? How do I treat them? Do I try to cheat them or do I pay what I owe? It is important to God, and he holds me responsible.

Civic government is needed. And it also has to be supported if it is to fulfill its responsibilities and serve its citizens. We all want to have an effective and efficient governing body in our country. But most governments have no money of their own. A government has operating expenses. It needs to be paid for the protection and peace it provides under normal conditions.

As the saying goes, "There is no free lunch." If we live on this planet, we need to pay our fair share of its overhead. Taxes, per se, are not evil. Taxes are what we pay our government for doing its job. If I do not pay my share, then, conscientious, law-abiding people have to pay more. Able-bodied, principled Christians never live at the expense of others. On the contrary, they work and pay taxes the same as (or better than) anyone else. Of course, this excludes people who – for one reason or another - *cannot* work and do not have a taxable income. But, true Christians are good, hard workers. And, they not only provide for themselves; they earn enough to help the needy.

"He who has been stealing [from the government also] must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need" (Ephesians 4:28).

"...we [Apostle Paul and his colleagues] gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.' We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to ... earn the bread they eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).

When civic authorities talk about us Christians, what do they say about our payment of taxes - that we pay what is due or that we cheat the government? It's important that we "Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody" (Romans 12:17).

"For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men" (2 Corinthians 8:21).

Unsaved people may not live honestly themselves, but they know very well when a professing Christian is not living up to biblical standards.

We Christians are to be known for our integrity. We don't lie, cheat or steal. That is one of the ways we witness and represent God. It is better to overpay than underpay taxes. He who cheats the authorities cheats God, because God is behind all authority. Taxes, like tithes, are a divine institution.

It needs to be noted that some countries have no clear, reasonable tax structure. In such situations, individual Christians can ask the Lord what they should do. God will give wisdom, so that his children can live with a clear conscience – not offending their Lord and not robbing their government.

If you think a certain tax in your country is excessive, illegal or immoral, investigate your juridical recourses.

A Scriptural lifestyle

- You may have a problem accepting Apostle Paul's teaching in Romans 13:1; i.e., "...there is no authority except that which God has established."
- You may find it hard to "Give everyone what you owe him...if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" (v. 7).
- You may disagree that we need "... to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient..." (Titus 3:1).
- Or maybe you don't want to "...pay taxes..." (Romans 13:6).
- And, perhaps, you don't care to pray "...for ... all those in authority..." (1Timothy 2:2).

That's your choice, your decision. It was not I who authored these truths; I simply quote them to you from your own Bible. My responsibility is to bring these biblical facts to your attention. What you do with them is between you and your Maker.

But, be sure to think ahead. When you stand before the *Judgment Seat of Christ*, you will not be able to tell him you were not aware of these divine declarations and expectations.

So, the New Testament specifies five areas of required Christian involvement with authorities

1. **Respect and honor them.**
2. **Submit to and obey them.**
3. **Be a good example to them.**
4. **Pay taxes to them.**
5. **Pray for them.**

Christian politicians

It is obvious that most of the unregenerate politicians of this world have a mindset of convenience and expediency, driven by the god of Materialism. Yes, I know; there are politicians who are principled and who do a lot of good, if for no other reason than that their voting constituency has expectations – "or else." But there are those who are ready to sell their ethical and moral convictions for a few years of political prestige and power. And, these are the ones who most often manage to get into the top positions in their respective communities and countries. Human nature being what it is, the situation cannot be otherwise.

I am convinced that - but for God's direct intervention - it is now almost humanly impossible for an undisguised born-again Christian to be a popular (electable) politician in most countries. Christians in politics need to be on their guard not to

be swayed by a humanistic worldview. They are obligated to stand up for truth and right, regardless of personal cost. Big business should not be able to buy a Christian politician's vote or favor. And fidelity to biblical principles should be stronger than loyalty to a political party. We need to be careful that our nationalism or even our patriotism does not influence us more than does our commitment to Christ. Essentially, Christians are citizens of Heaven. In the meantime, we are *in* this world, but we are not *of* it.

Here is British Member of Parliament, Roger Berry's observation regarding politics: "Politics is by its very nature the art of compromise. Even a professing Christian in politics is going to have to compromise Christian principles at times."

Evil invasion

Biblical "ways and means" are not of this world. We do not target human rulers and authorities, except to pray for them. We focus on the evil spirit rulers and authorities in the surrounding atmosphere, which is the location of their diabolical command center. Earth has been suffering from an "Axis of Evil" since the Garden of Eden. These bodiless beings influence and even control humans in a variety of ways.

"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" (Ephesians 6:12).

As individual Christians, by our Christlike demeanor and good deeds, we are to be the light of the world. If our *works* do not impress the world, our *words* will be even less impressive.

This does not mean our God is a pacifist or a fatalist. We are dealing with his superior rationale, his long-term strategy and his faultless methodology. We need not question his controllability. He will win this war. It follows that Christians *are* "activists." And quite radical. But we act and react unlike this world. For example, we don't just "grin and bear it"; we always return good for evil. (See 1 Thessalonians 5:18; 1 Peter 3:8-15.) We don't fight people; we fight the spiritual forces of evil that take advantage of the weaknesses of our fellow humans.

"The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God..." (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). *That's* how we fight!

Have we been ignoring the superior implements of warfare that God has issued to us and, instead, have we foolishly stooped to using finite weaponry? If we use the weapons of the world, we are no better than the world. And we will surely be defeated. If we use God's weapons, we will demolish ideological strongholds – the anti-God reasoning and the philosophy of this world.

Prayer, powered by God's Spirit, is our "secret," ultimate weapon. "Not by [human] might nor by [earthly] power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty" (Zechariah 4:6).

Generally speaking, this world is against God and against God's people. It is no friend of ours and we are not to be its friend. (See 1 John 2:15.) "The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather against the Lord and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters'" (Psalm 2:2-3).

For purposes of benevolence and witnessing, Christians can and should befriend individual people or groups of people in this world, but being a friend of this world's godless principles is spiritual treason.

I might add that as long as the "Body of Christ" stands in the need of prayer, of exhortation and of correction, we really should first *concentrate on making things right within the church*. If the church is right with God and with fellow believers, we can't help but make an impact on the world. Conversely, if we are out of touch with God and with each other, we will not be influencing the world in a positive and dynamic way. Let's get ourselves into proper spiritual shape, and the world can't help but be impressed.

Finger pointing works best when it's first done in our own direction. Improper behavior must be removed from our own midst. If not, we wound Christ and impair his cause.

"For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God..." (1 Peter 4:17).
"But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under [the Lord's] judgment" (1 Corinthians 11:31).

Believe it or not, our task is *not* to make "home improvements" in this world. God is calling individuals out of this irreparable system into his ultimate scheme. And we are here to proclaim and project Christ. *That is our vocation*.

Does power corrupt?

Even as we respect, obey, pray for and pay our government, we remember that all human authority is temporary; it comes and it goes; it constantly changes. We Christians live for eternity; we work for the success of the Kingdom of Heaven, where there will be no sin, no egotism, no greed, no graft. In that kingdom, truth and justice will rule forever.

Strictly speaking, power corrupts no one. It's not what power does to people but what people do to power. By itself, power is powerless; it has no life of its own; it cannot act on its own. Pure power is amoral. The corruption is not in the power; it is in the human heart. All we need is a situation, an opportunity either to repress or express our depravity. A little or a lot, power is totally innocent. Some people handle a lot of power very well. Others abuse even a little. The difference is not in the power but in the person. We were corrupt before we were exposed to power. If humans were not corrupt, there would be no problem with power – whatever its profundity or proportion.

If I believe power corrupts, I might as well say money corrupts. Yet, we all know there's nothing wrong with money itself. You can suffer from love of money

whether or not you have it. And you can be power-hungry long before you are entrusted with it. You can commit adultery in your heart. You can steal in your soul. You can murder in your mind. The problem is internal, not external.

It is not surprising then that, invariably, leaders pervert power. Winston Churchill said: "The whole history of the world is summed up in the fact that, when nations are strong, they are not always just, and when they wish to be just, they are no longer strong." Where, then, does a Christian politician fit into this dichotomy?

The Kingdom of Heaven will be both strong and just, not only because of God but also because of our own glorious transformation.

Inside or outside the camp?

It is tragic that many Christians not only know more about their earthly government than about the government of their Heavenly Father's Kingdom, but they are also more motivated by earthly politics than by the heavenly. Our assignments are on earth, but our headquarters are in heaven. A true Christian is a representative of another world order. Here, we are ideological aliens, understandably considered to be rather strange.

We are the sheep, not part of the wolf pack.

We are the light, not part of the darkness.

We are the salt, not part of the decay.

We are in this world, but not supportive of it.

"And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore [because he was the sin offering]. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:12-14).

We may want to stay inside the camp *and* be part of the world order. But, if we want to be close to Christ, we must go to him *outside the camp* (a reference to the encampment during Israel's wilderness wanderings), because that's where he is. And that means participating in his disgrace, because he is a social outcast on the planet he made, ostracized by the people he created. So, we must choose where and with whom we will stand. We cannot be inside and outside the camp simultaneously.

"...don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4). Who is your friend? Who is your enemy? You cannot be a friend of both God's holy truth and of this world's diabolical mentality and activity. You cannot, at the same time, be a biblical believer and a Hollywood Christian.

Independent of human government

We do not expect anything from earthly authorities, nor do we depend on them. We hope and trust only in the Lord. "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save" (Psalm 146:3). *God* is behind all authority and we should see *him* behind everyone he puts in place of authority over us.

We need to maintain God's perspective of human authority. "Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust... Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing... He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff" (Isaiah 40:15,17,23,24).

One Pharaoh was sympathetic to the Israelites. For awhile, they were privileged people. But, a subsequent Pharaoh enslaved them - a miserable condition they were forced to endure for over 400 years!

We Christians should not put our faith in human authority. We honor, obey, pray for and pay taxes, but we do not put our confidence in earthly governments. "This is what the Lord says: 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on the flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord'" (Jeremiah 17:5). To depend on the flesh is to reject the Lord.

"Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the Lord" (Isaiah 31:1).

If God wanted the children of Israel (under The Law) to look to and depend on him for *everything*, should God's children (under Grace) do less or be any different?

Currently, Christians have dual, concurrent citizenship: temporary/human and permanent/divine. Our primary allegiance and attachment is to God's Kingdom, and our devotion is first and foremost to the King of kings - Jesus Christ. "...our citizenship is [based] in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ..." (Philippians 3:20). "...and he will reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). But for the gracious interference of God in the affairs of men, the human rulers of this world are under the control of Satan – the prince (Gr. *archōn* = *chief*) of this world.

Psalm 2

(NASB)

Why are the nations in an uproar
And the peoples devising a vain thing?

The kings of the earth take their stand
And the rulers take counsel together
Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying,

"Let us tear their fetters apart

And cast away their cords from us!"

He who sits in the heavens laughs,
The Lord scoffs at them.

Then He will speak to them in His anger
And terrify them in His fury, saying,

"But as for Me, I have installed My King
Upon Zion, My holy mountain."

"I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD:
He said to Me, 'You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You.

'Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance,
And the very ends of the earth as Your possession.

'You shall break them with a rod of iron,
You shall shatter them like earthenware.'"

Now therefore, O kings, show discernment;
Take warning, O judges of the earth.

Worship the LORD with reverence
And rejoice with trembling.

Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry,
and you perish in the way,
For His wrath may soon be kindled.
How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!

I. The Christian under freedom

Introduction

If you live in a country where there is freedom of faith; that is, freedom to believe, meet together and propagate the gospel, then know that it is *God's* doing - not the government's. In the final analysis, *it is God (not the authorities) who provides freedom in any country*. Whether or not they acknowledge it, authorities serve God. Concerning the future of every country, God said through Isaiah (14:24), "...as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand."

If God himself does not force the leaders to fulfill the obligations of their laws, the charter or constitution of a country can guarantee us nothing. Succeeding rulers or Supreme Courts can totally ignore the articles and amendments, interpret them however they want and apply them as they wish. And it is God who permits or prohibits this sort of conduct, depending on his plan and purpose.

When we receive Christ into our hearts and lives, the Lord does not promise us only likeable experiences. We do not select for ourselves the conditions under which we as Christians will live. Christ himself will lead us; our job is to follow him

obediently. He knows what we need, how much, where and when. He tests us in difficult circumstances and situations, in abundance and in need, in sickness and in health, in freedom and in confinement.

Apostle Paul learned to live with surpluses and with shortages, to be content with what he had -- in all circumstances. That is a lesson we all need to learn. Sometimes the Lord tests us in countries where there is no freedom and sometimes where there is full freedom. *Both situations are an equally serious test.*

While we live in freedom, God observes how we use that freedom. Do we use it for good or for evil? Do we use it for his glory and for his purposes or do we use it for ourselves, for our own lifestyle?

When we live without freedom, the Lord watches our attitude and our conduct in those restricted conditions.

What am I living for? Do I have a good enough reason for living? If I live for myself, that is not good enough – neither for God nor for me. Life is all about living for God and for others. Even secular psychologists tell us that giving yourself to God and to people is very good for your mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health.

The pursuit of happiness

Generations of Americans (Christians included) have lived with the concept and belief that they are entitled to “certain unalienable rights,” including “the pursuit of happiness.” After all, the revered Declaration of Independence of the United States of America contains this lengthy statement: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Thomas Jefferson, with the endorsement of the legislators of the then existing 13 States, believed that “the pursuit of happiness” is not only a “self-evident” unalienable right, but that it is *endowed* by none other than the Creator. Without a doubt, this demonstrates Jefferson’s altruistic disposition. It expresses, I’m sure, his magnanimous concern not only for citizens of the United States but for people everywhere.

However, with all due respect for Thomas Jefferson and for the governments of the 13 States, nowhere in Scripture do I find that happiness, or even its pursuit, is a divinely-endowed right. The pursuit of happiness itself just isn’t a scriptural goal for anyone. Exactly what am I supposed to be pursuing? What is happiness, anyway? What is it that will bring me happiness?

If I am to *pursue* happiness, then it must be something outside of myself, or at least beyond myself. I go looking for it. Maybe I look for circumstances that I think will bring me this thing called happiness. But does my happiness depend on things and situations? If it does, then I will never be happy, because life is rarely all that I’d like it to be.

According to the Bible, I gain happiness by what I think, say and do; by my godly attitude and disposition, by who I am.

Someone has said that you don't find happiness looking for it; you stumble across it on the road of service. Happiness is something that happens to you as you live unselfishly for God and for others. Happiness is not a given; you have to earn it.

Here are some *biblical* indicators:

"Happy are the people whose God is the Lord." (Psalm 144:15) *We are to pursue God.* The Greatest Commandment tells us so.

"Happy is he who trusts in the Lord." (Proverbs 16:20)

"Happy is he who keeps God's laws" (Proverbs 29:18)

"Happy is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she [wisdom] is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She [wisdom] is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and in her paths are peace. She [wisdom] is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be happy." (Proverbs 3:13-18)

"Happy is he who is kind to the needy" (Proverbs 14:21).

After Jesus showed his apostles how they should *humble* themselves and *serve* one another, he said to them; "Now that you know these things, you will be happy if you do them" (John 13:17. Emphasis added).

Apostle Peter says you should be happy when you are insulted because of Jesus or when you suffer for what is right. (See 1 Peter 3:14; 4:14.)

Apostle Paul suffered a lot for his faith and for his faithful service. But he always had the joy of the Lord. The joy of the Lord does not depend on external situations and conditions. The joy of the Lord doesn't depend on material things. The joy of the Lord depends on the Lord. It is a personality trait of the Holy Spirit.

The joy of the Lord is already in you because the Lord is in you. But it needs to be released. The joy of the Lord is a delectable taste of heaven. Nothing human compares with it. Apostle Peter (1 Peter 1:8) says the joy of the Lord cannot be put into words; it's hard to define or describe, *but* it can be experienced and it can be demonstrated.

Apostle Paul writes from a prison in Rome to the believers in Philippi: He says: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). He was full of the joy of the Lord while bound by chains and living in a dingy dungeon. Many people are miserable even as they live in the lap of luxury. Many don't enjoy their affluence and many of these people even commit suicide.

We don't need to settle for momentary fun or even for short-lived human happiness, when we can experience the continuous, endless joy of the Lord.

Dangers of freedom

Living in freedom, the believer, more often than not, needs self-administered *inner* discipline. Where freedom is lacking, Christians live primarily by *external* controls. For purely spiritual welfare and growth, it is better and easier for most of us to live for God with reduced freedom. Human nature being what it is, the quality of our Christianity diminishes in proportion to the added freedom that is afforded us. This is especially true when the political authorities tolerate Christians or are in alliance with them.

In some countries Christians receive more than tax exemption on donations and cash allowances. Sometimes, the government financially supports the social (if not the religious) operations of the church or the para-church organization. It also gives these entities real estate and corporate tax exemption, tax-free police and fire protection, and other significant concessions. In some countries, even religious leaders' salaries are paid by the state.

I believe that the voluntary acceptance and use of such provision and protection puts the church in a position of dependence, obligation and compromise. Unconsciously, we withhold our salt and dim our light. How do you exhort or reprimand authorities to which you are deeply and permanently indebted? We don't want to offend or to lose any support, rights or privileges. Jesus did not hesitate to call the religious leaders of his day "brood of vipers," "hypocrites" and "whitewashed tombs," because he was not on their payroll. (See Mt. 12:34; 23:27.) He did not refrain from publicly dubbing King Herod a "fox." Why? Because he was not beholden to him (See Luke 13:32).

We don't need nor should we want the world's help to do God's glorious work – spiritual or humanitarian. The truth is we Christians have enough of our own money to pay our own way. If the church doesn't have enough money, it's because we ourselves are withholding it from the Lord. All too often, we try to give God as little as possible when, in reality, we should be giving him as much as we can. If we gave correctly, there would be no shortages in the Lord's work. And the government could stay out of church affairs - as it should.

Under coddled conditions, practical Christianity begins to deviate from the biblical path. It becomes more and more difficult to distinguish between what is from God and what is from the world; what is Scriptural and what is humanistic; what is of the flesh and what is of the Spirit; what is beneficial to the cause of Christ and what is beneficial to our selfish human nature. Progressively, we begin to see our governmental benefactors not as needy individuals, lost souls, but as an institution from which we can receive general and special consideration.

And now, even if we did "witness" to our local or national government officials, most of them would probably not see their need of Christ. Because of our

dependency on *them*, they may very well think our God isn't big enough, isn't able to take care of his people and his projects. If he *were* capable, why would he need their help? To a jeopardous extent, they have replaced God in our lives. (It's easy for me to "trust in God" when I have money in my pocket.) Believers should not expect or receive assistance from the powers that be, so as not to diminish their high calling nor to distort biblical Christianity. I personally believe that governments which patronize Christians are more harmful to the cause of Christ than are antagonistic or godless authorities. Church history supports this statement.

Yes, I am aware that Artaxerxes, king of Persia (Nehemiah 2), did help the people of Israel rebuild Jerusalem. But that was one earthly nation helping another earthly nation. *Our* kingdom is spiritual; it is not of this world.

It seems to me that when we Christians live in a country where there is full-orbited freedom, where government is tolerant (if not sympathetic), we tend to get preoccupied with this present world and forget why we're here. Eternity becomes remote and even eclipsed. In practice, this life becomes more important, more desirable than the next.

Humans are creatures of habit. The majority prefers predictability and stability. We're comfortable with the known. We think there is safety in sameness. The longer we stay in one place, the harder it is to move, partly because we've accumulated so much dispensable, dispersible stuff! It's easy to get addicted to this present world, especially if life is "good." The more we're attached to things, the less attached we are to Christ. When our relationship with the Lord is strong, material comforts are not all that important.

When we insist on a Christianity that is padded with material abundance, carnal convenience and physical comfort, we are embracing "another gospel." Good-bye self-discipline, self-denial, self-crucifixion. Hello self-centeredness, self-satisfaction and pseudo-spirituality. That's human nature doing its own thing.

Many of today's Christians are controlled by their old human nature and not by the Holy Spirit working through the new nature. The Lord understands the power and pull of the flesh; he knows what's good and what's bad for us. When we are poor, in pain and made to feel unwelcome in this world, we get homesick for heaven. We get our priorities right. We focus on pleasing God and proclaiming Christ.

It is argued by some that The Church is a material and moral asset to the community. It even does what the local government should be doing. It *deserves* the exemptions; it has *earned* the benefits and the subsidies. And look at what Western Christians are doing around the world!"

All this sounds reasonable, but it is totally unscriptural. There is no biblical support or justification for this kind of outlook. There should be no strings attached to what we do for humanity on behalf of God. Our good deeds never depend on what our earthly government does or doesn't do *to* us or *for* us. We should make no deals with governments.

And look at what we are *not* doing. As long as the spiritual harvest is immense and the workers are too few, we are not even up to par. As long as we're still giving out of our material abundance, out of our surplus, we haven't begun to understand our mission on earth.

Freedom from freedom

Nowhere does the Bible encourage us to expect or demand physical, religious or political freedom just for freedom's sake. The Christian's mission on earth has nothing to do with the presence or absence of freedom. In fact, it is very easy for human nature to misuse and abuse freedom, especially where concessions and assistance come from authorities. Human history confirms the fact that where there is freedom and abundance, people stop depending on God. At best, they give him perfunctory recognition and hollow lip service. They interpret Scripture through humanistic eyes and apply it capriciously. Without realizing it, their philosophy of life becomes thoroughly secularized. Very often, they put more heart, voice and resources into politics (and even into entertainment and sports) than they do into Christian service.

In the country where I now live (the USA), the dominant, morally and politically humanistic media routinely identify evangelical Christians as "right-wing ultraconservatives." This liberal press is quick to publicize the unethical and immoral conduct of pastors, preachers and evangelists. Evangelicals are not extensively known for their love of people or for their missionary fervor, and certainly not for their otherworldliness. By some, they are thought of as the "right-wing political fringe." By others, they are considered to be a "vast right-wing conspiracy." Included in this "rightwing" company is a long, published list of recognizable Christian leaders. Right or wrong, that is the perception the general American public has of evangelicals.

Above and beyond freedom

Humans are not very good at coping with freedom. We tend, thoughtlessly, to misuse, (if not abuse), this intriguing condition, no matter what its scope or its worth. In our minds, it is tied to a concept of personal independence. And, more often than not, that concept is unashamedly carnal.

To use freedom properly, it helps to be familiar with the Bible's view of freedom and independence. We need both external and internal disciplines. It is ironic that the worse kind of bondage develops in the midst of unbridled freedom. In many ways, absolute freedom and material abundance are in themselves a tremendous temptation and test. (If you don't think so, try giving it all up.)

More will be required of believers to whom more has been given in terms of freedom and resources. By themselves, neither wealth nor poverty are of any significance to God himself. But, for us, it is our *attitude* toward these things that matters. Are we using our material resources primarily for our flesh? Are we living for this life or for the next? Are we investing in heaven?

The true child of God needs to operate *above* freedom, *in spite* of freedom. Freedom is a proviso to do God's work; it is not a circumstance to do my own

thing. We are called to live for the Lord and serve him wholeheartedly, no matter what our circumstances -- be it in restraint or in liberty, in poverty or in abundance. Christianity is Christianity; there is not one kind for living in freedom and another kind for living in bondage. It stays the same, no matter what our location or state of being. There is no such thing as Catacomb Christianity or Convenience Christianity. We are to feel out of place in this world, no matter what the ideological climate.

Purpose of prosperity

Wealth should be used for God's work and God's glory. It is not given to us for only our own personal use. Let us never forget that we belong to God; we are not our own; we are his servants, the King's property. We will give him a full report about how we lived, what we did with the life and resources he entrusted to us.

So, "...though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them" (Psalm 62:10). Let us not strive to be rich on earth but in heaven. Jesus said it's hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Devotion to money can be deceitful and destructive. Better to be poor and be saved than to be rich and be lost. But, why not be both rich *and* go to heaven? Yes, but only if you're "*rich toward God*" and not toward yourself.

Jesus himself said you cannot simultaneously serve God *and* Money. If you love God, you will not love money -- and vice versa. (See Matthew 6:24.) Words are cheap; if you love God more than you love money, prove it by your actions. Convince God and yourself that you don't love money. There is only one way to prove you are not avaricious or covetous: Be cheerfully generous.

If God were to trust you with a lot of money, what would you do with it? Would you keep it for yourself? Spend it on yourself? Would you be willing to keep just enough to cover your overhead and use the rest to help the needy and empower God's mission on earth?

If God does give me material success and trusts me with wealth, he does so not for my personal pleasure but for his work on earth. For ourselves, we need -- and should be content with -- food and clothing. (See Matthew 6:11,25; 1 Timothy 6:8.) Too many Christians wrongfully appropriate for themselves what rightfully should be used to spread the gospel and help those who are in need -- tax-deductible or not.

Does God actually expect more than a tenth from me? *Absolutely!* He expects *everything* from me, simply because everything belongs to him. Under *The Law*, the tithe was the minimum to be returned to God. It belonged to him automatically. Under *Grace*, we ourselves and everything we have automatically belong to him because he purchased us. Everything we have has been committed to us for his use, for his glory and for his purposes. We love the Lord with all our hearts and serve him with all our might, with everything he entrusts to us.

Purpose of freedom

The history of the Jewish nation illustrates the truth that if freedom is misused, it will be withdrawn. So, it's important for us to know why God gives freedom.

The First Christian Church of Jerusalem had to learn this lesson the hard way. In the first chapter of the book of Acts, we read how the risen Christ commissioned his followers to be his witnesses, starting in Jerusalem and reaching to the ends of the earth. What could be clearer? What could be more urgent? But only in chapter eight do we read how this finally had to be implemented.

Why did they delay? Because they got comfortable in Jerusalem and had no intentions of going anywhere. God had to take severe action to force them out. He sent "a great persecution." A lot of Christians were rudely arrested and uncomfortably jailed. "...and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria....Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:1,4). They witnessed many miracles and conversions. Now they were back on track.

It should be noted that there are situations "When you are persecuted in one place flee to another" (John 10:23) (See also Acts 9:23-25). By doing this, the Good News is shared with people who are more receptive.

It is not easy to keep freedom in divine perspective, especially if we have been using it for ourselves for a long time. If suddenly the authorities were to take "our" freedoms or "our" possessions from us, we would be up in arms. But if everything we have belongs to the Lord and if he allows persecution, confiscation and privation, what difference should that make to us?

Have we made it clear to God that we will love and serve him no matter what – convenient or malapropos, freedom or bondage, wealth or poverty? Are we more concerned about having nice things than about doing God's thing? His plans and purposes take precedence over everything else.

Divine determination

Why is it that in different parts of the world, God's children have full freedom, others are limited and still others have no freedom whatsoever? Does God think one of these situations is better for the success of his mission on earth? It seems to me the Lord needs witnesses in all kinds of situations. We are challenged to excel for him in every environment. He's testing us.

We are not born in a certain country by mistake. And God moves us around this world in keeping with his plan. If we live in a country where there is complete freedom and life is materially good, God does not intend that it be only for our personal benefit. It is not because we are deserving. It is for the Lord, for his work.

A situation may not be good for us but it is good for him. And where it *is* good for us, it is often *not* good for him. The purpose of this earthly life is not so it would

be good for us. Our good life is still ahead of us. For now we will be the Lord's faithful servants and witnesses where he places us.

It is not a question of circumstance but of service. Why is it that, all too often, the imprisoned believer freely and openly witnesses behind bars, while a free believer feels reluctant to witness in a free society?

As I've already said, our calling is to convert individuals, not to make countries nominally Christian. *Our* job is to change hearts, not to write laws that try to enforce good behavior.

Are we divinely called to give people a moral façade? Should we be satisfied with behaviorally moral but lost souls? It may be pleasant when people behave civilly in society, but that's not why Jesus came and that's not why we, Christ's representatives, are here. These nice people still need to be converted.

Jesus made it absolutely clear: "I have not come to call the [self-] righteous, but [admitted] sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). Are we more concerned about having nice neighbors than about getting them saved?

When you and I stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ, which one of us will hear these words? "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Will it be the one who lived in freedom or the one who lived in bondage? It will be the one who was faithful, irrespective of the circumstances. I can just as easily fail the test of comfort as I can fail the test of discomfort.

II. The Christian under duress

It is just too easy to misuse freedom. That is why, very often, God does not trust his children with freedom. He knows our sinful human nature all too well. He knows what's best for us.

I become concerned when I see God's people crusading for freedom from discrimination and persecution, as though Jesus said it is an inalienable right. The New Testament says absolutely nothing about a guarantee of social or religious freedom. The Jewish nation believed that if Jesus was the Messiah, he should free them from Roman occupation. When he told them he specifically came to save lost souls, they rejected him. *They wanted a political, not a personal savior.*

Christians live by the Bible, not by country constitutions. No matter how well the constitution of a given country is written, our faith is in the Word of God – not in the words of a country's code. Jesus never promised us that conditions will be to our liking as we serve him anywhere in this world.

No matter what noble charters say and what rulers sincerely promise their citizens, God's people know full well that freedoms can be lost at any given moment. *We were promised only one right when we decided to follow Jesus: the right to suffer with him and for him.* We will never lose that right. As long as we faithfully follow Christ, that right will be a very real part of our lives.

Jesus Christ's unique ideology and his radical way of life must be tested in all the countries of the world, in all types of circumstances, as a witness to every sort of society and to every kind of authority. If our lifestyle cannot be distinguished from that of the world, our mission has failed. The only conforming we do is to Christ, never to the world. If Christianity is tested only in full freedom or only under duress, it is not a valid test.

Therefore, true children of God do not resent or oppose persecution; on the contrary, they embrace it. It's not that they have a martyr complex; it's just that they don't think of suffering for Christ is an experience to be evaded.

**Christ and the apostles insist that
persecution is indispensable *and* beneficial.**

It's for testing faith.

"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:31,32). (See also 1 Thessalonians 3:2-5.)

"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution..." (Revelation 2:10).

"Consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:2-3).

The nature of faith is that it has to be tested. Unproven faith is unauthenticated faith. Neither God, nor Satan, nor demons, nor angels, nor people see *true* faith until it is credibly and convincingly tested. To be of any value, faith has to be materialized. God himself sets the testing standards. And, possibly, Satan has a few conditions and requirements of his own. (See Job 1:9-12,22; 2:4-6,10; Luke 22:31.)

It's for church growth. (Read Acts 8:1,4.)

"The more ye mow us down, the more quickly we grow; the blood of Christians is fresh seed" (Tertullian in Apologeticus, circa A. D. 155). That is what a 2nd century Christian said. I'm afraid the 21st century egocentric Christian says: "That's fine, as long as it's not *my* blood."

But, the early Christians were not the only ones who had to pay for their faith with their lives. In many parts of the world today, thousands of people are being killed for professing Christ. But that's not the worse thing that can happen to us, because physical death for following Christ results in eternal life in heaven.

"I [Jesus] tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him [God] who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him" (Luke 12:4-5). (See also Mt.10:28.)

“They [followers of Christ] overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (Rev 12:11).

In 2002, 65 percent of Sudan’s population was Christian. Prior to persecution, it was only 2 percent. Do I want to see a spiritual awakening in my country? If yes, at what cost to me personally?

It’s for personal strengthening.

“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Peter 5:10).

It’s for spiritual growth.

“..the testing of your faith...[is]...so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:3-4). Christ himself “...learned [about] obedience from what he suffered...” (Hebrews 5:8). And we can, too.

“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).

”To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. 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” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Apostle Paul said his desire was not only to know Christ and his resurrection power, but also to participate in his suffering and to live a life consistent with his death. (See Philippians 3:10.)

It’s for a testimony.

“On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them...” (Matthew 10:18). Persecution gives believers the opportunity to witness on a level of authority that, under normal conditions, would not be possible.

It’s for the gospel!

“So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel...” (2 Timothy 2:8). How are you suffering for the Gospel?

It’s for the glory of God.

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering ... But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ...If you are insulted because

of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (1 Peter 4:12-14).

“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God...if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1 Peter 2:12; 4:16).

The certainty of trouble

Inseparably tied to the need for persecution in our lives are things like trouble, pressure, hardships, affliction, suffering and distress. The Authorized Version calls these experiences *tribulation*. When these things happen to us, it is important to God that we handle them in a Christlike manner. Apostle Paul and his coworkers are good examples.

**“We put no stumbling block in anyone's path,
so that our ministry will not be discredited.
Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way:
in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses;
in beatings, imprisonments and riots;
in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger;
in purity, understanding, patience and kindness;
in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love;
in truthful speech and in the power of God;
with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left;
through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report;
genuine, yet regarded as impostors;
known, yet regarded as unknown;
dying, and yet we live on;
beaten, and yet not killed;
sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;
poor, yet making many rich;
having nothing, yet possessing everything.”
(2Corinthians 6:3-10)**

Jesus predicted (if not promised) that we, his followers, would have trouble. “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). In the midst of trouble we have victory and peace – the victory and peace that come from God.

The Lord was going to tell or show Saul [Paul] of Tarsus “...how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16). If Apostle Paul had to suffer for Jesus, why should you and I be exempt? *The New Testament says twice as much about the suffering of Christians as it does about their joy.*

In Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, Paul and Barnabas encouraged new converts to stay true to the faith no matter what happened: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

“In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know” (1 Thessalonians 3:4)..

What does suffering produce in our lives? “...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance...character...and hope” (Romans 5:3).

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction...” (Romans 12:12).

Apostle Paul knew how a Christian is supposed to handle trouble: “...in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds” (2 Corinthians 7:4).

When Christians handle pressure and persecution biblically, it brings God glory from every direction. Rulers and ordinary people see the wisdom, power, grace and love of God in the demeanor of persecuted believers. The world sees how persecuted people manage suffering. *Persecuted Christians show how much Christ means to them.* The world is impressed that ordinary people (like themselves) can have such an overcoming faith and loving life. The greater the persecution, the greater the testimony, the greater the effect.

This “narrow road” is only for the spiritually bold and brave. That is why “...only a few find it” (Matthew 7:14). A time is soon coming on earth when “...some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons” (1 Timothy 4:1). “People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud...unholy...without self-control...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:2-5). The day is also coming when many will claim to know Christ, but he will tell them that he doesn’t know them. They will be denied entrance into heaven (See Matthew 7:21-23).

“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him...” (Philippians 1:29).

We stand on shifting sand if we insist on a Christian life that is without pressure, persecution or pain; we are Christians for the wrong reasons. We are not spiritual but carnal. “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature” (Galatians 5:17).

Keep in mind that Christ guaranteed only *inner* personal peace. We can expect hatred, “a sword,” oppression, suffering and death from the outside. In the midst of all this, we can rejoice in the Lord. (See Philippians 4:4; 2 Corinthians 6:10.)

Again, *authorities cannot and do not give us freedom.* It’s entirely up to God. God himself decides where, when and for whom freedom or liberation will be given. He sends his representatives to the highest authorities. And, if it’s needed, there may be imprisonment, torture and even death. He expects full commitment from us no matter what the situation or consequence. It is better for us to be faithful to

him in imprisonment than to be unfaithful, carnal Christians in the midst of freedom. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews catalogs marvelous deliverances, thanks to divine intervention. But it also lists the persecution, torture and death of many other heroes of the faith, on whose behalf God chose not to intervene. God is glorified not only by the life but also by the death of believers.

Darkness dislikes light

We live in a world where God's Son is despised and rejected. God's Truth is either ignored, or ridiculed, or twisted, or persecuted. The world of darkness and the world of light cannot coexist peacefully. By nature they are mortal enemies. The pure, bright light of God will always antagonize the kingdom of darkness. It cannot be otherwise.

It is the character and quality of the light of the gospel to bring out in many people the feeling of discomfort and even animosity. Most people are willing to converse with you about God in comfortable generalities. But start presenting the claims of Christ and their dark side shows itself immediately. The majority will never accept the true Christ; he will never be popular. Neither will you, if you are walking in the Light.

"This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (John 3:19-20).

By the way, why don't people come to the Light of the world? Because they are confused? Because they don't understand? Because it sounds simplistic, foolish? Because, first, they have to get answers to questions and resolve some problems? No, it's "...for fear that [their] deeds will be exposed." But it is a mistaken fear, because the opposite is true. If they come to the Light, their sins will be forever forgiven and deleted. However, if they don't come to the Light, their sins will be exposed on Judgment Day, and they will be punished appropriately.

If my personal Christian life never bothers anyone, it may very well be that I'm hiding the light or that I don't have it at all. It doesn't mean we have to be obnoxious. There is a big difference between *humbly bold* and *arrogantly aggressive* witnessing. There is a big difference between *to-your-heart* and *in-your-face* communication.

We can learn a lot from Apostle Paul's uncompromised but wise personal testimony. "Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:32 – 11:1). (See also 2 Corinthians 2:15; 6:3-10.)

**The Gospel itself is offensive enough
without adding human affront**

- **Christ himself is a stumbling block.** (See Romans 9:32-33; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 1 Peter 2:8.)
- **The cross of Christ is offensive.** (See Gal. 5:11; Hebrews 12:2; 13:13.)
- **The gospel brings disgrace.** (See Acts 5:41; Hebrews 11:26; 13:13.)
- **The gospel is foolishness to the carnal mind.** (See 1 Cor. 1:18-23.)

“Do not be surprised...if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13).

Jesus said, “All men will hate you because of me” (Matthew 10:22).

“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Let others seek governmental protection from discrimination and exemption from oppression (for being a certain nationality, for adhering to a certain religion, or for having a certain lifestyle). Genuine followers of Jesus Christ don't ask for or expect immunity from being hated and persecuted.

You can't have it both ways; you can't be a true Christian and not stand the test, not pay the price. That's the way our Lord has set it up. He has his reasons. We should not try to change things. If we do, it will be to the gospel's detriment. And to ours. And to the world's.

Didn't Jesus alert us? “No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). We were more than willing to accept these terms at the time of our conversion. If no one shared this tough truth with you back then, it was not an intentional omission. But, if you had known then what you know now, would your decision for or against Christ have been any different? No matter what happens, isn't it still more than worth it to know Christ, to have your sins forgiven and to enjoy eternal life?

Ultimate vindication and victory for the persecuted

By word and example, Jesus Christ taught that persecuted truth (and only persecuted truth) will overcome the world.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, watch how compassionately, how compliantly he responds to Judas, the traitor: “Friend, do what you came for” (Matthew 26:50). (A few hours earlier, Jesus washed Judas' feet and served him bread and wine.)

Listen to him on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Look how he, the Lamb of God, is silent before his shearers. (See Isaiah 53:7.)

Pay attention to how the disciples and apostles handle persecution. “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they have been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:41).

Observe Stephen as he is stoned to death for his faith: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

Fifteen hundred years earlier, Moses “...chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt...” (Hebrews 11:25-26).

It is worth repeating that if we suffer according to the will of God, we should praise God for it. We are blessed by God and should rejoice that we are privileged to suffer for Christ, because, for all of our difficult experiences, the Lord has happily prepared a great and everlasting reward for us in heaven. (See Matthew 5:10-12,39,45; 1 Peter 4:12-19.)

That kind of victorious suffering for Christ develops a rare relationship between the persecuted and the persecutor. God pours into his child the needed forgiveness and love. Yes, love! God’s love. The persecuted one prays for his persecutor and returns good deeds for evil deeds. (See Matthew 5:39-45.) Human nature doesn’t understand this and doesn’t know how to respond to it. That’s how we overcome the world. We have very unique, effective weapons.

God’s apparent weakness is really hidden power in a hidden agenda. As Jesus was hanging on the cross, the chief priests ridiculed him: “He saved others’ they said, ‘but he can’t save himself!’” (Matthew 27:42).

From a purely human viewpoint, God is a failure. But true children of God know this: “...the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength” (1 Corinthians 1:25).

Our great God outwitted Satan by willing to be weak, to be defeated. His true children live by the same principle. If we try to save ourselves, we will lose ourselves. If we lose ourselves for Jesus’ sake, we will find ourselves. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground, it remains alone. If it dies, it will live again; in fact, it will multiply.

So, the Way of the Cross guarantees triumph through helplessness, submission, surrender and loss. Even death. Let’s adhere to God’s infallible strategy. In our actions and reactions, let us not be tempted to use the unregenerate thinking and counterproductive tactics of the world.

Danger in rejecting persecution

We Christians should not be in a hurry to demand freedom from persecution for ourselves. We don’t want to work against God. He never takes the easy way out. Let’s not act in the interests of the material and of the flesh. We need to act in the interests of lost souls and of God’s earthly objectives and eternal purposes. Our main concern is to be faithful servants -- whatever the conditions, whatever the cost.

The one who is set free by Christ is free even in prison. The person who serves self is in bondage while living in freedom. Christ said: "...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free...everyone who sins is a slave to sin...So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:32,34,36). The only freedom that matters is *freedom in Christ!*

Ask for and claim wisdom from God, especially in perplexing situations. We are to be consistently wise as serpents and harmless as doves. (See Matthew 10:16.) If fellow citizens and governments criticize us, it should be because we are doing what is right. Even when the authorities conduct themselves corruptly, we, as representatives of the Lord, must always act uprightly. Bad rulers do not give Christians an excuse to act badly. Ultimately we, individually, are accountable to our Lord for our own behavior.

Chapter 14

Giving Joyfully!

"And they offered great sacrifices that day, and rejoiced; for God made them rejoice with great joy; and the women also and the children rejoiced: so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard even afar off."
(Nehemiah 12:43)

Why all the excitement, celebration? What was the great event?

A newly built wall was being dedicated!

Most of these people were poor immigrants, recently arrived from Babylon. (Many of them were born in Babylon.) Yet they sacrificed greatly. The Lord was so pleased with them he "...made them rejoice with great joy." Their joy was so great, people far away heard about it.

God's children are immigrants and displaced persons here on earth, and most of them are not rich. But, no one can stop them from sacrificing (sacrificing, not just giving) until it stops hurting, and sadness turns to gladness. Giving grudgingly hurts. But giving joyfully (literally: hilariously) is exhilarating and therapeutic!

The immigrants in Nehemiah's Jerusalem did not say, "First, let us rebuild our own houses, furnish them, buy a chariot or two, and make ourselves financially secure. After all, we were denied all these things in exile, in captivity; now we are going to make up for lost time. We deserve it. Then, when our personal needs and wants are satisfied, we'll think about rebuilding the wall and gates of God's City."

Role models

Building the wall was not something that only the men had done; the women and children were involved. Whole families! Children were being taught how to give – to give sacrificially, enthusiastically.

When our children see how, and how much, we give to our local church and to God's work worldwide, what value do they put on Christianity? Can they get interested, excited? Will they grow up committed, caring Christians because of our example? Blessed is the child whose parent loves the Lord with all her/his head, heart, hand and handbag.

Children need to see good giving role models right from the start. They should be taught – by words and works - to think of others, to help others, to share with others. From day one, they need to be told and shown that self-centeredness and selfishness are self-destructive. Early on, they should be diverted quickly from anti-God, anti-social self-indulgence.

Parents are responsible to show their children how to be compassionate, generous and joyful in giving. What a blessing for a child to experience, firsthand, that while getting may be good, giving is better! My words alone will not convince my children; my example will.

Spouses! Don't discourage each other from giving. Dare to give generously, together, in agreement. Invest in eternity together and reap dividends in heaven individually. (No joint accounts there.)

Sow sparingly, reap sparingly

In God's economy, abundant living comes only as a result of abundant giving. The costlier the gift, the greater the joy. That is true freedom in Christ. Allow Christ to be as generous as he wants to be through you. He has no other way to reach next door or around the world.

It is possible to have much money and little joy, as most millionaires know. Or you can have little money but great joy, as a lot of Christians know. What really matters is not the amount of money we have but our attitude toward it. You don't actually have to have money to "love" it. And you shouldn't love it, even if you do have it. The love of money can torment you whether you have it or not. Have feelings for God, not for money.

"Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously...God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work...[so that] you can be generous on every occasion..." (2 Corinthians 9:6,8,11).

How many shoes do I need?

Imelda Marcos (wife of Ferdinand Marcos, former President of the Philippines)

is reported to have 1500 pairs of shoes. She obviously liked shoes, not that she needed that many.

Some Christians have perennial problems with money because they have not determined the difference between their needs and their wants. Have you established a specific standard of living, regardless of your income bracket? Don't miss out on the joy of giving just because you still haven't figured out how much you actually need to live on.

If I don't set a limit on my personal or family spending, there will never be enough money. And, anyway, why should God give or entrust more money to me, if I am only going to give all, or most of it, to myself? And at what point, at what level, will I stop spending on myself?

How many shoes do I *need*? A person without shoes would be happy to have one pair of secondhand ones. A person who is used to having one pair of shoes wants a second pair, preferably new. And a person who is used to having two pairs of shoes wants a third pair – new, of course. Where does it stop? *It does not stop unless I myself put a stop to it – whether it's shoes or something else.*

Do I give just enough to make me miserable?

We think that the size of our bank account, the size of our house, car or TV is important. But where do these amounts and sizes come from? From our *hearts!* Some hearts are happy with daily bread and enough clothes to cover and keep them warm. Some hearts are never satisfied. Are we overlooking another important *need* – the need of *self-discipline*?

Great sacrifice will bring you great joy. Little sacrifice brings little joy. No sacrifice brings no joy. Refusing to give brings sadness. The greater the refusal, the greater the sadness. Do you know the joy of giving? Or do you give just enough to make you either smug or miserable?

Break the *giving barrier* and pass from sadness to gladness! Get rid of the stultifying sin of covetousness. When God and people look at you, do they see a hand that's closed or one that is opened? The Lord is a Great Giver. To experience his joy, you need to be a great giver also.

Dead diamonds or living souls?

If you had the money, how much would you give for a one-carat diamond – a piece of beautiful but dead stone? How much would you give to save one living, lost soul? If people can get excited and make great sacrifices for the building of a wall, can't we get excited about making great sacrifices for the kingdom of God, for the salvation of priceless souls? The more you give God, the more you will love him; and the more you love him, the more you will give him. Jesus stated that your heart is where your treasure is. (See Matthew 6:21.)

Meeting God's needs

God is sensitive to our needs. He takes care of us. He's happy to do it. But, we are to take care of God. He has many needs. We should be sensitive to him. It's a two-way street. Give and take. Cooperation. Mutual assistance. What an honor, what a privilege, what a joy to work with the Lord! And he is carefully crediting our eternal account. He wants us to help ourselves in heaven by helping him on earth! Jesus calls it *storing up for yourself treasures in heaven*. (See Matthew 6:20.)

Yes, I know there is a sense in which God does not need anyone; he can take care of himself. But that's not the way he wants it and that's not the way he's doing it. That's not the way he set up our relationship with him. The implementation of his strategy makes us co-workers with him, makes him dependent on us. In fact, he needs more than people; he needs people's resources. "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied up there, which no one has ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it'" (Luke 19:30,31). He has invested in us to represent him on earth. If we fail, he fails.

"Where is your heart?"

In his first letter, chapter two, verse eleven, Apostle Peter reminds us that we are immigrants and migrants (aliens and strangers) in this world. We should always feel like foreigners no matter where we settle temporarily in this world. *"But our citizenship is in heaven"* (Philippians 3:20). At the moment, we should be homesick for heaven. If we *"Set [our] minds on things above, not on earthly things"* (Colossians 3:2), we will be busy laying up for ourselves treasures where our heart is - in heaven and not on earth.

"You...joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded" (Hebrews 10:34,35).

Can you see beyond this present world's horizon? Or, are you taking the shortsighted and dangerous route of storing up temporary and unreliable treasures on earth rather than safe and secure eternal riches in heaven?

"Surplus" giving

Why did God make the wall builders rejoice with great joy that glorious day in Jerusalem? *Because they offered great sacrifices* (Nehemiah 12:43). *Everyone* can sacrifice, even the poor widow, distinguished for giving God her last two pennies. (See Mark 12:42-44.) Jesus pointed out that the others *"... put in a contribution out of their surplus; but she has given out of her neediness all she possessed, her whole living"* (Moffatt). There is *surplus giving* and there is *sacrificial giving*. Guess which kind of giving excites God.

"Beyond ability" giving

One of the most beautiful biblical examples of *the grace of giving* is related in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5. We will note only that the Macedonian churches *"...gave as*

much as they were able, and even beyond their ability." Here we see the kind of giving God loves, the kind of giving he blesses.

Normal ability giving is careful and calculated. It would probably not be much more than the obligatory tithe (tenth), which people in those days gave to their heathen gods (if they were not Christians) or to the Lord (if they were Christians).

But what is beyond ability giving? It can mean only one thing: self-denying, sacrificial giving. Denying oneself something. Giving up something. Cutting back. Living on less. Daring to work with God. Daring to believe him, to trust him. God himself is behind that kind of thinking, that kind of giving.

“The privilege of sharing“

Verse one says they gave, because of *the grace God gave them*. It *had* to be the grace of God because, (verses 2-4), *“Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity... Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.”* Sadly, nowadays, you don't see this kind of disposition and demonstration very often. We must come to the point in our stewardship for God when we are completely convinced that sharing is our joy and a privilege.

“They first gave themselves”

Why did God pour out His *“grace”* on these impoverished Christians, with the result that they gave so sacrificially, yet so joyfully and insistently? I think it was because, as Apostle Paul states: *“...they first gave themselves to the Lord...in keeping with God's will.”* That must be the explanation for what happened. That is what should happen to each one of us.

The first step of giving is giving *myself* entirely and unconditionally to the Lord, because that is *God's will*. When God has all of me, there will be no dispute over money: what is Caesar's, what is God's, what is mine. The Holy Spirit will direct me. With his guidance, I will not give or keep too little or too much. But, if we are to go to an extreme, may it be in the direction of *more than enough* rather than *not enough*. Giving too much doesn't happen very often but, when it does, it's a happy problem. Wouldn't it be wonderful if, in church and mission work today, it would happen on a regular basis?

“More than enough” giving

After God told him to build the Tabernacle in the wilderness, Moses made an appeal to the Israelite community: *“Everyone who is willing is to bring to the Lord an offering of gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair; ram skins dyed red and hides of sea cows; acacia wood; olive oil for the light; spices for anointing oil and for fragrant incense; and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breast piece”* (Exodus 35:5-9).

At one point the craftsmen told Moses, *“The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the Lord commanded to be done* (Exodus 36:5). *Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: ‘No man or*

woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.’ And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work” (Exodus 36:6-7). How often have you witnessed Christians “...restrained from bringing more...” because there was “...more than enough...”?

Remember that these were unregenerate people, yet they gave “...more than enough...” to carry out God’s will and work. As God’s new creation, we should be doing not less – to build the Kingdom of God - but more than they did. And, of course, joyfully!

Chapter 15

Perpetual Prayer & Praise

Our stewardship for the Lord is lifeless without prayer and praise. Prayer and praise are the inhaling and exhaling of the Christian life. *Breathe deeply!*

Prayer

Introduction

The other day I read the story of a fisherman who was an agnostic - or so he thought. When his boat overturned in a storm, he unexpectedly appealed to God. He didn’t know it, but he was praying. Prayer is a human being talking to God. Basically, it’s a person communicating – for any number of reasons - with her/his Creator.

To pray means to ask, petition, beseech, entreat, make supplication, request, plead, beg, appeal, implore, intercede. It can also mean to worship, meditate, call upon, wish well, pour out one’s soul.

Prayer can be a perplexing and often misunderstood subject. It’s meaning and implications are fathomless. At the same time, it is one of the most important exercises or occupations in which humans can be engaged.

After watching and hearing Jesus pray, his disciples said to him, “*Lord, teach us to pray...*” (Luke 11:1). That’s when he taught them what we call “The Lord’s Prayer.” It contains the general essentials both for God and for man. We can make the Lord’s Prayer *our* prayer by daily reciting it reflectively. Its truths will eventually sink in and transform our attitude and our actions.

Body posture during prayer or praise depends on the event, the situation or the location (venue). Much is dictated by culture and tradition and not necessarily by Scripture. Depending on the country and the church, Christians sit, stand or kneel when praying during worship services.

At home, before and/or after meals, they recline, sit or stand to pray. During family or personal devotions, they sit, stand or kneel. At certain times, some people prostrate themselves before God. In keeping with the biblical instruction for us to pray and praise ceaselessly (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18), we would also do so while riding, walking or running. And what about lying in bed?

Jesus did a lot of praying outdoors, away from the crowds. He often knelt to pray.

Purpose of prayer

Prayer is multi-purposed. And God does many things only in response to the prayers of his people. Generally speaking, numbers make a difference (Leviticus 26:8); results are better when more people pray about something.

▪ Confess sin

"...I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making request to the Lord my God..." (Daniel 9:20). (See also 1 John 1:9.)

▪ Resist temptation

"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak" (Matthew 26:41). (See also Mark 14:38; Luke 21:36; 22:40,46; 2 Corinthians 13:7.)

▪ Uphold believers

"I have prayed for you...that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:32). (See also John 17:15.)

▪ Receive spiritual power

"After they prayed...they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:31).

▪ Be healed

"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

▪ Welfare of persecutors

“...pray for those who persecute you...” (Matthew 5:44). (See also Luke 6:27-28)

▪ **More workers**

“Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:38).

▪ **Open doors for God’s word**

“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains” (Colossians 4:2-3).

“...pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored...” (2 Thessalonians 3:1).

“Pray also for me (Apostle Paul), that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should” (Ephesians 6:19-20).

▪ **Protection**

“And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one” (2 Thessalonians 3:2-3). (See also Romans 15:31.)

▪ **Mutual support**

“I urge you...to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me” (Romans 15:30).

▪ **Get God’s grace to help us**

“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

▪ **Avoid anxiety**

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

“Cast all your anxiety on him (God) because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

- **Intercede** (intervene on someone’s behalf)
 - ✓ The Holy Spirit intercedes for us (Romans 8:26,27).
 - ✓ Christ intercedes for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25)
 - ✓ We intercede for others (1 Timothy 2:1)

Intercession is hard work; it takes commitment and persistence.

- **Serve God**

“She (Anna, the prophetess) never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying” (Luke 2:37).

Conditions & results of prayer

- **Right motive**

The Lord responds to us according to our motives, which he sees. When we pray, we cannot be self-centered or self-indulgent. We should be Christ-centered and God glorifying.

“When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:3).

- **Stay confident, bold, determined and persistent**

This is the right approach to God. He expects us to be confident. His character demands it (James 1:6-8). So we must maintain singleness and stability of heart. Doubters get nothing. A guilty conscience drains confidence (1 John 3:21-24).

“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence...” (Hebrews 4:16).

“...if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him” (1 John 3:21). When do we receive what we ask? When “...we obey his commands and do what pleases him.”

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Gospel of Matthew 7:7). (See also Luke 11:5-8; 18:1-8.)

- **Stay delighted**

“Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). If I make delighting in the Lord a way of life, my desires will be in tune with what pleases him.

- **Stay stable**

“Be...faithful [steady, constant] in prayer” (Romans 12:12).

- **Dwell on/in Christ**

“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you” (John 15:7). When will God grant our wishes? When we stay in unbroken union with Christ and when we are daily feeding on his word.

“In him (the Lord Jesus Christ) and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence” (Ephesians 3:12). (See also Hebrews 10:19-22.)

- **Stay in and with the Spirit**

Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, gained victory over the Moabites and Ammonites because he prayed, *“We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you [O God]”* (2 Chronicles 20:12).

The Holy Spirit teaches us *how* to pray and *what* to pray for.

“...the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for...” (Romans 8:26).

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests” (Ephesians 6:18).

“...build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 20).

Praying in the Spirit simply means praying with his help, insight and direction. It is beneficial for us to pray in the Spirit because he always prays in harmony with God’s will (Roman’s 8:27).

- **Be holy**

“I (Apostle Paul) want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing” (1 Timothy 2:8).

- **Stay separated from sin**

“If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened...”
(Psalm 66:18).

- **Stay obedient and pleasing to God**

(See 1 John 3:21-22.)

- **Fasting helps**

(See Mark 9:29; Acts 13:2-3; 14:23.)

- **Pray with faith**

“...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of [unfaltering] faith...” (Hebrews 10:22)

- **First forgive**

“And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (Mark 11:25). (See also Matthew 5:23-24.) *We still have to ask God forgiveness for our sins. But there is no point in asking, if we don't first forgive others – whether or not they ask us. Only the forgiving are forgiven.*

- **Short and succinct**

“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask” (Matthew 6:7-8). Just because God knows our needs ahead of time doesn't mean we shouldn't pray and ask. It just means we should get to the point as quickly as possible and with as few words as possible. The Lord has the advantage of not only being able to hear our words; he also sees our hearts.

- **In agreement**

“...if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:19).

We see dramatic results of prayer in Acts 4:23-31. Their prayers were affective because, *“All the believers were one in heart and mind”* (verse 32).

- **In Jesus' name**

We cannot come to God in our own name but only in the name of Jesus. That's because Christ – himself both God and man - is the only recognized go-between (intermediary). *“For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ (divinity) Jesus (humanity), who gave himself as a ransom for all men...”* (1Timothy 2:5-6). *“...ask in my name...”* (John 14:13,14). *“...in the name of our Lord Jesus”* (Ephesians 5:20). (See also John 15:16; 16:23-24,26.)

- **In God's will**

God's will and wishes always take precedence over ours. All our requests should be contingent upon God's will. He knows what's best for us. He has plans and purposes for us. The Lord's prayer promises

are generalizations that are subject not only to specific situations and to our spiritual state, but also to the will of God.

“...your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

Jesus prays according to God’s will. “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done” (Matthew 26:42). “My food...is to do the will of him who sent me...” (John 4:34).

The Holy Spirit prays according to God’s will. “...the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Romans 8:27). That means the Spirit prays for you and for me in keeping with God’s will. That’s because “We do not know what we ought to pray for...” (verse 26).

We pray according to God’s will. “...if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us” (1 John 5:14). This should be our prayer standard – asking according to God’s will. (See also Romans 12:2; Ephesians 5:17; Colossians 1:9.) If you forget everything else about prayer, remember to include God’s will in all your prayer requests. When Jesus prayed for God’s will, it was not because his faith was small or unstable. On the contrary, it was a sign of absolute submission and trust.

There are instances in our lives when, no matter what we think or want or pray for, it is God’s will that we drink the cup he puts in our hand. In that case, it is for our ultimate good, for other people’s blessing and for the glory of God. There are times when a permanent “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7) is God’s will. And no amount of prayer or faith will remove it.

How do I react, what do I think of God, when he doesn’t answer my prayer the way I expect him to? Is my relationship with him weakened or strengthened?

Conclusion

Getting what we don’t ask for

God is not only always right, just and justified in his dealings with us; he is also predictably and, at the same time, unpredictably generous. He enjoys giving us what we don’t anticipate or ask for.

God said to Solomon: “Ask for whatever you want me to give you” (2 Chronicles 1:7). As the newly acknowledged king, Solomon asked for knowledge and wisdom, so that he could lead the people of Israel properly. He asked nothing for himself personally.

And this is how God responded to Solomon’s prayer: “Since this is your heart’s desire and you have not asked for wealth, riches or honor, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you. And I will also give you wealth, riches

and honor, such as no king who was before you ever had and none after you will have” (verses 11-12).

A word about unanswered prayer

God responds to each of our prayers in his own sovereign way (See John 11:6). There is really no need to question or second-guess God. You can count on him to do what’s right concerning you and your affairs. He really cares for you and wants what’s best for you. We need to appreciate that, because we don’t know what’s best for us.

I believe God wants us to learn things about himself and about ourselves – regardless of how he responds to our petitions. I think the Lord wants us to discover that we have everything *in* him, not just *from* him. Sometimes we act like thoughtless, selfish children; we focus on the provision rather than on the provider. The Lord wants us to love him for who he is, not just for what he gives us. And speaking of giving, God wants me to give all of myself to him, holding back nothing.

Praise

Introduction

No matter how we dissect them semantically, *Prayer and Praise* are joined at the hip. *Prayer* customarily concentrates on requests and needs, earthly affairs and problems. *Praise* focuses on the person of God and on glorifying him.

Praise means to bless, thank, honor, exalt, exult, extol, boast about, confess, lift or extend hands, proclaim, commend, speak well of, raise or lift up, worship.

We live in a world of self-centered orientation and a self-glorifying mentality. We may not be saying aloud, “Look at me! Praise me!” But everything else about us is saying or pointing to it.

An eternal biblical principle says that everything in the world, everything in nature, every human being was created for God’s glory. God always has, is and will be glorified. He will be glorified “forever and ever.” (See Galatians 1:5; Philippians 4:20; 1 Timothy 1:17; 2 Timothy 4:18; Hebrews 13:21; Revelation 1:6.)

Why praise?

Purpose

Humans were created to praise the Lord. That’s our primary purpose for time and eternity. That is what God’s people were made for. It is something humans can do better than the nature world or even the angels, because we’ve personally experienced God’s great grace, mercy and forgiveness.

“...everyone who is called by my name, whom I have created for my glory, whom

I formed and made.... the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise” (*Isaiah 43:7,21*).

To know God is to glorify him. If you’re not glorifying God, you either don’t know him or not very well. “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave him thanks.... They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen” (Romans 1:21,25).

“...so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: ‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.’ Again, it says, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.’ And again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples” (Romans 15:9-11). Why would the Gentiles glorify God? For his mercy!

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope....” (1 Peter 1:3).

“But you are a chosen (select) people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people (acquired by) belonging to God, that you may declare (publicize) the praises (virtues) of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world...to the praise of his glorious grace...for the praise of his glory...to the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:4,6,12,14).

Worthy

“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being” (Revelation 4:11).

Many angels and countless others sang in a loud voice: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Revelation 5:12).

“Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name” (Psalm 29:2).

“Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments” (Revelation 19:1-2).

Even God’s wrath against rebellious, disobedient humanity brings praise to him (See Psalm 76:10), probably because he acts justly – rewarding good and punishing evil. What God is against is as important as what he is for. A holy, righteous God deserves praise.

Appropriate

**“Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him”
(Psalm 33:1).**

“Praise the Lord. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!” (Psalm 147:1).

While Jesus was making his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the crowd loudly praised God for the miracles performed by Jesus Christ who, they believed, was the promised Messiah. Some of the Pharisees didn't like what they heard and asked Jesus to tell his disciples to stop. But Jesus replied: "...if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40). That's how necessary it is for us humans to praise God – with heart and voice.

Beneficial

It is impossible to be sad, angry, bitter or unforgiving – for very long - while we are wholeheartedly praising God. Praising God centers attention on him, not on us. So, praise is good for our bodies, souls and spirits. It also helps us overcome Satan, because praise is part of our testimony against him (Read Revelation 12:11). I believe the Prince of Darkness and his evil forces are nauseated by human praise of God. The devil is elated when people curse God. However, he will be satisfied with your indifference and silence.

A big part of biblical stewardship

Whether we do it grudgingly or willingly, God requires praise. We will give an account for our ministry of praise and worship. An angel said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory... Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water” (Revelation 14:7).

“The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him” (Revelation 16:8-9).

You may not curse God, but do you praise him? You need to verbalize your allegiance – the oftener the better, the bolder the better, the louder the better. The Lord is counting on your support. Godless people of the end times will refuse to glorify God. Sadly, many believers in God also fail to glorify him with their lives and lips. God is very disappointed and displeased with these people. And, I am afraid that those who refuse to praise God today will be ready to curse him tomorrow.

How should we praise God?

With obedience

For me, praise is proof of trust and surrender.

With an attitude and disposition that's pleasing to God

(See Philippians 2:5).

With speech, conversation that honors him

"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14).

By accepting one another

"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Romans 15:7).

With fear and trembling

The name of the Lord is to be hallowed, respected, revered, revered and honored. "Serve the Lord with fear [awe] and rejoice with trembling" (Psalm 2:11).

"...Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him...." (Revelation 19:5).

With gladness

"Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory" (Revelation 19:7).

It's hard to praise the Lord and glorify God properly when you don't fear him or when you're not rejoicing.

You will be able to praise God all the time only when you rejoice in the Lord all the time. (See Philippians 4:4 and Psalm 47:1.)

Is it possible to rejoice while grieving some sort of loss? You just lost a loved one. How can you be rejoicing? While the joy of the Lord can be exuberant,

it is also sensitive and sensible. It knows how to behave in various circumstances. It knows when to be in the forefront and when to stay in the background. But, it is always there. It is, after all, one of the abiding fruit of the Holy Spirit (See Galatians 5:22). "...sorrowful, yet always rejoicing..." (2 Corinthians 6:10).

With thanksgiving

"Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything..." (Ephesians 5:19-20).

“I will praise God’s name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving. This will please the Lord...” (Psalm 69:30-31).

“Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song” (Psalm 95:1-2).

“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.... Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name” (Psalm 100:1,2,4).

“For long ago...there had been directors for the singers and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God” (Nehemiah 12:46).

“...the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne...” (Revelation 4:9).

With trust

**“Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines,
though the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food,
though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the**

stalls, yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.

The Lord GOD is my strength; He has made my feet like hinds' feet, He makes me walk on my high places” (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

With diversity

God created everything and everyone to praise him, but we were not created alike to praise him in the same way. Our personalities are different. We all express ourselves differently. There are no two people alike. God made us that way and he wants it left that way. He does not want me to express my praise the way he wants you to do it. He wants and he deserves variety.

He wants variety in praise. He wants unity but not uniformity. We enjoy a choir because people sing different parts in harmony.

Here in Colorado the state flower is the columbine. But our Rocky Mountains are not filled with only these unique flowers. No, what makes the mountainside beautiful is the sight of 1500 varieties of wild flowers that take turns blooming – almost year-round.

People know me by my looks. They recognize me because of my appearance. No one looks exactly like I do. People also know me by my voice. I am unique. God made me that way. When I imitate another person, I

am not myself. The Lord wants me to be myself – not like you. And you don't want to be me. God expects us to be the way he made each one of us. He enjoys, he expects, diversity.

We are the Lord's flowers of praise. Each one of us must praise God the way he made us. He is too great to be satisfied with identical praise from his creation. If he wanted only your kind of praise, he would have created only you. (Or cloned you). But he wants my kind of praise, too. I do him a great disservice if I try to copy you and fail to be me. I think we grieve God when we expect others to praise him the way we do it. His Spirit will work on this with me if I ask him for his help.

It is not by accident that the 150 Psalms conclude with this one:

Praise the Lord.

**Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens.
Praise him for his acts of power;
praise him for his surpassing greatness.
Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,
praise him with tambourine and dancing,
praise him with the strings and flute,
praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.
Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.**

Praise the Lord.

With everything

“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). We praise him with all of life, with our whole being. We do it by fulfilling the Great Commandment. Our gifts, our talents praise him. Everything we experience should be for the glory of God. If you can't do something for the glory of God, don't do it! (Just don't try sinning for God's glory. That would border on blasphemy.) The most interesting things and the most boring duties should be done for the glory of God. That's what biblical stewardship is all about. Building the glory of God into something gives it a divine dimension.

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor [endorse, glorify] God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Is my body glorifying God?

“If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God.

If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:11). Did you notice the phrase, “...in all things...”? What does that include? Everything. What does it exclude? Nothing.

The glorifying and glorified church

“...to him [God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen!” (Ephesians 3:21).

“We pray...that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ”

(2 Thessalonians 1:12).

“...so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:10-11).

If the church will glorify God, God will glorify the church

Apostle Paul says the day is coming when Christ will present us to himself

“...as a radiant [literally: glorious] church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:27).

“...urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:12).

“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears (is manifested), then you also will appear (be manifested) with him in glory” (Colossians 3:2-4). Today, because our life in Christ is hidden, we are ridiculed by many; tomorrow we will be openly, visibly glorified for all to see!

“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).

“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

“In this [hope] you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith ...may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor [for you] when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

“...he did this [*made his power known*] to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us...” (Romans 9:23,24. *Emphasis added*).

For a highly symbolic but very graphic and beautiful description of the future glorified church (which will be the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, the bride, the wife of the Lamb), read chapter 21 of the book of Revelation.

Conclusion

Let's get into a God-glorifying frame of heart and mind; that's what we were created for.

When children shouted concerning Jesus, “...Hosanna to the Son of David” (Matthew 21:15), the chief priests and teachers of the law questioned him about it. Jesus replied, “From the lips of children and infants you [God] have ordained [*prepared, perfected*] praise” (Verse 16). (See also Psalm 8:2.)

Adults need to be more childlike in their praise of God. Children are so spontaneous, natural, uninhibited, innocent, genuine, sincere and wholehearted when they worship! They do it with wide-eyed awe, with wonder.

Adults can be unresponsive and bound by culture, tradition, habit and legalism. All too often sophistication and conformity to this world contaminate them. They will get enthusiastic and excited about the most insignificant earthly things or events, but never about their faith or their God. There has to be a deep inner change. It has to come from the inside out. It must come from the heart. If you find it hard to praise the Lord properly, ask the Holy Spirit to teach you; ask him to help you do it. Ask him to touch your heart and loosen your tongue.

Nonstop prayer and praise

Praise, prayer and thanks are often used interchangeably in the Bible; they are inseparable, interactive and ever active. *“Be joyful 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 will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips...Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together” (Psalm 34:1,3).

“Praise the Lord, O my soul. I will praise the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live” (Psalm 146:2).

“...we have not stopped praying for you...” (Colossians 1:9). (See also Romans 12:12; Ephesians 6:18.)

Prayer and praise are evidence of spiritual life (Acts 9:11). It's the last thing we do – consciously - before sleeping and the first thing we do upon waking. It even happens in our sleep, in our dreams. It's something we do all day.

“Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess [profess] his name” (Hebrews 13:15). How often should we offer praise to God? Continually! Always! Praising should be an indivisible part of our existence. It should become as natural as breathing. Second nature. Whether you have too much or nothing to do, there's always one thing you should do: praise him!

There are different levels of prayer. There is different intensity of prayer. There are different occasions and circumstances of prayer. The same is true of praise. There is public and there is private prayer and praise.

Pray and praise is music to God's ears, whether it's loud and center stage or quiet and in the background. To do both unceasingly means to be in an *attitude*, in the *spirit* of prayer and praise. Whether or not our minds are occupied, they are always automatically promoting prayer and praise. (In computer lingo, it is our “Default Setting.”) It's our spiritual breathing. We may not always be aware or conscious of it, but we are breathing. The same is true of spiritual breathing. It's something a child of God does supernaturally, with the Holy Spirit's help. The more we do it, the better we do it, the more we enjoy it, the more God is pleased!