

# Sermonettes

~ Volume 3

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## CONTENTS

1. SAVE THIS, LOSE THAT .....	5
2. THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION .....	7
3. THE STRONGER MAN.....	9
4. JESUS CHRIST, OR NOTHING AT ALL.....	11
5. ON SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS.....	14
6. CHRIST'S WORLD, CHRIST'S RULES .....	18
7. JESUS, REMEMBER ME.....	22
8. THE WISDOM AND POWER OF GOD.....	25
9. THE MIND OF CHRIST.....	29
10. ARE YOU NOT WORLDLY? .....	34
11. KICK HIM OUT AND CUT HIM OFF .....	37
12. CONCERNING SPIRITUAL GIFTS.....	40
13. THE BODY AND ITS MEMBERS.....	41
14. THE WAY OF LOVE .....	44
15. THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST .....	46
16. LOGIC AND RESURRECTION .....	48
17. CHRIST THE FIRSTFRUITS .....	50
18. ANCHORED IN HEAVENLY THINGS .....	52
19. TRIUMPHALISM AND DEFEATISM .....	56
20. THE AROMA OF CHRIST .....	58
21. THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT .....	60
22. COMPETENCE IN MINISTRY.....	61
23. PLAIN AND HONEST PREACHING .....	65
24. WE PREACH NOT OURSELVES.....	67

<b>25. THE BLINDNESS OF UNBELIEVERS .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>26. GOD'S ALL-SURPASSING POWER.....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>27. WE WALK BY FAITH, NOT BY SIGHT .....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>28. THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION.....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>29. TOUCH NO UNCLEAN THING.....</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>30. GODLY SORROW .....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>31. FALSE HUMILITY AND THE DENIAL OF THE GOSPEL.....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>32. THE MOST HEARTWARMING DOCTRINE .....</b>	<b>90</b>

## 1. Save This, Lose That

**Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels." (Luke 9:23-26)**

You can tell a lot about a person by his theology or philosophy. We would naturally wonder about the man whose theology permits adultery. Or, a relativist wants you to admire his accepting attitude, but he is really nothing more than an intellectual midget and a moral coward. He is so stupid that he cannot arrive at the truth, although he insists that relativism is correct, and would debate you over it, and he is so spineless that he can take no absolute ethical stand, unless he arbitrarily does so, which again shows that he is stupid.

To the world the typical Christian is a curious thing. He declares that his God is wise and holy, and that he speaks through the Bible, but at the same time he insists that God speaks in riddles and paradoxes, and that man's mind cannot understand the Bible. That is, Kenneth is the smartest man I know, except that when I hear him he always contradicts himself. The fact that I perceive him as completely insane proves that his intelligence is far beyond mine. To the non-Christian's delight and amusement, this is a standard Christian position, and of course, utterly unbiblical and ridiculous.

The Christian who sees a contradiction in Scripture is either untaught, so that guidance from someone who perceives the plain sense of the text can remove his error at once, or he blasphemes God and is not a Christian at all. To tout one's own finitude, or what is really an inferiority in intelligence and character, as a sign of humility and as a substitute for true understanding is unworthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although our institutions are populated with these scoundrels, I say that none of them should be in positions of authority, but should be removed and tried before the church. Alas, there is no one to try them, for it seems most people are like this.

My theology is that God is most intelligent and rational, and he has made me in his image. He speaks to me through the Bible, which is clear, simple, and completely consistent and non-paradoxical both in actuality and in appearance. Any apparent contradiction is not found in the Bible itself, but only in the mind of the person to which this contradiction is apparent. In other words, it is an intellectual hallucination. Any person who sees an apparent contradiction in the Bible is spiritually, intellectually, and psychologically unwell. It is not a sign of reverence, but a sign of sickness. But Christ is our Healer.

Here is an easy one: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it." Ah, Christ teaches in paradox, or does he? Find a sermon and see how a preacher deals with this. I cannot tell you how a person who perceives a paradox here would preach on it, because I do not see a paradox myself. There is the distinction between a logical paradox and a literary paradox. A literary paradox occurs where no logical paradox necessarily exists, but it is used for effect, or to make the point more memorable. I am not as glib as many to concede even the use of literary devices. For example, elsewhere I have refuted the notion that the Lord employs hyperbole in Mark 11:23, but people perceive a hyperbole because of unbelief. But even if the Bible uses certain literary devices, the Christian's paradox fetish is usually disappointed just by reading the words of the text, and in the case of Mark 11:23, by reading Mark 11:21.

In this case, we only need to continue on to the next verse: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?" Christ clearly uses "life" in two different senses, and he even specifies them. To paraphrase, "Whoever wants to save his worldly life will lose his spiritual life, but whoever loses his worldly life for me will save his spiritual life." There is less finesse, but this is what he means. James makes a similar point when he writes, "You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4, ESV).

The inferior breed of Christians refuse to hear it. It all makes sense! It is so clear! It is all consistent! It must be heresy! "You are a rationalist." Thank you. It is better to be called a rationalist than an irrationalist, and it is better to profess God's intelligence, and his willingness and ability to communicate in a way that man would perceive as sensible and consistent, than to blaspheme and burn in hell. I say that I can understand God not because I deny human finitude, but because I affirm God's kindness and wisdom.

With all this talk about paradox, we almost forgot to talk about the teaching in the passage. And this is why people insist on paradox, so that they may see and not perceive, hear and not heed, and make a mockery of God's doctrines and commands, lest they be converted and be healed. People hide behind ambiguities, and since God leaves them none, they will make some up.

Jesus says that if a person is bent on saving his worldly life, he will lose his spiritual life. If he persists in satisfying his lusts, in pursuing wealth, in securing fame and position, in enjoying pleasures and amusements, in continuing ungodly vices and relationships – if he wishes to *save* these things – then he will lose his soul. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul? He is like the rich man who continues to build barns and storehouses, but God says to him, "Today I will take your life! How then will your riches profit you?" But a man who is willing to lose these things for Christ will save his soul, and he will have God's help to do it. Temptation is a powerful force, but the Spirit of God is stronger. We have removed the paradox excuse, and now we see the plain meaning of the text. What are we going to do about it? May God work in us so that we will love him only, and not the world, so that we may cling to Christ and inherit everlasting life in him.

## 2. The Most Important Question

**When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."**

**"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven." (Matthew 16:13-17)**

At this point the people identified Jesus with one of the prophets. John the Baptist preached repentance and righteousness, and he was beheaded for his stance against Herod's unlawful marriage. Elijah confronted hundreds of false prophets and mocked their god. He lived a life of faith and miracles, and bore witness against the people's idolatry. Jeremiah spoke against superficial religion, and stood alone when he called his people to repentance and to surrender to God's will. These were great and holy men, courageous men, a noble breed, who declared truth and suffered for righteousness.

Anybody else should have been flattered, but Jesus was not satisfied. Perhaps his disciples had a different opinion? "Who do you say I am?" Does it really matter? No one understands the Christian faith until he realizes that this is the most important question. It is the question that divides humanity into two groups – the saved and the damned, the children of God and the children of Satan. This is everything. It is insufficient to offer a generally positive opinion on the person. A false answer, an answer that is not exactly right, means sure damnation. But the right answer accompanied by sincere faith means total forgiveness and abundant life.

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." This Jesus of Nazareth who walked the earth was the Messiah, the king and savior promised to God's people. A person must acknowledge that he was all the things that the Scripture said about the Messiah; otherwise, he does not in fact acknowledge that he was the Messiah at all. The Messiah is not an empty title, or just a sound, but a term pregnant with the attributes and promises that the Scripture assigned to it. And it says that the Messiah would be killed, not because of himself, but for the sake of his people. However, God would not leave him in the grave, nor would he allow his body to undergo corruption. The Messiah would be raised from the dead.

Therefore, the idea of the Messiah includes the atonement and the resurrection. He is alive today, and he remains the focal point of faith and salvation, and his identity remains the most important question. Who do you say that Jesus was? Just one of the prophets, a moral reformer, or the incarnation of the divine Son of God? And who do you say that he

still is? The Bible declares that he ascended to heaven and was seated at the right hand of God, with all power and authority over the nations.

Peter gave the right answer, and Jesus said that he knew it not because he was taught it by flesh and blood, or by men, but because the Father himself revealed it to him. It is a Christian's duty and pleasure to tell a man, "Jesus is the Son of God. Trust him and be saved." But in himself the non-Christian cannot hear even such a straightforward statement, and would construe it and respond to it in the strangest ways. Jesus explained, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him" (John 6:65). He said that the Father opens up the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to some people. As for others, he makes their eyes blind and their ears dull. We thank God that he has taught us the truth about Christ. It is the very gift of life.



### 3. The Stronger Man

**"But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils.**

**"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters. When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first." (Luke 11:20-26)**

Jesus' opponents, especially those of the religious establishment, were jealous of his success and following. His preaching challenged their theology, and exposed their hypocrisy. His miracles brought attention to their impotence, that their religion consisted of rituals and traditions, and not truth and power. They drew close to God with their lips, but their hearts were far from him. Thus his ministry threatened their image and position in society, and they sought to undermine him at every turn.

We need such a ministry today. Many of the people in our churches and denominations, including the leaders, have never been converted. But even in genuine believers, sin continues to work, and unless the Holy Spirit applies God's word in their hearts, divine grace is abandoned and human energy takes over, resulting in a religion that is lifeless, ritualistic, and hypocritical, having the form of godliness without the power. A ministry that dares to stand up against this should expect similar treatment by men of the religious establishment.

They said that Jesus cast out demons by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. The Lord explained that this is not how a kingdom operates: "Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?" This is a fundamental rule in the study of religions. There are only two spiritual kingdoms – Christ's kingdom and Satan's kingdom – one is good, one is evil, and evil does not cast out evil. Evil may cooperate with evil to deceive, but there is never genuine opposition between evil powers.

Jesus continued, "But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils." The Christian faith expels evil not by working with it, but by overcoming it with a greater power, the power of the Spirit of God, or the power of God's kingdom. Satan is the strong man that has

captured the sinner's heart, but Jesus Christ is the stronger man who defeats him and takes over.

This is the context for the statements that followed, first, verse 23: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters." Since there are only two kingdoms, and one is good and the other evil, there is no neutral zone for any man to occupy. Even a passive attitude is impossible. A man who thinks that he favors the good, or who even approves of the Christian faith, but who does not wish to bother so much with religion, in fact belongs to Satan's domain, and is working against Christ. You are either a Christian or an anti-Christian. You are either for Satan, or you are against Satan, that is, against all things non-Christian.

And this is the lesson in verses 24-26. What if Christ delivers a man from a demon, but the man remains passive about the Lord? What if a person reforms his life merely by the ethical principles of the Christian faith, but refuses to commit his soul to Christ for salvation? To take this even further, what if a man puts his life in order by his own willpower and discipline, or by the guidance of his parents, friends, or spouse? Also, do not non-Christian religions change lives? Do they not reform killers, thieves, gamblers, drunkards, and prostitutes? And non-Christian philosophers continue to advance arguments that man can be good without God.

Jesus told us what would happen to such a man: "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first."

When a man refuses the doctrine and power of Jesus Christ, but tries to reform himself or to improve his life by some other principle, he leaves himself open to the return of not only that which has been ejected, but also to things that are much worse. The killer may return to killing, the thief may return to stealing, and the drunkard to his drinking. What is even worse is when a person maintains the appearance of a new life, but has now become filled with intellectual snobbery or religious pride and hypocrisy, and has hardened his heart against the truth of the gospel. Thus the Pharisees were greater sinners than the prostitutes and extortioners who heard Christ gladly, and who repented at his preaching.

Can we be good without God? Can we be saved by another religion? Of course not. You cannot even define good without God, let alone live it. As for non-Christian religions and religious systems that espouse Christian ethics without Christ, even if they manage to tidy up your behavior and appearance, will only make you twice as much the son of hell as you were before. You had one demon before. Now you have eight, seven of which more sinister than the one. Things will only go downhill from here. There are evil forces at work within you. Jesus Christ is the stronger man. Call out to him, and he will save you. This time it will be real. This time it will be forever.

#### **4. Jesus Christ, or Nothing At All**

**Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.**

**"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'**

**"Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:25-33)**

Some aspects of Jesus' ministry were very attractive. His preaching carried authority and conveyed truth, defied man-made traditions, and relieved the people from the burdens imposed on them by the religious establishment. Then, there were the miracles, hundreds and hundreds of miracles. He healed the sick, cast out demons, raised the dead, and multiplied food. Contrary to those who attempt to undermine the place of miracles, not all those who sought signs and wonders did it out of unworthy motives, such as to satisfy their curiosity or their stomachs. Many of them had genuine and desperate needs, and they came to Jesus in faith. All those blind men and lepers were not looking for amusement, but help from their God. The Lord did not rebuke them, but he commended them and healed them.

That said, there were indeed many who followed him that did not strive to understand him or to obey his teachings. Jesus was deliberate in chasing away insincere seekers. He preached some of the scariest messages, and often behaved in a manner calculated to push people away. I had counseled some believers, who after reading his Sermon on the Mount, feared that they were never converted. A rich man eagerly came to him and inquired about salvation. He told him to give everything away, and the man left, saddened. Jesus gave hard teachings to the people. He told them that he was the bread that came down from heaven, and that he would ascend to where he was before. And he said that no one could come to him unless the Father enabled him. From then on, many of those who followed him turned back, and no longer followed.

Christians need to learn the difference between running after a lost sheep and inviting a wolf into the sheepfold. The sheep may be wayward, but it knows the shepherd's voice,

and it will not follow a stranger. On the other hand, a wolf is governed by its self-interest, and its hunger for satisfaction. Due to their spiritual insecurity and desperation to produce an appearance of success, Christians have gathered multitudes of wolves into the church. The sheep run for their lives, and sometimes the safest move is to leave the sheepfold, where the person in charge is nothing but a hireling anyway.

The Lord was not desperate for followers. He knew that a man could not come to him unless the Father enabled and compelled him. And he knew that he would lose none of those whom the Father had given into his hands. So he turned to his closest disciples and asked if they wanted to leave as well. Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." For them, it was Jesus Christ, or nothing at all. Those who left did not think like this. So they were never true disciples. They were walking along with Jesus, but their hearts were somewhere else.

I had been seeking salvation for a while before I was converted. I knew it was only through Jesus Christ that anyone could be saved. And I wanted it. I wanted it more than anything else. I did not need any "seeker friendly" ministry. What was at work within me could not be destroyed by a few harsh words or hard sayings. If you had told me that I was a sinner, that I was a useless piece of garbage, I would have said, "Yes, I know. Please help me." If you had said that I was a fool, that I was the most stupid person who ever lived, I would have said, "That's how I feel too. Please teach me." You could have kicked me in the face and I would have thanked you, if you would only teach me how to come to Christ.

There was no other option, and there was nothing to go back to. Without Christ, my life was over. That was it. For me, it was Jesus Christ, or nothing at all. I did not know then that God was already at work, that this earnest desire for salvation through Jesus Christ was the initial effect of an invincible divine summons to faith. Finally, I apprehended him, because he first apprehended me, and in a moment, divine love and mercy invaded my heart, and the power of sin was broken. Before this, I did not think that I would enter the ministry – I took it for granted that I was not good enough. But after that day, I knew that I must dedicate my life to serve the Lord Jesus, and I took it for granted that I could never do anything else.

The work of the Holy Spirit is robust, not fragile. You can beat on it again and again with a hammer, and all you will get is a broken hammer. A Pentecostal minister said that he could not talk to people before he preached, or the anointing would leave. The Bible indeed says that the Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove. This may mean that the Spirit is pure, but surely it does not mean that he is a wimp. And a Pentecostal should at least consult Acts 2, where the Spirit came as a mighty wind and as tongues of fire. The Spirit would scare you off before you scare him off.

While I affirm the benefits of extended prayer and solitude, and that the regular chores of a church or family should not distract a minister from the ministry of the word, I also insist that the anointing is poured out on a man so that he can serve in power and

humility, and to be an example. If a preacher has become too good to help in the nursery with all the dirty crying babies, or to scrub some toilets alongside the young people, because he might lose the anointing, then his anointing must be so weak that it would be better to play an audio recording of the Bible from the pulpit than to have him teach the people. Do you want to preach with power? Go study and pray, but then go wash the dishes and help your wife do the laundry. The power is in the Holy Spirit, not in your tranquil state of mind or your undisturbed tailored suit.

Accordingly, we need to preach the truth to potential converts and established believers, but we do not need to baby them. Some will be offended no matter what you do (Luke 7:31-35), but the Holy Spirit is not offended by the truth. When God works in your hearers, they will believe in Christ and receive his teachings. Try to push them away, and they will come right back. When Elijah called Elisha, Elisha slaughtered his oxen and burned his plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people. When Elijah was about to be received into heaven, three times he told Elisha, "Stay here," but Elisha said, "As long as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." Likewise, Peter and the others left all to follow Jesus.

This aspect is often neglected in preaching and evangelism, but it was integral to Jesus' ministry. Christians often say to people, "Jesus loves you and wants to save you. Just repeat this prayer after me." There! Another convert. But Jesus said, in effect, "You better think about what you are doing. Do not begin if you are not going to finish." To be a Christian, to be a follower of Jesus Christ, means that you can no longer think and behave and live like a non-Christian anymore. If you belong to another religion, and any other religion is a false religion, you will have to give it up and become its enemy. If you are on a career path that is inconsistent with the teachings of Christ, you will have to give it up. If you are in a family or a country where the people oppose the Christian faith, be prepared to lose your income, your position, your friends, and in some cases even your life.

So I will not say to you, "Just repeat this prayer" or "Pleeeeeease accept Jesus." No, if you are not serious, if you think there is another option, if you do not understand what you are doing, then please do not come. My brothers have already packed our churches with losers like you. We do not need more. You are either all in or all out. The evangelists will tell you, "Today is the day of salvation. Come now!" Yes, come, but first think about what you are doing. You will be throwing away your old life. If you are going to go back, then do not come at all and waste our time. Do not vomit if you are just going to eat it. But if, for you, it is Jesus Christ or nothing at all, then you are ready. We have been waiting for you. Come and enter into the joy of the Lord.

## 5. On Self-Righteousness

**To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)**

Self-righteous people are those who are confident of their own righteousness or who trust in themselves that they were righteous (ESV). Non-Christians certainly need this teaching. They believe that they are good in themselves, and teach others to believe in themselves. When the blind lead the blind, they will both fall into hellfire. But Christians, or those who call themselves Christians, need this teaching as well. There are Christians of all ranks and from all traditions who confuse true righteousness and self-righteousness, and who cannot distinguish pride and humility, or who think that self-deprecation is a sure sign of humility, if not the essence of it. This kind of humility is often a camouflage for the most evil and deep-rooted arrogance.

The self-righteous person is not just anyone who is confident of his righteousness, or that he is righteous, without stating its basis. Rather, the self-righteous person is confident in *his own* righteousness and who trusts *in himself* that he is righteous. The basis for this estimation is his own works: "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." He judges his own works as good and meritorious by his own standard. Although the Pharisees selected rules to live by that happened to coincide with some of God's laws, as least in appearance, they did not in fact have his laws as their standard. As Jesus pointed out, they invented many traditions to subvert the laws of God, and they ignored the weightier matters like justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Thus it was mere delusion that allowed them to be confident in their own righteousness, and to have based this confidence in their perceived obedience to God's laws. Then, on this shaky foundation, they "looked down on everybody else."

The tax collector was the opposite. He had no religious façade. He spoke to God with shame, but also with candor. He said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." He admitted that he was a sinner. He did not say, "At least I am not a hypocrite like the Pharisee!" He trusted not in himself, but turned completely to someone other than himself. He depended on nothing in himself, but leaned on a quality in this other, namely, his mercy. This is the difference between a righteousness that comes from self, which counts as wickedness

under divine judgment, and a righteousness that comes from God. The tax collector went home justified before God, but the Pharisee remained in line for everlasting punishment.

A Christian who thanks God that he is a Christian, who affirms the benefits that he has received from Jesus Christ, and thus his utter superiority to the non-Christian, is different from the Pharisee. First, a Christian admits his total depravity. He declares that he was born evil, and that he transgresses the laws of God many times each day. He affirms that in himself he deserves to suffer everlasting punishment in hell, along with all the sinners and non-Christians. Second, he depends on God's mercy. He insists that in himself he has no basis to expect pardon, no ability to attain redemption, and even no willingness to attempt or request it. But God, because of his own decision and kindness, rescues sinners from their condition, as from the very pit of hell. Third, a Christian trusts in the work of Jesus Christ, that because God has established an association between Christ and the believer, he is accepted before the heavenly throne on the basis of Christ's perfect righteousness.

Many Christians are weak in faith and steeped in false humility, or to put it another way, in great arrogance, because they fall short when it comes to the third item. They fail to consistently affirm Christ's righteousness and all his benefits as they are applied to those who believe. Instead of looking to the treasures of Jesus Christ, they still answer spiritual questions on the basis of self, on how good or bad they feel about themselves, and on how much they think they have accomplished or failed to accomplish. If you are a Christian, then Christ has made you better than when you were a non-Christian, and this means that you are now superior to a non-Christian. If this is not true, then you are either saying that you are still a non-Christian, still doomed to hell, or you are saying that Christ has done nothing for you, which makes you a blasphemer, and probably still an unbeliever.

Ask a Christian if he is superior to a non-Christian and watch him stutter. He is bound by tradition and unbelief. Ask me the same question and I will say, "Yes! In myself I was nothing and I am still nothing apart from Christ, but I am not without Christ. He has made me better, far superior than before. I was darkness, now Jesus Christ is my light. I was unrighteous, now he is my righteousness. I was filthy, now he is my sanctification. I was stupid, now he is my wisdom. I am superior to a non-Christian because Jesus Christ is superior to any non-Christian. I have renounced myself and speak about him who dwells in me. I dare not insult the Lord by suggesting that he has made no difference in me."

But even forty or fifty years from now, you will not hear me say, "I am confident in the Lord, because I have faithfully served him for many decades. I never wavered, but labored with diligence, courage, and sacrifice. Look at all these books that I have written, all these sermons that I have preached, all these people that I have taught and converted!" No, no, no, no. Perfection always eludes us, but even if we have done all we were commanded, we could only say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty."

Rather, I will tell you, "Many years ago, Christ took hold of me, and formed a permanent association with me. I am assured of my place because he saved me. I know I am righteous before God, because I know that he is righteous before God. I was lost at sea, drowning, then even dead in the water, but Christ pulled me out and breathed new life into me. True, since then I have served on his vessel, but it is not because of my work that I will be granted entrance to the heavenly harbor. I will enter because it is Christ's ship, and he calls out to his Father to open the gates. The Father accepts and loves him, and a friend of Christ is a friend of the Father. I have no doubt that Jesus Christ is righteous, and therefore I have no doubt that I am righteous. I have no doubt that Jesus Christ is accepted, and therefore I have no doubt that I am accepted. And although I have this confidence, I do not look down at other people, because I know that they are also accepted because of Christ. However, non-Christians do not have Christ, and they are despised, not because I am better than they are in myself, but because Christ is better, and they do not know him. This makes them inferior."

In Paul's letters and other places, the Bible repeatedly emphasizes the difference between Christians and non-Christians, and how Christ has elevated his people far above where they were before. It tells us that Christians are superior in intellect, that the minds of unbelievers are darkened, and although they think they are wise, they have become morons. But Christ has enlightened believers. It tells us that Christians are superior in character. For all their flaws, they love God and the Lord Jesus; otherwise, they would not be Christians at all. And they continue to increase in faith, love, patience, courage, and so on. It tells us that Christians are superior in destiny. Non-Christians are without God and without hope, but Christians have received abundant life on this earth, and will enter into glory in the life to come. This is what the Bible teaches. Why is there any hesitation to speak like this? Unbelief.

This shows us why self-deprecation is not necessarily humility: "God, I thank you that I am more humble than other Christians. I condemn myself twenty times a day, and reject ninety percent of all the redemptive benefits that belong to me, and refuse to speak as if they were true in my life." Unless one is making a point about the saving power of Christ, as when Paul referred to himself as the chief of sinners whom Christ had converted, he is still speaking on the basis of self-perception, not very different from the Pharisee who praised himself. Thus we may refer to ourselves in ourselves to illustrate Christ's mighty salvation, but the self should no longer be our primary point of reference.

Self-righteousness often manifests itself in self-deprecation, because no matter how outrageous, self-righteousness is always limited. But a person who trusts in Christ will quickly turn the attention to him, his benefits, and the changes that he has wrought. And as Christ is unlimited, so is this person's confidence, because the object of his confidence is unlimited. A Christian who knows this can speak boldly, as if he has unlimited righteousness, precisely because he has overcome pride and because he has long renounced his own righteousness as evil and worthless, and he speaks on the basis of Christ's perfect righteousness.



Pride is indeed an epidemic in the church. It often assumes the form of self-deprecation and an implicit denial of the work of Christ, or a failure to personalize his benefits. It is false humility, cheap humility, lazy humility, non-Christian humility. What a disgrace we are, if we shout "Amen!" to "All things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27), but stumble over "All things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:24), and even oppose those who affirm it. May God teach his people to distinguish between true and false righteousness, true and false humility, and to boast about Jesus Christ and all his benefits. Apart from Christ we are nothing, but when we abide in him, we will bear much fruit.

## **6. Christ's World, Christ's Rules**

**One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him.**

**"Tell us by what authority you are doing these things," they said. "Who gave you this authority?"**

**He replied, "I will also ask you a question. Tell me, John's baptism – was it from heaven, or from men?"**

**They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' all the people will stone us, because they are persuaded that John was a prophet."**

**So they answered, "We don't know where it was from."**

**Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."  
(Luke 20:1-8)**

The text makes an important contribution to our understanding of spiritual authority and its relationship to human institutions, and provides a corrective to existing doctrines and practices. Men, because of sin, tend to substitute divine revelation with human tradition, and divine authority with human approval. To maintain an appearance of faith but to hide their unbelief at the same time, it is asserted that things worked differently in Jesus' day than in our day. By this dispensational invention, although some are ironically and even vehemently anti-dispensational, they attempt to render irrelevant any biblical doctrine that they do not wish to affirm and avoid situations that they are too afraid to face.

Thus God withdrew his power and the demons went on vacation, and spiritual authority now comes from human institutions. As for ministerial credentials, the apostles looked for the fullness of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit, for all purposes except the most hidden operations, died with the apostles. The doctrine is to ensure that his absence remains undetectable – it is normal to be powerless. Now we demand printed documents from respectable – meaning approved by other equally unqualified men – seminaries and denominations. The fact that they posit a change is indication that sin has not changed, that like the Pharisees, religious leaders continue to work around God's word with manmade doctrines and traditions. The good news is that, since they have neither heavenly nor demonic powers, not believing in either, spiritually speaking they can be safely ignored. But beware of vicious political maneuvers.

If these paragraphs are vague enough that they name no one, but clear enough that they offend most, then they have accomplished their purpose, and we may proceed to our main topic, which is the way Jesus answered his challengers and how it applies to our own practice.

Against all that is wise and holy, Christians are enamored with the non-Christian intellect, and admire their scholarship, methods, and most of their conclusions. Thus Christians are accustomed to following non-Christian standards in their discourses and arguments, and in debates they allow non-Christian assumptions to dictate the rules of engagement. Of course, this is unnecessary and rather pathetic. A giant leap in our understanding of theology and performance in apologetics can be achieved if we would learn to despise the non-Christian mind, but instead put on the mind of Christ.

One illustration is name-calling, that is, the practice of assigning derogatory labels to non-Christians. Whether one is for or against this, it does not usually affect the course of a debate to an overwhelming extent, but it is a good example precisely for this reason, since there is little to distract us from considering how Christians have compromised. Name-calling is often regarded as an informal fallacy; however, this in itself is illogical. If a term applies to a person, then it is a description, not a fallacy. And when it is a fallacy, it must be so because it is inaccurate, and not because it is an insult.

Although it appears to be a simple issue, it would be a mistake to think that it is therefore unimportant. This is because the Bible calls non-Christians all kinds of derogatory names, including dogs, pigs, snakes, donkeys, foxes, brutes, whores, murderers, dung, rubbish, toilets, demons, sinners, hypocrites, wicked men, blind men, dead men, fools and morons, sons of hell, and many more. Therefore, when a Christian attempts to vindicate the faith before non-Christians, it must be at least an implicit part of his purpose to defend the Bible's practice of name-calling as well as the scathing names and curses that it applies to non-Christians.

If the Christian rejects this aspect of it, then he himself stands as an enemy of God's revelation, and has disqualified himself from speaking in its defense. In any case, if the Christian admits that name-calling as such is an informal fallacy, then he has accepted a non-Christian standard of argumentation that condemns the Bible from the start. This world belongs to Jesus Christ. He can call non-Christians anything he wants, and we can – we must, since we must agree with Christ – call non-Christians anything that the Bible calls them.

To make this more relevant to our text, it is usually considered rude or evasive to answer a question with a question. Jesus' example teaches us that when we face the opponents of the faith, we are to operate by his rules of engagement, and not the unbelievers' rules. His example authorizes us to break from non-Christian practice. Indeed, it is true that sometimes a person answers a question with a question because he wishes to avoid the challenge, but this is not always the case.

The chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came to Jesus and demanded an answer: "Who gave you this authority?" They were the human authority, the religious establishment, and they knew that they did not authorize Jesus' ministry. But if Jesus had said that his authority came from God, they would not have believed him. They had already decided to oppose him no matter what. As the matter stood, any answer that Jesus gave would not have led to a greater appreciation of his work, but would be used as ammunition against him. The question itself could have been asked without hostility by another person, but in this case there was something wrong with the people who asked it, so that it was not in Jesus' best interest to answer the question right away and in the most straightforward manner.

Their deliberation illustrates this point. Instead of telling the truth or speaking honestly, they tried to design the best response. They could not say that John the Baptist received his authority from heaven, since they did not believe him. Such an answer would have exposed something wrong in them, that they would reject a messenger from God. But they could not say that he received his authority from men, because the people believed that he was a prophet, and they were afraid of the people. This again exposed something wrong in them, that they were interested in producing a calculated effect, and not in knowing or telling the truth, or even debating about it. Instead of offering them the kind of answer they wanted, Jesus saw through them and went on the offensive.

Non-Christians attack us and demand answers from us. We can answer all their questions and objections, but how we may best do this without losing focus is another matter. Similar to the priests, teachers, and elders in our text, unless God has opened their minds, non-Christians are not interested in the truth, but they are interested in attacking it. If an ironclad answer shuts one door to them, they will open another area for debate, no matter how absurd or farfetched, to stay on the offensive and to indefinitely delay an actual confrontation with Jesus Christ. They will make excuses and throw up smokescreens to stop you from talking about them and uncovering their reasons, desires, and motives, and forcing them to examine themselves.

Our aim is to declare and apply God's word to people, to them as individual persons. Jesus' response immediately exposed them, and what appeared to be a ministerial issue is shown to have a spiritual and ethical root. Likewise, if we will learn from Jesus, we will see that all statements and challenges from non-Christians are rooted in their hatred, wickedness, prejudices, and defective intellect. We have the answers, and there is no need for fear or evasion, but at the same time, non-Christians are not really looking for answers. Their demands only reveal the wickedness of their hearts. Thus eventually, and the sooner the better, a Christian must go on the offensive and expose their inward condition, often using the very questions and objections that are thrown at him.

All authority belongs to Jesus Christ. As his servants, we are not obligated to answer the non-Christians on their terms. Christ's world, Christ's rules. The non-Christians have many things that they must answer for – their assumptions, their lifestyles, their ethics, their sciences, and so on. When a Christian engages them, he should make sure that he digs up all these things and demand the non-Christians to defend their positions. The

Christian who does this will find that the Bible's verdict is correct, that sinners, because of their wickedness, refuse to face reality and admit the truth about God, and that although they claim to be good and clever people, the truth is that without Jesus Christ, all of them are wicked and stupid.

## **7. Jesus, Remember Me**

**There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.**

**One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"**

**But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."**

**Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."**

**Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."  
(Luke 23:38-43)**

Jesus was crucified with two other men. He was there to suffer agony and death in order to save sinners, but these men were criminals.

The first illustrates the mindset of the reprobates. Even when he is in grave danger or when he is beat down, a non-Christian hardens his heart, and puts on a proud and sarcastic attitude. Even when he is in trouble, he still throws insults at Christ and his followers. Punishment incites bitterness and violence in him, not self-examination and repentance.

But one who is being converted takes a different position. The second criminal illustrates the simplicity of salvation and the sufficiency of faith. Presumably, he was not a follower of Jesus, and did not sit under hours of preaching about the Christ, the kingdom of God, and the way to salvation. He was nailed to a cross. His feet could not run back and forth to perform errands for the Lord. And his hands could not bring anything to alleviate his pain. The last great thing that he performed was a crime punishable by death. Yet Jesus accepted him to heaven.

Nevertheless, we must not represent him as wholly ignorant, or his faith as void of doctrinal materials. Even if he had never heard of Jesus before, there was a written notice above the Lord: "This is the King of the Jews." This statement of his "crime" became a gospel tract to this second man. It was the most concise of all gospel tracts, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, it was enough to move the heart. There were also the jeers of the crowd, and in the hand of God, they became powerful sermons on the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

It is not uncommon for opponents of the Christian faith to become unwilling messengers of the gospel as they recite its doctrines so as to criticize them. God enables his chosen ones to perceive the truth even when it is mentioned only to be attacked. The same is true with professing believers who attempt to refute biblical teachings in favor of human theories and inventions.

When I teach the truth, those who are supposed to agree with me will surely agree with me, and they will agree with me even when they hear what I say through my critics. They will see that what is criticized is more biblical and rational than the criticism. God will attract the right people even by the few paragraphs cited. So critics help me reach people that otherwise I may never reach. And those that disagree with me or are swayed by the critics are useless to me anyway. Whether they actively oppose or seemingly remain neutral makes little difference, for as Jesus said, "He who does not gather with me, scatters." There are only two groups – for or against. If you are supposed to be for me you will be for me no matter how information about me gets to you. If you are supposed to be against me, there is no need for me to prevent you from knowing about me, since you are essentially no different than the one who does not know. Satan wishes to silence the truth altogether, but when it is heard by one whom God has chosen, sometimes even only half a sentence, he is awakened. Thus God's commission and sovereignty form the basis for a confident and indestructible ministry.

If this is true of a servant, it is much more so of the master. This second man saw that Jesus was right, and that the mockers were wrong, although some of what he knew about Jesus probably came from their insults. The man's faith was simple, but far from empty. He had the conviction to turn against another criminal and rebuke him. He confessed his sin, and said that he received what his deeds deserved. He also had a definite opinion about Jesus Christ. He declared that, although the Lord came under the same sentence and penalty, he was innocent and had done nothing wrong. His statement to Jesus suggests that he believed in the perpetuity of human existence and identity after physical death. That is, he affirmed the reality of man's soul, that it is distinguishable from the body, and that man's identity is associated with this immortal soul.

Moreover, although the Lord was nailed to the cross and about to die, this man believed that Jesus would inherit a kingdom, and rested his hope on it. His faith surpassed even those disciples who had been following Jesus, for some of them said, "The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:20-21). They thought it was the end, that the Master's death had dashed their hope, and remained in doubt even after the resurrection had taken place. Jesus rebuked them for their unbelief (v. 25-26). In contrast, while Jesus was dying on the cross, the criminal believed that the Lord would possess a kingdom. Then, unlike many people, he did not take it for granted that he would receive forgiveness and gain acceptance. He asked. And he did not ask just anybody; he asked Jesus.

This is the faith that leads to salvation, that makes us friends of Christ: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." If we are the friends of Christ, then we will

renounce the world and our former life. We will rebuke non-Christians, and lambaste them for their insolence, their self-righteousness, and their unintelligent thinking. We will declare the righteousness and kingdom of Jesus Christ, and put our hope in him. We will go to him, only him, and ask for salvation: "Jesus, I deserve hell, but take me to heaven. Remember me. Take notice of me. Have compassion on me." It is indeed simple, but that first criminal did not do it, and was doomed to everlasting torment. The second one did it, and was accepted by the heavenly king into paradise, where there are fullness of joy and pleasures for evermore.



## **8. The Wisdom and Power of God**

**The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. As the Scriptures say, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligent."**

**So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish. Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe. It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.**

**But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.**

**Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important.**

**As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God. God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin. Therefore, as the Scriptures say, "If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD." (1 Corinthians 1:18-31, NLT)**

The Christian faith, this message about Jesus Christ, is a revelation of the wisdom and power of God. Non-Christians do not think so because they have different standards – false and irrational standards. The Jews and the Greeks had different perspectives. One respected power and the other sought the ultimate philosophy, and neither thought that a doctrine about a crucified man could be the answer to humanity's questions and problems.

Non-Christians are essentially the same but they do not all think exactly alike. Some lean toward politics, others emphasize economics, and still others think that science is the savior of mankind. Then, there are others who perceive that these are futile, but that the key is in religion and spirituality. So they make an idol and bow down to it. Some make five hundred and bow down to them. Others try a little meditation. Although they appear

to differ, by their standards of judgment they all agree that a message about a man who was nailed to a cross cannot be the only and final solution to all human ills. Of course, if they did not think like this, they would already be Christians.

Non-Christians use the wrong standards of judgment because although they think that they are smart, they are all stupid. And although they think that they are intellectually honest, they are all delusional hypocrites. They do not think that they need God to tell them anything. If something is there, they will find out about it by their own methods. If something is true, they will figure it out by their own wisdom. Even God, they insist, cannot hide from them. If they cannot discover or understand something, then it must not be there in the first place. Thus they consider themselves the ultimate reference point for all thinking and investigation, the center of all existence.

This is remarkably similar to those theologians who declare that certain biblical doctrines are beyond human understanding, and incomprehensible to our finite human minds, not because there is biblical evidence stating this, but because they themselves cannot grasp these doctrines. In other words, they follow the demonic wisdom of the non-Christians in making themselves the ultimate reference point for all thinking and investigation, the center of all existence, and the very standard of what is possible for the human intellect. If they cannot understand something, this means that no man in all of history can understand it. This is what they call humility! In any case, the non-Christians call the gospel foolishness, not because the gospel is indeed foolishness, but because they are so stupid and self-centered that they fail to recognize the wisdom of God. And what these unbelievers call nonsense and foolishness, theologians call mysteries and paradoxes. Thus non-Christians openly blaspheme, and the theologians do the same thing, but hide behind euphemisms. These are some of the most heinous and destructive troublemakers in the church.

All of this is by God's design. Since non-Christians and those Christians who follow their way of thinking refuse to humble themselves and learn from God, but rather make their unrenewed intellect the judge of all things, "God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom." God sees to it that the non-Christians would never succeed, but would forever wallow in perpetual speculation and confusion. And rather than allowing the theologians to grasp the simplicity and coherence of the faith, he causes them to spiral deeper and deeper into mysteries, paradoxes, and absurdities. They claim to honor God with their minds, but they refuse to accept what God teaches, and to acknowledge the inherent coherence and perfection of God's revelation. They are like the non-Christians because they also perceive the Christian faith as foolish, only they realize that they are not supposed to say this, so they use different words to express the same opinion.

So God makes a mockery of them. He makes fools out of them. He allows non-Christians to pursue their sciences and philosophies, but all these compound fallacies upon fallacies, resulting in absurdities upon absurdities. He makes sure that they will never know him by their own methods and powers. But since God is the most basic principle to all of reality, it means that by their sciences and philosophies non-Christians can never discover the

truth about reality. They think that science is a direct contact with reality, but the truth is that it has no intelligent contact with it at all. They think that their philosophy is an exercise in reason, but the truth is that it is completely out of touch with the actual and the rational. And there is only hellfire in the end. God watches, and laughs at them.

Then, he allows the Christian theologians to boast of their finitude and confusion. Rather than learning the plain truth and teaching it to God's people in all its simplicity and perfection, they make a magic show out of the gospel. Here a mystery, there a paradox, and everywhere a contradiction. Now they believe this, then they believe the opposite, and then they believe both at the same time! They blame the Bible, and claim that the Bible teaches both sides of a contradiction. The truth is that the Bible teaches only one side, but they want to believe the opposite as well, and so they want to affirm both. God declares a teaching in simple and direct statements, and they immediately obscure it with religious sounding slogans, till the hiss of the serpent drowns out the voice of the shepherd. They refuse to enter the place of rest and clarity, neither will they let others go in. The world watches, and laughs at them. The theologians rise up and defend themselves, but they do not even know which way is up or down, or perhaps both are up and down – because they cannot make any sense and are proud of it – the world rolls over in laughter and becomes hardened in their unbelief. This is God's punishment against the theologians, and against a church that admires them.

God says to the non-Christians, "You think you are so clever. I will make sure your cleverness never touches the truth. I will present the truth in a way that offends your intellectual assumptions. You think you are so powerful. I will make sure your power never achieves anything worthwhile. I will manifest my power in a manner that you will perceive as extreme weakness. I will make sure that you will never attain salvation by any means that is comfortable to your thinking." Thus the history of non-Christians is a story of failure, and also of self-delusion regarding its success and progress. They mock the gospel, but the gospel is the very thing – the only thing – that could save them. So God mocks them in return by showing them what they would not expect, and what they would refuse. He makes them suffer their own mockery, by making the way of salvation something that they could not accept. And what happens to those preachers and theologians who pretend to be experts but make a mockery of the Christian faith? God makes a mockery out of them, and embarrasses them before the world. The Christian who has a pure heart, like a little child, and who does not care if someone is reverend this or doctor that, exclaims, "Hey, the theologians have no clothes!"

"God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important." We see this in so many things that God does. Non-Christians esteem human power and wisdom, but God placed their only hope on a cross. The Jews trusted in their natural ancestry and their own effort, but God saved the Gentiles by Jesus Christ through faith. Some are educated and influential, but God chose the weaklings of the world, filled them with his Spirit, and unleashed them to defy the human powers and to preach his message.

There are those who claim to be Christians, but who have trouble with the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. They think that they are honest and thinking men, but in reality they are non-Christian hypocrites who pretend to be Christians. God compiled his thoughts into a book, recorded by men that the world despised but who were carried along by his Spirit. The scholars profess to seek wisdom, but they refuse to hear from God. So he places before them the most powerful and the only true intellectual system in existence – the very thing that they are supposedly after, their life's quest, and the holy grail of all intellectuals – and they cannot take it.

Again, "God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom." The treasure is protected in plain sight. The Christian faith is a testimony against the non-Christians' foolishness and dishonesty. And it exposes those who infiltrate the church and pretend to be one of us. A non-Christian cannot truly accept the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scripture, or the deity of Christ, or the atonement. He will always see God's revelation as foolish, as wrong. If he forces himself to profess the faith, he will always see mysteries, paradoxes, and contradictions. He will always see problems. He will always see something that is not there. And when Christians offer solutions, he will refuse them even if he cannot refute them. This is God's design. He sees to it that those who persist in unbelief and who are heading toward destruction will never get their filthy hands on his wisdom and knowledge.

Non-Christians, who are themselves foolish, do not know how to judge, or to distinguish truth and error. They regard what is good as evil, and what is evil as good. And they regard what is wise as foolish, and what is foolish as wise. Christians were at one time non-Christians, and subject to the same confusion. But God gives insight to those whom he desires to save from his wrath, so that they now perceive the Christian faith as what it really is – the very wisdom and power of God. They perceive that there is no imperfection in the Christian faith, not even apparent ones. There is nothing that confounds or mystifies. There is only truth, beauty, and ultimate power. One theologian said that all biblical doctrines end in paradox, although he presented nothing that could not be resolved in a moment. This is not a sign of wisdom and reverence, but of profound unbelief, depravity, and intellectual incompetence. As a Christian, I see only simplicity, coherence, and perfection.

## **9. The Mind of Christ**

**No, 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, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" – but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.**

**The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.**

**This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:7-16)**

Verse 9 is often taken to mean that the things of God are so exceedingly profound and transcendent that they remain beyond our ability to imagine or to understand: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." Christians use it to express praise and wonder toward God, and to affirm the incomprehensibility of the Christian faith. However, the verse is rarely cited in context, and when cited in context, the context is often ignored.

Earlier in 1:18, Paul says that the message of the cross appears foolish to those who are perishing, but those who are being saved perceive that it is the power of God. This is not because the gospel is indeed foolish, but the reprobates falsely perceive it as foolish. As he explains in 1:21, this is by God's design: "God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom" (NLT).

The non-Christians consider themselves intelligent and that they have no need for God to teach them. They think that they are intellectually self-sufficient, so that by their own wisdom and power they could discover and understand all that there is to discover and understand. Thus God has decided to frustrate their efforts, and to see to it that they will never know him by human wisdom. Instead, he will reveal himself and the way of salvation by the message of the cross, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Then, in 2:1-5, Paul writes that when he preached to the Corinthians, his message was not filled with rhetorical fireworks and sophisticated arguments, nor did he overwhelm them with stage presence or his knowledge of science and philosophy. Rather, his materials consisted of only what was in the Christian faith, and he depended on the Holy Spirit to convince and to convert. Verses 6 and 7 state that he nevertheless speaks a message of wisdom, only that this is not the wisdom of non-Christians, which God has determined to humiliate and destroy. Instead, he speaks God's wisdom, which "God destined for our glory before time began."

The non-Christian rulers did not understand God's wisdom, he continues in verse 8, for if they had understood it, they would not have murdered Jesus Christ. It is in this context that Paul cites Isaiah 64:4 in verse 9: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him," and then he adds, "but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (v. 10). So Paul contrasts human wisdom and divine wisdom, human sophistry and divine power, and those who cannot understand God's wisdom (v. 8) and those who do understand it (v. 10).

The point of verse 9 is not that the human mind cannot understand the things of God – it is not referring to intellectual profundity or difficulty. Rather, it is referring to method of discovery. Again, "God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom," and this is why no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has conceived the things of God. Man cannot know God by his sensation, intuition, or imagination. He cannot discover and know God by his own human abilities. Both empiricism and rationalism are unable to grasp reality. "But God has revealed it to us by his Spirit." Man can know God only by revelation, by God disclosing his own thoughts and knowledge. This means that when Christians apply verse 9 to themselves, they are putting themselves in the position of non-Christians, even in the position of those who would murder Jesus Christ. When they assert that the things of God are so exceedingly great that they are beyond their ability to understand, they proclaim themselves to be reprobates, as those who would betray Christ and nail him to the cross.

Verse 11 says, "No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God." Does this mean that we cannot know the thoughts of God? But Paul continues, "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us." Either you have the spirit of the world or the Spirit of God. If you have the spirit of the world, then you are a non-Christian, and it is no wonder that you do not understand the things of God. But if you are a Christian, then you have the Spirit of God, and if you have the Spirit of God, then you can understand the things of God, even the very "thoughts of God." If you can understand "what God has freely given us," then you can understand creation, providence, the covenants, divine election, the incarnation, justification, sanctification, the promises and glories of the life to come, and hundreds of other doctrinal points and thousands of other biblical passages.

What about Herman Bavinck's statement, which reflects the view of many believers and church leaders? "In truth, the knowledge that God has revealed of himself in nature and

Scripture far surpasses human imagination and understanding."<sup>1</sup> If we have any respect for Paul at all, this must mean that Bavinck was a non-Christian, and that he would have killed Jesus Christ. If we are permitted to show leniency, we could say that Bavinck was a misguided and confused Christian who had no idea what he was saying, and unknowingly taught false doctrine and deceived the sheep. Leniency is one thing, but it is impossible to avoid the implication of Paul's teaching – reprobates cannot understand God, but as believers we can understand God because he has revealed himself and given us his Spirit, so that if you say you cannot understand his revelation, it must mean that you lack the Spirit of God and that you declare yourself a reprobate. The irony is that Christians use this declaration as a slogan for praise and worship.

Or, consider this from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: "But I want to underline this and even to emphasize it still further. I must submit myself *entirely* to the Bible, and that will mean certain things. First, I start by telling myself that when I come to read the Bible and its doctrines, I am entering into a realm that is beyond the reach of my understanding."<sup>2</sup> Where does this come from? Where does the Bible teach this?

He continues, "By definition, I shall be dealing with things that are beyond my power to grasp." By definition? Whose definition? Paul says that God gives us revelation (v. 10) so that we may understand (v. 12). Thus according to the apostle, revelation is something that, by definition, we can understand, that is, if we have received the Spirit of God (v. 12, 14). On the other hand, Paul indicates that revelation is beyond the grasp of reprobates, of those without the Spirit of God, and of those who would kill Jesus Christ. Does Lloyd-Jones think that he is one of these people? He says, "The very idea of revelation, in and of itself, I suggest to you, must carry that implication." But our passage asserts the opposite, except for the reprobates. Rather, the very idea of revelation, when referring to Christians, denotes explicit knowledge and understanding.

Then, "If I could understand God, I would be equal with Him. If my mind were able to apprehend and to span the truth about God, then it would mean that my mind is equal to the mind of God, and that, of course, is altogether wrong." If by "understand" he means an exhaustive knowledge of God, then this is admittedly impossible, if for no other reason than that God has not revealed everything about himself. But this would be a strange use of the word. But if by "understand" he means that we cannot even grasp what has been revealed, and indeed he has just said this above, then he is saying that our passage, the Bible itself, is "altogether wrong." To put this another way, Lloyd-Jones is saying, "Who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" Paul has an answer to that: "But we have the mind of Christ."

This way of thinking, whether expressed by Bavinck or Lloyd-Jones, or by lesser figures, represents a hostile stance toward Scripture, and if they knew what they were saying, it amounts to a renunciation of the faith and of their salvation. By this doctrine of incomprehensibility they portray themselves as reprobates, as without the Spirit of God, and as those who would kill Jesus Christ. Lloyd-Jones says that he must submit "entirely

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume Two: God and Creation* (Baker Academic, 2004), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible, Volume 1* (Crossway Books, 1996), p. 37.

to the Bible," and the first step is to affirm that he cannot understand revelation. But he lies and fails his own standard, because he does not submit to 1 Corinthians 2. Paul teaches the opposite. He writes that the Spirit of God searches even "the deep things of God" and the "thoughts of God," and we have received "the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand." Yet the reprobate mentality seems to dominate in the church; it must be vehemently opposed by all who know the truth.

"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them." When a non-Christian tells you that the Christian faith seems foolish to him, what does he mean? He means that it seems wrong to him, or more specifically, that it is contrary to facts, to logic, to experience, or some such thing. What is the difference between this opinion and the view, held by many Christians, that God's revelation is filled with mysteries, paradoxes, and contradictions, or the view that something like the existence of evil is both a logically and experientially difficult issue for the Christian faith? There is no essential difference. Any difference is only in the response: the non-Christians regard the gospel as foolish, and therefore they refuse to believe it; the Christians who think the same way also regard the gospel as foolish, but they claim to believe it, and they say that this is the way it should be, even the way it must be. But this is not the way that it should be for Christians. A man who thinks that the things of God are foolishness, and who cannot understand them, is a man "without the Spirit." The Bible says that he is a carnal man, an unspiritual man.

It is as if the preachers and theologians say to themselves, "If I say that God is so great that he cannot be understood, that I cannot understand, I will be extolling his greatness without having to strive for understanding or conformity to his teachings. I will be showing how humble I am, and if I tell people about this, then they will know how humble I am too." But this is not humility. Essentially, it is idolatry. A person who thinks that to magnify God and to diminish self means that no comprehension of the divine can remain is really one who constructs in his mind a God that is not the revealed God, a God who in fact does not exist as this man conceives him. But he tells the people: "This is the God who took you out of Egypt!" And then he worships, and tells others to worship. The God of the Bible is a God who has revealed himself and who has given his Spirit to men so that they can understand him.

"Who has known the mind of the Lord?" The preachers and theologians answer, "No one!" Yet Paul says, "But we have the mind of Christ." Verse 13 properly describes the Spirit's inspiration: "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words." This refutes the notion, also popular in Christian circles, that the things of God cannot be expressed in words. Paul says that they can, and these words were given by the Holy Spirit. And it is in this context that he says, "We have the mind of Christ."

Someone said that we must always maintain the Creator-creature distinction. Of course, but this is why when the Creator tells you that you can understand something, you better agree that you can understand it! This theologian meant to defend our inability to understand or his idea of God's incomprehensibility, but he was the one who failed to



maintain the Creator-creature distinction. He spoke as if he was equal with God, and able to contradict God concerning the possibilities of the human mind. God says that men who have the Spirit of God can understand the things of God, even such an explicit and precise understanding as teachings expressed in words. This theologian said that we could at best understand only in some analogical rather than univocal sense – utter nonsense. This invention was an excuse to subvert the truth, and the Bible never teaches it. It was an attempt to *claim* to be a Christian but to *be* a non-Christian. He spoke as if he was equal to or even greater than the Creator. This is the essence of arrogance and the root of heresy.

There is only one truth but many aberrations. Paul clearly sets forth the matter: "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us." Those who cannot understand are reprobates, non-Christians, and do not have the Spirit of God. But Christians have the Spirit of God, and are able to understand. This understanding refers to more than a general sense or feeling, but to an intellectual comprehension of the words that God has revealed to the prophets and apostles. It is not some analogical understanding, which amounts to no understanding at all, but it is an intellectual comprehension of, and one that is identical to, the very "thoughts of God," the thoughts that the Spirit of God has grasped and revealed to us in words, so it is even said that we have the mind of Christ. This is the biblical teaching. Anything less or different is false doctrine.

## **10. Are You Not Worldly?**

**Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?**

**What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building....**

**Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God. (1 Corinthians 3:1-9, 18-23)**

Christians tend to follow non-Christian culture in every area of life. This is a disgrace, but it is a fact.

To offer one example, Christians follow non-Christian language and expression. Recently I attempted to read a really irritating book about rescuing ambitions – it was so bad that I could not finish it. The author must be older than I am, and holds a doctorate from a prestigious seminary. But in the book he tried so hard to sound hip and failed so miserably at it that the text was a continuous mess of awkward and irksome prose. This is a trend that I notice in recent publications. The old prose is convoluted; the new prose aspires to be hip. In fact, I hope that it was a put on, that it was a misguided attempt at reaching a younger audience, since if he truly thinks and talks this way, then he must be an extremely annoying person to be with, and I pity his friends and family. The fact that young believers follow their non-Christian friends in talking like uneducated morons is a problem that we should correct and not accommodate.

If one wants to write like a non-Christian, at least he can talk his own age. I just finished another book, also a disappointment, in which the author tried to sound hip as well, but it was not as irritating because he used jargons from an older crowd. It felt like he said "at the end of the day" and "unpack" five hundred times – these were expressions that he did not use in his previous and more academic works. If he did not know how to sound

casual, he should not have tried. It was difficult, but I managed to finish the book. The wisdom of God is always relevant. Its power is easily unleashed in a sober and plain delivery, and any unnatural attempt to make it relevant or interesting will only dull its effect. Let us freely adopt expressions that are appropriate for Christian presentations, but once in a while, let us also choose or invent our own and force non-Christians to accommodate us.

There are more severe problems. Paul refers to a celebrity culture in which Christians form cliques around preachers and theologians. Of course this has continued to this day. It is not uncommon to hear Christians say, "I follow this pastor" or "I follow this theologian." Now, I suppose such expressions can serve a practical purpose. People differ in their opinions and known figures can function as convenient labels to represent these opinions. Although this is arguably acceptable as far as it goes, it can readily lead to the "boasting about men" that Paul condemns.

When attention around these figures becomes more personal and obsessive, it evolves into something more than a matter of convenience, but a destructive force that divides the church and hinders spiritual growth. One person says, "I follow this theologian." He also has a label for everyone else, so he says, with much contempt, "Oh, you follow that theologian" – and proceeds to demolish you. He thinks that he is well-read and familiar with the theological scene, and always caught up with the latest academic gossip and trivia.

I have had people assign me to an American theologian, although many of my opinions were formed independent of him and even before I knew about him, and some came from the influence of figures belonging to other theological traditions and from other countries, and which I had to greatly revise and reinterpret. But suddenly I was responsible for defending him, as if I was his direct disciple and he was my exclusive teacher! What happened? It was the way these people viewed the world, and they were not even able to do this properly, since their horizon was extremely small, so that they could categorize others only under the few individuals that they knew. They were molded simply and narrowly, and they assumed that everyone else was molded the same way. The culture of idolatry, when applied to theological categorization, results in misleading and unproductive analyses.

Paul says that this way of thinking is outright worldly – carnal, of the flesh, exactly like the non-Christians. He does not regard them as theological experts, but "mere infants in Christ" who are not ready for solid food. They should stop supposing that they can handle the more advanced doctrines, let alone teach and argue about them, but they should return to a learning stage, to the milk of the word of God. They think that they are the scholars and debaters among the people of God, but Paul says that they are mere infants, and they are still worldly.

God's people, the apostle continues, is like a field, and Paul and Apollos are only servants. One planted and one watered, as the Lord has assigned to each his task. The laborers are not in competition, and they do not work against one another. They serve the

same God and the same purpose. But in themselves they are powerless to produce results. Thus the credit is reserved for the real doer of the work, the God who causes life and growth. The metaphor inspires not only humility but also confidence. If I am the doer of the work, then I better get the credit for it. But if God is the doer, then he receives the credit. And it also follows that if God is the doer, then my confidence should not be restrained by my limitations, but it should increase more and more according to God's limitless power and sovereign will. I can plant and I can water, but I do not have to perform the impossible – I do not have to cause the increase, for God will do it by his omnipotence.

The Bible consistently distinguishes between the Christian and the non-Christian, the things of God and the things of the world. Christians often admire those who have received an advanced non-Christian education, or even an advanced Christian education as measured by non-Christian standards. But Paul says, "Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a 'fool' so that he may become wise." If you think that you are wise according to non-Christian standards, then you are in fact a fool; rather, you should become what non-Christian standards would regard as a fool, so that you may be truly wise. You are deceived if you think that it is wise to apply a celebrity culture or a system of idolatry to Christian ministry. You are deceived if you think that a person with an advanced degree, even if from a seminary, which is modeled after the non-Christian system, is necessarily wise. "What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight" (Luke 16:15). Faith in Jesus Christ is the only foundation for true wisdom, whether or not you pile human recognition on top of it.

"So then, no more boasting about men!" Why fight? Why choose? "All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours." Indeed, not all preachers and theologians are gifts from God – many are false prophets that God sends to test our faithfulness, to see whether we will follow them or reject them (Deuteronomy 13:2-3). But as for those who exalt sound doctrine, there is no need to align ourselves to this one or that one, to say, "I belong to this pastor" or "I belong to that tradition," and then to take pride in this silliness. It is not that we belong to them, but all of them belong to us, and all of us belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. Therefore, stop being worldly, stop being children, but grow up in the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **11. Kick Him Out and Cut Him Off**

**When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin. But I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that.**

**I meant that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or is a drunkard, or cheats people. Don't even eat with such people.**

**It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning. God will judge those on the outside; but as the Scriptures say, "You must remove the evil person from among you." (1 Corinthians 5:9-13, NLT)**

We should first talk about what it means to "judge" someone. The word does not always mean the same thing.

Non-Christians often complain that we judge them in the sense of condemning their beliefs, actions, and lifestyles. We express a negative verdict about them. We tell them that they must repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, or face the wrath of God and endless suffering in hellfire. Non-Christians resent this, and even claim that this is contrary to the teaching and example of Christ, who commanded us not to judge. Many Christians have picked this up from unbelievers, but since "the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God," Christians should not learn how to interpret the Bible from non-Christians. Yet this basic wisdom is so often violated that perhaps it should become an explicit teaching in introductory hermeneutics.

The Bible never teaches us not to judge in the sense of expressing a moral verdict. When Jesus says "Do not judge" (Matthew 7:1), he is referring to hypocritical judgment, and only hypocritical judgment. He says, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?...You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (v. 3, 5). The application is limited to the hypocrite, who ignores his own greater fault when he criticizes another. But not every person who criticizes another always has a greater fault in himself, and even if he has a greater fault in himself, Jesus teaches that after he has removed it, he may proceed to "remove the speck from your brother's eye," that is, to point out the fault in the other person.

Far from forbidding us to judge in the sense of forming an opinion about someone's wisdom, morality, spiritual condition, and so on, Jesus teaches us to do it, and he teaches us how to do it without hypocrisy. Immediately after this, he adds, "Do not give dogs

what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces" (v. 6). Thus Jesus takes it for granted that we should make moral judgments about people, but more than that, he teaches us to give them some very unflattering names. This is the real Jesus, and this is his true teaching.

We can demonstrate the same point with our passage. Paul writes that if we are to avoid "unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols," we will have to leave this world. In other words, he thinks that the world is filled with non-Christians who are sexually immoral, who are greedy, who are swindlers and idolaters. There are so many of them, and so many of them are so evil, that we cannot avoid them. This represents the kind of harsh moral condemnations that non-Christians say we are not supposed to make. But the prophets and apostles, as well as the Lord himself, talk like this throughout the Bible.

On the other hand, how often do you hear Christians talk like this, who make such a sweeping and derogatory statement about non-Christians? The truth is that when we refer to judgment in this sense, Christians are rarely judgmental enough. How many of us measure up to the Bible's contempt and harsh judgment against non-Christians, against all their beliefs, and all their deeds? May God forgive us for our unlicensed leniency, and for not being judgmental enough, and may he grant us the wisdom and boldness to judge unbelievers more and more, and to hold forth his damning verdict, as well as the only way of escape, to this crooked generation.

So the Bible does not forbid us to judge others, in the sense of forming a negative moral verdict about them. As long as this opinion is accurate and without hypocrisy, we are obligated to make this judgment and to declare it. In fact, this is a necessary aspect of gospel preaching. We can even address a man's personal business, such as whom he marries, when he transgresses a divine moral precept, as when John the Baptist told Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have her." So when non-Christians say to us, "It is not for you to judge" and "It is none of your business," we answer, "The Bible commands us to judge, and it is certainly our business."

Non-Christians are afraid of judgment, not our judgment as such, but they fear the voice of God in our words. As Paul writes in Romans 1 and 2, "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." They know that they are wrong, and even if they deceive themselves, they are without excuse. But because they are wicked, they "suppress the truth," although "God has made it plain to them." They do not want Christians to dig up the truth and confront them with it. They oppose judgment not because they are so merciful and tolerant – for in their hypocrisy they also judge those they consider judgmental and intolerant – but because they are wicked and cannot face the truth. As the Gospel of John says, "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" (3:19-20).

In our passage, Paul is evidently referring to judgment in another sense, and it is easy to see what it is. Here to judge someone means to not associate or eat with that person (v. 9, 11), and to expel him from the community (v. 13). It does not refer to confronting and criticizing a person; in fact, the point is to stop talking to him altogether. Instead of talk, the judgment refers to actions directed against a person to discipline and to punish him. We are to judge non-Christians, to confront and to criticize them, and we should do this more and more, but it is not up to us to judge them in this other sense, that is, to discipline and to punish them. God will do this. It is impossible for us to ostracize every person and boycott every business or institution that is non-Christian. Unbelievers are everywhere, and everywhere they are perverts, cheaters, and idolaters. We will have to hide from society or even exit the planet to avoid all of them. But God himself will punish them.

Rather, Paul has in mind "anyone who *claims to be a believer* yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or is a drunkard, or cheats people." This is evidently not an exhaustive list, but a sample of the violations that would warrant such treatment. If a person says that he is a Christian but behaves like a non-Christian, then the church must warn him, and if he does not repent, then the church must judge him. This means that Christians must not associate with him, and not even eat with him. He is to be completely cut off – no meals, no conversations, no business dealings, not even a greeting card. And he is to be banned from all church gatherings: "You must remove the evil person from among you." He must be ejected and shunned both in the individual and corporate sense. The next time a Christian is permitted to pay him any attention is when he gets on his face and repents in dust and ashes. Only then may he return to the fellowship and reintegrate himself into the lives of believers.

Sometimes when you teach the Bible, you feel like you are just talking to yourself in an empty room like an idiot, because you realize that no one is going to obey it. This is one of those cases. One can hardly find a pastor with the mind to grasp this simple passage. Then, one can hardly find a pastor with the spine to preach it. After that, one can hardly find a congregation awake enough to hear it. And after that, one can hardly find a crowd who cares enough to do it, that is, to cut off an offender from the community. And if we get to this point, one can hardly expect all the churches and believers in the area to cooperate. So the person just crosses the street to another church and lives like nothing has happened. Yet we continue to teach it because this is what the Bible teaches, and we must implement it as churches and as individuals. Corporate rebellion is no excuse for individual failure. If your church does not do it, you do it, and try to persuade others to join you.

Still, may God send a wave of faith and repentance throughout his congregations so that they will begin to take him seriously, for only then will true discipline and its full effect be restored to his people.

## 12. Concerning Spiritual Gifts

**Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. (1 Corinthians 12:7-11)**

Paul wishes that the Corinthians would have a correct understanding of spiritual gifts. A fundamental test is the testimony that one offers about Jesus Christ. The operations of God are diverse. As Peter says, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10). The basis for their unity is that they come from the same source. And because they come from the same source, they are not to work against one another, or in competition with one another.

Spiritual gifts are the "manifestation" of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is unseen and unheard, but he shows himself by his operations and effects. All of God's people have wisdom and knowledge, but the Spirit enables some to break forth in messages bearing powerful insights for the edification of the church. All Christians have faith, and saving faith itself is a gift from God, but there is a gift of faith that supercharges a person with confidence, so that he may, without hyperbole, command a mountain to cast itself into the ocean. The workings of powers could cover a broad range of items. There are too many examples to choose from: Elijah alone multiplied matter, called down fire, and raised the dead.

The list is not meant to be complete, since others gifts are specified elsewhere, and there is no reason to believe that all the lists together form an exhaustive inventory. God's grace is manifold, and the lists merely give us an idea as to the kinds of things that the Spirit enables his people to do. There is no one like our God, and there is no people like his people, endowed with power from heaven. Each manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. The gifts are not meant to secure personal glory or benefit. They are distributed according to the Spirit's will, and Paul suggests that a person may pray for an ability that he lacks (14:13) in order to build up the church.



### **13. The Body and Its Members**

**Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. (1 Corinthians 12:14-20)**

God's design is that there should be mutual dependence between believers; however, the Bible teaches this mainly in relation to public ministry and not the individual's faith. It is often said in one way or another that a Christian who is disconnected from a community is doomed to failure, but this teaching is more autobiographical than it is biblical, and it is manipulative rather than supportive. It is propagated by people who are either weak in themselves or by leaders who prefer to threaten people than to improve their own ministries. As they stress corporate faith and worship, although their intention is purportedly to strengthen the church and its members, in reality their error has been a major factor in perpetuating the lack of power and commitment in believers.

The trouble is that their doctrine amounts to a denial of the fullness and sufficiency of Christ. Jesus Christ is sufficient to sustain and nurture each individual believer entirely apart from any other believer. There is only one Father, and one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ. The church is not our mother and not our priest. Rather, each Christian is a priest, divinely ordained to his position, with full rights to approach the throne of heaven, and to receive and administer all that God has to offer through Jesus Christ. A Christian can receive all of Christ through faith, and that by direct contact with God, without the church's assistance, and still less its permission. Any doctrine different from this is an attack on Christ's sufficiency and mediation, and must be regarded as heresy.

The focus here is the principle, and not that an isolated faith is always preferable or that one should deliberately pursue it. And when the concern relates to the principle, we must insist that the popular doctrine that renders community a matter of necessity comes not from God's revelation, but from unbelief and pessimistic assumptions about an individual's potential in Christ. When it is taken for granted that community is necessary for the flourishing or even the survival of the individual's faith, then to encourage corporate faith becomes the same as to encourage personal weakness. This is also a disservice to the community, because instead of coming together out of love, now a bunch of weaklings congregate out of need to leach upon one another.

Jeremiah was very much alone, and Paul at times had to face the greatest trials by himself, but Jesus Christ stood with them and was sufficient for them. You say, "But I am not Jeremiah or Paul." Right, and when you continue to think like this, you will never be anything like them. You are not Jeremiah or Paul, but you trust in the same Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, so that there is no difference. Thus we must never sacrifice the sufficiency of Christ to maintain the importance of church fellowship. And if you cannot get through the day without depending on some other man to hold you up, at least do not infect someone else with your unbelief and weakness. Likewise, preachers who deny the sufficiency of Christ for the individual in order to preserve the importance of community ought to be resisted. The church is indeed God's design, but not for the purpose of the individual's spiritual survival. Jesus Christ is sufficient – more than sufficient – for each person apart from the community. This is nonnegotiable.

When it comes to the public setting, as in a church gathering or the community's daily affairs, God's design is indeed mutual dependence, and no one person can represent the entire body or perform all its functions. Rather, each person is set in his own place according to God's will. As Paul writes, "But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be." We are not all meant to do the same things, or focus equally on the same things. Sometimes an evangelist would pound so hard on the primacy of evangelism that it makes everybody else feel guilty for not doing as much as he does. But he is not feeding any orphans. Then the one who does nothing but feed orphans comes along and makes the evangelist look like a coldhearted hypocrite. God has set us in our own positions, and we must not define the entire body by any one function that we obsess about: "If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body."

Here is where the distinction between the individual's faith and public ministry becomes essential. As an individual, I can perform almost any function in the body of Christ on a small scale, even though that is not my main ministry. That is, I may not be called to lead a nationwide project to feed the hungry, but I would be remiss if a beggar starves to death at my doorstep. But just because I must feed the beggar at my doorstep does not mean that I should lead a nationwide effort to combat hunger. Perhaps God has called me to combat this ridiculous confusion about personal and corporate faith instead. In other words, each person should be a complete believer, but no one person needs to be an entire church.

You may not think about your little toe very often, but if you have ever sprained it, you suddenly discovered that you depend on it all the time. Now it hurts when you stand, when you turn, when you walk. What happens if you get a tiny paper cut on your finger? It hurts when you do almost anything – it hurts when you write, when you drive, when you cook, when you throw a ball – so that "if one part suffers, every part suffers with it." Likewise, the person who processes paperwork at church, or perhaps who does the accounting, receives little attention, but imagine the chaos if he is suddenly removed, or if he is incompetent or dishonest.

To press the previous point once more, if you preach at church and somebody else cleans the floor, it does not mean that he also cleans your floor when you get home. And if you clean your own floor at home, it does not mean that you have to clean it at church, unless that happens to be your job. Again, Christ is sufficient for each believer, so that each believer should be complete, but each believer does not perform all the functions at church, so that at church there is mutual dependence. A theology of the church that in any degree compromises the total sufficiency of Christ or the potential and responsibility of the individual is false doctrine.

Now a person may increase in proficiency and a gift may increase in power through prayer, study, and regular use, but the ability will seem native to him, and not artificial or forced. A person who cannot perform, say, administrative duties may very well receive the ability after conversion, but it will become natural to him from then on. An eye is an eye because God has made it an eye. Thus for an eye to be an eye, it only has to be itself. It does not have to become something that it is not, nor should it be jealous of or pretend to be some other member in the body. This is how it will function according to its true purpose and potential.

## 14. The Way of Love

**If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.**

**Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.**

**Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (1 Corinthians 13:1-12)**

Just as 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 is not mainly talking about biology but spiritual gifts, although what the passage says about biology is true, 1 Corinthians 13 is not mainly about love, since Paul is still talking about spiritual gifts, although what he says about love is true and could be applied beyond the present context. Nevertheless, if love itself becomes the main or even the exclusive focus, then we will miss what the apostle says about both love and spiritual gifts. He does not refer to a love that is without the gifts, since he is talking about love in the context of the right use of the gifts.

Thus it could be misleading to call this "The Love Chapter," since it is more like "Concerning Spiritual Gifts, Section 3." The custom of giving love the main or the exclusive focus when reading the passage has encouraged the false notion that love is an alternative to spiritual gifts, and a superior alternative at that. This misses Paul's point. He precedes this passage by saying, "But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way." He does not mean that love is more excellent than the gifts, or that love itself is a greater gift, for in this context love is not a spiritual gift at all. He immediately follows the section with, "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy." Even after he has introduced this "most excellent way," he does not say follow love *instead of* desiring spiritual gifts, but follow love *and* desire the gifts.

The context is desire for the spiritual gifts, or the proper motive for their operation. Thus the "most excellent way" does not refer to a superior gift or something that is superior to

the gifts, but rather a superior motive than mere desire for the gifts. Love is the most excellent way to guide a person's thinking about the gifts, about which ones he desires, and about how he should use them. Instead of thinking about which gifts would best exalt his pride or advance his status, now he is thinking about which gifts would most benefit the church, which gifts would most help other Christians in their faith, and which gifts would best impress unbelievers about the greatness of God. In many situations, prophecy is a gift that seems to benefit the most people at the same time in the most important way, since "everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort." Thus, "eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy."

Verses 1-3 do not devalue the spiritual gifts, but they devalue the person who uses them without love. The verses are often presented as if Paul thinks that the gifts are ineffective apart from love. This again misses the point. If Paul speaks in tongues without love, he may be just a clanging cymbal, but he still speaks in the tongues of men and angels. He never says he could not do it without love. If he prophesies without love, he says, then "I am nothing" – the person is nothing. But still he can "fathom all mysteries and all knowledge" – the gift is never nothing. If he has the gift of faith without love, then again, "I am nothing," but the mountain is still moved. If he offers all he has to the poor without love, then he says, "I gain nothing," but the poor still receives.

Verses 4-7 must be first applied to the use of spiritual gifts. Paul writes, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking," and so on. This targets the selfish and divisive manner in which the gifts could be used. If a person is filled with pride because of his gift and looks down on other people, then he is nothing. Instead of admiring him as he wishes, he should be considered a nobody. And if a person aspires to a more prominent place in the church not so that he may strengthen the congregation and help more people, but because he wishes to receive attention and applause, then he is nothing, although he is not necessarily ineffective at what he does.

Although love is presented as the most excellent foundation for the spiritual gifts and not an alternative to them, it will indeed outlast them all. Prophecy, tongues, miracles, healing, and so on, will cease. Prophecy is said to be imperfect, not because the gift itself is defective, but it offers incomplete knowledge. So "when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears." Paul does not leave the time of "perfection" in doubt. He writes, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." When perfection comes, there will be "face to face" knowledge. When perfection comes, we will know fully, *even as we are fully known*. This is not a potential knowledge, as in knowledge revealed but not completely assimilated, but an actual knowledge, so that we will know as we are fully known. When this happens, the gifts will cease, and we shall not miss them, for we will lack nothing.

## **15. The Resurrection of Christ**

**Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.**

**For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.**

**After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Corinthians 15:1-8)**

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is integral to the gospel. It is a necessary part of the Christian faith. Although this is obvious to many of us, it still needs to be emphasized. This is because there are people who deny the fact of the resurrection but still claim affiliation with the Christian faith. They present themselves as followers of Christ, and even teachers and theologians of the church. Thus we must continue to reaffirm and clarify the gospel, and in doing so we must refute this notion that it is acceptable to deny the resurrection, and spell out the implication of this denial.

First, Paul writes, Christ died according to the Scriptures. This is a most significant point. Long before it happened, God testified by the prophets that the Christ would suffer and die by the hands of wicked men, and Jesus repeatedly told his disciples this during his earthly ministry. We could have known about the death of Christ entirely apart from eyewitnesses, since nothing could have rendered the event more certain than the inspired words of the prophets. Even if the Bible says nothing about his actual death, we would know that it must have happened. The prophets predicted it, and in the Gospels Jesus said it would happen to him.

Nevertheless, the Bible also testifies about his actual death, and there were many eyewitnesses. Now, the eyewitnesses in themselves provide a far inferior testimony than the Holy Spirit's infallible testimony. Our certainty, therefore, does not rest on the idea that there were eyewitnesses, but in the Bible's record about these eyewitnesses and what they saw. The distinction is crucial because it is only when we put it this way that our attention never departs from the perfection and truthfulness of God, and our faith never rests on anything less than the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. When it comes to the things of God, or infallible knowledge about any event, if man witnesses anything at all, it is not man's witness that verifies God's testimony, but God's testimony that verifies man's witness.

We would have known about the death of Christ apart from his burial, but mention of his burial draws attention to the historical nature of his death. It renders the Bible's testimony even less subject to misinterpretation. His death was not something metaphorical or imaginary, nor was it meant to be understood that way. It was a physical death. His body expired, and he was handled and examined, embalmed, and buried in a tomb. This sets the stage for his resurrection, since in order for his resurrection to be what the Bible says it is, his death must be what the Bible says it is.

Jesus Christ was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. Again, he repeatedly told his disciples about this before it happened. The prophets predicted that the Christ would be raised, and Jesus confirmed that the prophets were talking about him. Thus even apart from his post-resurrection appearances, we could be certain that he was raised from the dead, and that he is alive today. Our confidence rests not on man's witness as such, but on God's testimony and his assurance that man's witness about the resurrection is true.

And he indeed appeared to many men and women at different places and on different occasions. They handled him, walked with him, and talked with him. He took a piece of bread and broke it apart. He even cooked and ate with them. Thus the resurrection was not something metaphorical or imaginary. He was not raised as a phantom, but he was raised with a body that was physical, even though it was enhanced with heavenly features and abilities. He appeared to specific people that Paul could name: Peter, the Twelve, James, and himself. Once he appeared to five hundred people at the same time, most of whom were still living when this letter was written, so that the Corinthians could even interview them if they wished.

The resurrection of Christ is a definite and unambiguous doctrine that leaves no room for distortion or figurative interpretation. Paul writes, "This is what we preach, and this is what you believed," and "By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain." The Corinthians were counted as Christians because they believed this message. If they had rejected it, or if they had failed to hold on to it, then they had "believed in vain," and they would not have possessed the benefit associated with the gospel. That is, they would not have received salvation.

The Christian message demands its hearers to take a stand for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, not in some ambiguous or metaphorical sense, but as actual events in history. The Christian faith is not first to be taken as a message for ethical reformation or social progress, but the ethical is founded on the historical – creation, fall, and redemption. Nevertheless, contrary to some who are eager to preserve this historical aspect of the faith, it is a mistake to think that the ultimate foundation of the Christian faith is historical. It is not, because the historical itself is founded on God's eternal existence and decree. In any case, it is futile to merely imitate the ethical aspect of Christianity. There is no salvation in this. The basis of the Christian faith is the eternal, which effected the historical, and which is the foundation for the ethical and social. There is salvation only in this understanding of the gospel.

## 16. Logic and Resurrection

**But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. (1 Corinthians 15:12-15)**

Logic, or reason, is intrinsic to the nature of God. It characterizes the way he thinks, and it is built-in to everything that he does. Man is made in the image of God, and an essential aspect of this image is the ability to reason, or to think according to the laws of logic.

Since the Bible is the Holy Spirit's own writing, it naturally exhibits perfect logic, perfect rationality. Wicked men think that they should attack the Bible or stand in judgment over it with logic, but this reverses the proper order. They ought to learn logic from it. Then, some Christians think that they honor the Scripture when they claim that it transcends logic. However, logic is intrinsic to God, and it cannot be transcended anymore than God himself can be transcended. Or, some say that the doctrines of the faith are beyond "human reason." But there is no such thing as human reason. All reason is God's reason, and we inherited reason from God. One either follows God's way of thinking, and thus follows reason, or he is not thinking according to reason at all.

There is confusion in the use of the word because people often burden it with meanings additional to the idea of bare logic, and these meanings often vary when the word is used by different people. For example, if you reject the reliability of sensations, many people would complain that you reject reason itself. However, it is impossible to produce a rational proof to support the principle of the reliability of sensations, or to support the reliability of any instance of sensation. This reliability is assumed by force contrary to reason. Then, if you reject the scientific method as a way to discover truth, people are even more certain that you reject reason. But the scientific method assumes the reliability of sensations without any proof and without any evidence. It depends on induction, which is by definition illogical, since the conclusion never necessarily follows from the premises. Moreover, the process of experimentation that is so integral to the scientific enterprise is merely a repeated use of the fallacy of asserting the consequent. Science is said to be rational only by agreement among men, who wish to think that it is rational. But under logical analysis, it seems that there is hardly a worse way to discover anything about reality.

In other words, people are confused about the idea of reason because they have loaded it with different assumptions that are in fact supposed to be either axioms for the right use of reason or the conclusions derived from the right use of reason. These assumptions are



not supposed to be built-in to the idea of reason itself. God's revelation is indeed beyond the many silly inventions that men have associated with reason. This does not mean that revelation is beyond reason or "human reason"; rather, it is better to separate from the idea of reason what does not belong with it in the first place. Thus revelation is wholly in harmony with reason, but it is beyond and hostile to human speculation.

Men make things up in their science and philosophy. Let us not blame reason for it. Rather, when we refer to reason in a way that loads it with principles and assumptions, let us load it with God's principles and assumptions. When we engage unbelievers, then, reason means bare logic. But in the more restricted settings of theology and preaching, where the source of truth has been settled so that we may load the word with meaning, there is no difference between reason and revelation. There is no conflict between faith and reason, because faith *is* reason – faith is only a religious word for rationality. And Jesus Christ himself is reason personified. He is Reason himself.

Paul reasons with the Corinthians about the resurrection. He applies logic to the supernatural, to Christ, to his ministry, and to faith and salvation. The things of God are not beyond logic; rather, the use of logic is the only way to process, understand, and defend the things of God. He says that if there is no resurrection as a matter of principle, and if resurrection itself is an impossibility, then Christ himself was not raised. And since so much depends on the resurrection of Christ, if it did not happen, then the Christian faith itself is useless and vain. On the other hand, if Christ was raised from the dead, then resurrection is possible, and then there is hope and salvation.

Elsewhere Paul says, "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?" (Acts 26:8). Resurrection and the supernatural in general are not beyond logic or reason. In fact, if we were to think logically, it would make no sense to say that resurrection is impossible or that God would not raise the dead. The assumption that something like this is impossible is unjustified. It is an invented principle. Nothing about resurrection is unreasonable or impossible. And Christ has indeed been raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and in harmony with the eyewitnesses that Paul enumerates, whose witness the apostle authenticates by the inspiration of the Spirit.

## **17. Christ the Firstfruits**

**For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.**

**But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. (1 Corinthians 15:16-23)**

Paul writes in another place, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25). Jesus Christ came to save us, his chosen people, whom God had conceived and selected in eternity, even before the creation of the world. Just as Adam represented humanity and plunged all men and women into sin, Jesus represented us and identified with us as he suffered the punishment pronounced against us. He endured the wrath of God on our behalf, and there remains no condemnation against us. And he was our head and champion when God raised him from the dead – vindicated and declared righteous.

The Christian faith brings the good news that our sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ. This faith is not just a vague attitude, but a definite and detailed view about history and reality, since it involves an understanding regarding his person and his works. He was the sinless and perfect incarnation of deity. By his death, he paid the penalty of our sins, and by his resurrection, he secured for us full acquittal and perfect righteousness before the throne of heaven. If there is no such thing as resurrection, then Christ was never raised from the dead, and if he was never raised from the dead, then he did not secure for us justification before God, and as Paul concludes, then "you are still in your sins."

But the apostle is careful to add, "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead." This was predicted by the prophets, whose words were claimed and taught by Christ, and whose fulfillment was witnessed by more than five hundred men. These things were not done in a corner – they were public deeds and events that were in turn proclaimed and applied by the apostle's public preaching. The religious establishment opposed the message because of their unbelief and jealousy, but they were unable to refute the resurrection. And here, not too many years after the event, Paul openly refers to the witnesses and the fact that many of them were still living, so that they could be located and interviewed. The witnesses, including the apostles, refused to recant even in the face of death.

Since the gospel promises the forgiveness of sins and justification before God, and since this is possible only due to the death and resurrection of Christ – here the emphasis is on the resurrection, which of course presupposes death – and since the resurrection indeed happened, this means that a message that neglects or denies the resurrection of Christ is not the gospel, and accordingly, anyone who refuses to believe that it happened has not believed the gospel, and he is still in his sins. The wrath of God remains upon him.

If Christ was not raised, then "you are still in your sins." Paul does not allow any alternative. He does not say, "If Christ was not raised, then you are still in your sins, unless..." – there is no "unless." If Christ was not raised, then *everybody* burns in hell. But Christ was raised. Then, since the only way to benefit from Christ is to believe in him, this means that there is no salvation in non-Christian religions. All non-Christians, whether they regard themselves as religious or not, are still in their sins. It is not enough to affirm just any religion. It is not enough to claim to be a Christian. To escape hellfire, a person must believe in the resurrection of Christ, that it really happened, and that it means justification for those who rely on him.

Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection – that is, the first of many. We know what will happen to us by learning about what happened to him. And we have confidence that we will be raised to a glorious and heavenly life not because we are good people or even excellent believers, but because we have confidence that he has experienced this and he will cause us to follow in his footsteps.

He told his disciples, "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you." The theology of free will paints the picture that we will barge before the gates of heaven, stick our thumbs at the Christ who follows behind us, and say, "He's with me." But faith, although both wise and good, is not a sign of our inherent good sense and character, that we should choose Christ to save us. You can say to God all you want, "I chose him! He's with me!" And he will ask, "But who are you?" Faith is, instead, a product and evidence of divine grace, that God has chosen to save us by Jesus Christ. He is the one who brings us before the gates of heaven and declares, "Let them in – they're with me."

Jesus is the firstfruits. He leads the way and brings us into life and glory. God knows him and accepts him, and because of this, he knows us and accepts us. It is as if the Father says to him, "Your friends are my friends. Your people are my people. They are welcome here because of you."

## **18. Anchored in Heavenly Things**

**Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58)**

An earlier verse states, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Corinthians 15:19). If Jesus Christ was not raised, and if there is no resurrection, then our faith is in vain. If there is no resurrection, then there is no salvation, and there is no truth or permanence in our religion.

We ought to note that Paul is not depending on a pragmatic argument when it comes to the fact of the resurrection. There is a common mistake that Christians make in debate. They say, for example, "If there is no God to establish an absolute ethical standard, then all things are permissible, even child molestation and genocide." Some non-Christians may balk at this, but this argument does not demonstrate that there is an absolute ethical standard, and sets itself up for a simple rebuff of "So what?" Although all is not lost by this point, this kind of argument carries insufficient force and invites unnecessary trouble. We should not say that there is a God because murder is wrong; rather, we should say that murder is wrong because there is a God who says so.

Paul has already stated that the Christ was raised from the dead "according to the Scriptures." Revelation is the foundation of his doctrine. The resurrection was predicted by the prophets, confirmed by Christ, and then witnessed by his disciples, once to more than five hundred people at the same time (v. 1-11). After this the apostle does not use a pragmatic argument to prove the resurrection. Rather, by saying that faith is in vain if the resurrection had not happened, Paul exposes the absurdity in claiming to believe the gospel, claiming to be a Christian, and in rejecting the resurrection at the same time (v. 12-19). If a person rejects the resurrection, then he cannot claim that he believes the gospel, because the gospel says that Christ was raised from the dead. He cannot claim to be a Christian, because a Christian is one who believes that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures. He cannot claim to have any hope, because the hope of the gospel rests on the resurrection of Christ.

Then in verse 58, Paul reverses the thought of verse 19 and closes the topic with a positive application. This life is full of value and meaning, and our work is not in vain, because Jesus has indeed been raised from the dead, and because his people will also be raised to heavenly life, with a body like unto his glorified frame. "If only for this life we have hope in Christ," then there is no hope at all, because even the hope that we think we have would be false. On the other hand, on the basis of the resurrection, the apostle affirms value for the present life. Our hope begins in this life and continues to the next,

but there is hope now because there is a later. That is, hope and value in this life are anchored not in the present but in the future, in the fact that there is a future.

Unlike evolutionists and materialists, Christians know to think ahead. We look forward, and if there is nothing there, then we realize that nothing is worthwhile now. The propagation of the species is not enough if the individual cannot survive and if the species is going to eventually perish. Nothing has inherent value and present meaning if there is no future. Non-Christians usually lack such wisdom. They grit their teeth and trudge forward anyway, toward nowhere, toward nothing. This is not courage but foolishness. There is no reason for love, for valor, or for any effort to do anything. "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'" (v. 32). Those unbelievers who think ahead a little do not like what they see, and so they commit suicide.

It is evident that a focus on the next life, the resurrection life, does not deflate our motivation for making the best of this life. In fact, such a focus is the only proper foundation for present motivation, since it is on this basis that Paul writes, "you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." He distinguishes between the present and future, the natural and the spiritual, and teaches us to focus on the heavenly things, the things of God and not the things of men. Thus he says, "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). And in another place, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:2).

There are those who worry that this heavenly perspective can be pushed too far and result in the neglect of our present responsibilities and an illegitimate disdain for the things of this life. Their misguided attempt to provide a corrective has produce some destructive doctrines and interpretations. For example, one writer alleges that Colossians 3:2 refers not to a spatial contrast between the earthly and the heavenly but an ethical contrast instead. But this interpretation ends in heresy because the previous verse states that "Christ is seated at the right hand of God." Thus his ethical interpretation is at least an indirect denial of the ascension of Jesus Christ. Paul refers to a spatial relationship, and the ethical is only an implication of the spatial.

Another motive for the concern with "excessive" heaven-mindedness appears to be the justification of activities, relationships, policies, and desires that some individuals wish to pursue. The Bible indeed says, "For everything God created is good" (1 Timothy 4:4), but there Paul refers to food and marriage, that nothing is in itself ritually or religiously unclean. Contrary to the way this has been applied, it is not a straightforward endorsement for sports, movies, and capitalism.

Likewise, a favorite verse of theirs is "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). Sometimes it is as if they think that, if you say that you are doing it for the glory of God, then you can pursue pretty much anything you want. Rather than a principle that provides definite guidance and purpose, and even some restrictions, it has become a slogan for "holy" licentiousness.

Read the passage – what does it mean to eat for the glory of God? "But if anyone says to you, 'This has been offered in sacrifice,' then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience' sake – the other man's conscience, I mean, not yours" (10:28-29). To eat for the glory of God means that sometimes you *do not* eat at all, that you *refrain* from eating. The passage does not mean that you can glorify God in every area of life if you will only have a certain attitude; instead, it means that sometimes you must give it up and withdraw. Thus in many instances the teaching would translate into a restriction or a prohibition, and not a license to pursue. Paul makes a similar point in Romans 14: "I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself," but "If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love." To eat for the glory of God often means self-denial, not self-indulgence or enjoyment.

Even if "Everything is permissible," Paul says, "not everything is beneficial." And even if "Everything is permissible," "not everything is constructive" (1 Corinthians 10:23). It is true that "everything God created is good," and some have taken this to mean that all of life is holy, that all activities are holy, and that all vocations are holy, even as holy as the gospel ministry. The Bible never suggests such a thing. But echoing this line of thinking, one writer asserts that because we are all priests in Christ, all occupations are holy. However, no priest can be a holy prostitute, a holy drug dealer, a holy human trafficker, or a holy assassin for hire. This seems rather obvious, but the false doctrine, once it is tenaciously assumed to be biblical, and even a pillar of orthodoxy necessary for Christian engagement with the world, blinds a person to its absurd implications.

The Bible never suggests that an occupation like accounting, although there is nothing inherently sinful or unclean about it, is just as holy as things like prayer and preaching. In fact, all biblical evidence points to the contrary. It is true that we should do all things for the glory of God, including accounting, and painting, and competing in sports, if some of these things are to be done at all. And doing these things for the glory of God sometimes means that we must give them up for more important – and more holy – things, like the ministry of the gospel. The concern is that professional ministers would be set up as an elite company among the believers. Yet the solution is not to banish the handling of the word of God to the level of scrubbing toilets, but to note that since all believers are priests in Christ, all believers are allowed, encouraged, and even required to handle the word of God, and to deal with holy things.

"Everything God created is good," but some things are more spiritual. "Everything God created is good," but some things are more beneficial, more constructive, and more enduring. Even when it comes to food, "everything God created is good," but some items are more nutritious. So even if all things are acceptable, and nothing is unclean in itself, let us pursue the more excellent things, and stop using the goodness of creation as an excuse to pursue selfish ambitions and petty hobbies, to glorify ordinary careers, or to even sanctify evil activities and interests. As a Christian, you can pursue holy and spiritual things whenever you want, but do not call whatever you want holy and spiritual, or even equally holy and spiritual as the gospel ministry, just because you happen to

enjoy it. If you want to do something, just do it, but stop trying to convince the rest of us that you are doing God a favor.

If the religious establishment withholds the Bible from the believers, the solution is not to assert that all books are equally holy, and that believers should read whatever is available to them without worry or jealousy – any book that divine providence arranges for you will do. This way of thinking is entirely wrongheaded, but it is not that different from the remedy that has been proposed. Instead, the proper solution is to declare that all believers are permitted to read this uniquely holy book. Books are not unclean in themselves, but there is one Book that is more holy than any other. Likewise, foods and hobbies and vocations may not be unclean in themselves, but there are things that are more important, more holy, and more spiritual than others, and doing some things for the glory of God sometimes means to suspend them, so that we may give place to the greater things.

Thus the problems of the elite clergy, the neglect of present responsibilities, and the denial of the goodness of the creation have been attacked from the wrong angle. Paul's own teaching does not produce these effects. Rather than inventing something that the Bible does not teach as a remedy, we only need to reinforce the original teaching. That is, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we know that the resurrection of the saints will follow, and this instills value and meaning to our present life, because we know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain.

## 19. Triumphalism and Defeatism

**But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. (2 Corinthians 2:14)**

Christian preaching must always carry a sound of triumph. The gospel message is a declaration of God's victory through Jesus Christ over all his enemies – demons, unbelievers, sin, decay, and death.

Some are worried about a theology of "triumphalism." There are several uses for the word, so we need to specify the intended meaning. Here we refer to the view that, through faith in the work of Christ, a believer should expect to live his life free from all difficulties and oppositions, or if he does encounter them, should expect to completely conquer them on every occasion.

Such a view is rather rare – I can only assume that it exists, but I have never come across it myself. Although it has been attributed to certain charismatic sects, at least in my own exposure to the controversy, it has been a caricature in every instance, even if the caricature is not without some basis. Those teachers that have come under the most attacks from traditional and evangelical circles, have never taught triumphalism in the sense stated above (although because they tend to be imprecise, careless, and inconsistent, at times they indeed seem to teach it, and they must assume part of the blame for being misrepresented). They do not teach that the Christian no longer encounters problems in this life. Rather, they teach that a Christian, on the basis of the work of Christ, should *in principle* expect to conquer all the problems that they face. Some would think that persisting problems signal a lack of faith, or a lack of love or holiness, although some also attribute this to divine sovereignty. Those who disagree could oppose them on this point, but let them not attack a straw man.

According to its critics, the trouble with triumphalism is that it offers believers false hope, and the failure to attain the promised results then leads to false guilt. This danger is real when a theology does not note the so-called "already vs. not yet" distinction in God's promises. To illustrate, he has promised me a resurrection body with enhanced features and abilities, and that is immune to damage and death. The promise is mine now, but the fulfillment comes later, and regardless of the strength of my faith, there is nothing that I can do to immediately attain it. A teaching that insists I should attain something that is not meant for this age would place an unreasonable burden on me.

That said, this danger is often exaggerated because of the critics' own unbelief, and because they speak from a position that is on the other extreme – a position of defeatism. A doctrine of victory is thus construed as a denial of reality, when the teaching may simply be that the power of Christ enables us to overcome suffering, or that if we must



endure it, to do it with a smile or even a shout of joy. Many Christian thinkers are baffled by this. They contend that this life is a time of trials, and the promise of victory through faith constitutes false hope. Failure then seems to reflect a lack of faith, and thus produces false guilt. But Jesus repeatedly said to his followers, "Where is your faith?" The truth is that even if continual suffering does not indicate a lack of faith, a depressed and defeated spirit certainly does. Such a one ought to feel a measure of guilt, and he should repent and improve.

The victory that we preach is first God's victory, not our personal success. God has fulfilled his promises and predictions, and he has overcome his oppositions through Jesus Christ. It is impossible to declare this with too much triumph in our voice or too much relish in our attitude. There is no such danger. Then, if we are joined to Christ, his victory must have application in our lives. We benefit from his victory. We enjoy actual effects from it. Otherwise, we are not truly joined to him, and our faith is a sham. Much more widespread and ingrained than triumphalism – it is practically universal – the theology of defeatism pays lip service to the victory of the gospel, but in all its pretense to humility and compassion, it desperately tries to hide an evil heart of unbelief.

Triumphalism, with all its faults, is often a reaction to this spirit of unbelief, because defeatism paints such a different picture than the one we perceive in the Scripture. There is no need to adopt either extreme. Christians indeed continue to face problems and oppositions in this world, and sometimes we must continue to endure. And it is indeed necessary to distinguish between the "already" and the "not yet" of the gospel promises. Nevertheless, God has already "put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (1:22). The Spirit himself is no weakling, and the gift is not merely a symbolic gesture. The gospel gives us a taste of "the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age" (Hebrews 6:5), even in the here and now.

The background of Paul's triumphant sound is not ease and comfort, but distress far beyond his own ability to endure (1:8-11). He does not deny the present reality, but still he declares the victory that God has attained through Jesus Christ, and that believers now enjoy. In contrast, many sound the note of defeat even without much suffering. They ought to be ashamed. They ought to be burdened with guilt. They have too little hope to criticize others for having too much. It is not farfetched to think that the Lord would say to them what he said to his generation: "How long must I be with you? How long must I put up with you? Men, where is your faith?" Triumphalism makes us delusional dreamers. Defeatism makes us pathetic losers. True faith in the victory of Jesus Christ makes us hopeful and realistic winners in this life, and in the life to come.

## 20. The Aroma of Christ

**But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God. (2 Corinthians 2:14-17)**

The ministry of the gospel is a work of God. First through the apostles, and then through the rest of us, he spreads everywhere the knowledge about himself and his Son, Jesus Christ. This knowledge is likened to a fragrance. And because it is propagated by his people, we are also likened to the aroma of Christ. The message and its messengers stand in close relation, and regarded either with fondness or disdain.

The same aroma is perceived differently by those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

To those who are destined for salvation, that is, to those of us who believe, the gospel exudes a most attractive and pleasing scent. We are drawn to God and the Lord Jesus Christ. We are mesmerized by the knowledge about him. We acknowledge the Scripture as the publication of his very words. We delight in its every page and cheer every sentence in hearty approval. We perceive its wisdom and sense its gravity.

But to those who are destined for damnation, or those who would persist in unbelief and thus perish, this Christian religion comes as a most repulsive stench. What a sickening odor! What an ominous scent! Usually, they cannot be more impressed with their own magnanimity and open-mindedness, but this...they have no tolerance for it. And no wonder – the gospel is a message of life to those who believe, but it is a death sentence to those who refuse.

So the same aroma – the same Christ, the same gospel – means two opposite verdicts upon men and incites two opposite reactions from them. This is the way it ought to be. Although the Christian faith is indeed good news in that it saves sinners by Jesus Christ, it is not regarded as such by those who refuse to accept it, because there are serious intellectual and ethical defects in them, and because God has not initiated a radical change that would reverse this condition.

More concerned with appearance than with substance, with effect than with truth, some have tried to make the gospel pleasant to the reprobates. However, in order to do this they had to temper with the formula. The fragrance is no longer the aroma of Christ, but a concoction manufactured by men to lure those who care nothing for the knowledge of

God and of his Son. Now the elect finds the smell repugnant to their nostrils. These are not true ambassadors of Christ, but they peddle the word of God for profit, for respect, and for status. They separate and repackage the ingredients of the gospel to satisfy men's lusts and to cater to their every whim. Now the Christian faith is not about God, sin, and salvation, but about man's comfort and welfare, and the attainment of his selfish dreams.

Make no mistake about it: for those of us who believe, the gospel indeed fulfills our dreams – we dream that God's glory would fill all things and subdue all things, that every knee would bow at the name of Jesus Christ, and that we should worship him forever. But this is a nightmare to the reprobates. Think about this the other way. What will it take for a non-Christian to make his worldview appeal to me? He will have to change it so much that it becomes Christianity. And this means that he can no longer be a Christian, or I will not really be in agreement with him. As a Christian, I will never be attracted to something that is of unbelief, that is of the anti-Christ.

Likewise, a non-Christian in himself will never love the Christian faith unless it is changed to something that is entirely different from the original, which is to say that it is no longer the Christian faith. But this is what some have done in order to make the message appetizing to unbelievers, and in doing so they have ceased to preach the gospel. Now they use words and expressions from Scripture to promote the psychology and philosophy of men. There is no salvation in this. The message must not be altered; rather, God must change the non-Christian, to correct the defects in him. Since the non-Christian is defective through and through, God must change so much about him that the event is said to be a new birth. This is regeneration, or what it means to be born again.

## **21. The God of All Comfort**

**Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)**

God is not just a philosophical principle or a necessary postulate for an intellectual system. We must never reduce him to this. He is an active person and an ever-present power. He produces concrete effects in our beings and in our lives. He is ready to comfort, to teach, and to strengthen us. And as we receive from him, we turn to comfort, to teach, and to strengthen others. Each Christian can directly approach God and receive from him, and then transmit his grace to build up the church. As Paul writes, "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church" (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Paul and his companions received God's comfort not for some minor trauma. He says that the things they faced were beyond their ability to endure, so that they despaired even of life. "But," he explains, "this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead." Elsewhere he notes that the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. Of course the kingdom is in word in the sense that it is associated with intelligible doctrines, but he means that the kingdom is not just talk – it is backed by a power that defies death and despair. The gospel comes with invincible hope and comfort.

The apostle did not receive help from man's counsel, which espouses a false view of the world, a distorted version of reality. But God tells us his interpretation of the world and of our circumstances, and grants us an understanding of his plan and our place in it. Man sustains himself by imagining that he possesses limitless potential, but God teaches us to trust in his resurrection power. God's Spirit applies his word in our hearts; he produces a stability in our thoughts and feelings, and he cures our hurts and fears. Non-Christians love the world, but the world drives them insane. They attempt to cure themselves, but their program fails, and they drown in useless counsel, medicine, alcohol, and destructive habits and distractions.

God not only comforts us, but he teaches us and empowers us to comfort others, to lift them up from their fear, pain, and sadness, and to help them become productive citizens of his kingdom. In Christ, you do not face troubles in vain. Learn to receive from God, fight for victory by his power, and then help someone else.

## 22. Competence in Ministry

**Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Corinthians 3:4-6)**

The gospel ministry is like Christ's victorious parade before the world (2:14). By it God spreads the knowledge of his Son like a fragrance. It is a most attractive aroma to those who believe, but a stench of death to those who reject the message. The preaching of the gospel, therefore, is a momentous event. Nevertheless, the ministry is not exhausted by preaching, but it is a lifestyle that strives to advance the gospel in every place and establish the kingdom of heaven in every heart.

Although all Christians are to participate in this, it is clearly an occupation unlike any other. As Paul says, "Who is equal to such a task?" The answer is that no one is equal to such a task in himself, but a believer can become competent in the ministry of the gospel when God teaches him and enables him. Our passage offers the following points to guide our thinking.

Competence is relevant. Some people assume that spiritual operations are only ethical, so that the essential qualities of God's servant consist of holiness, sincerity, zealousness, and such things. Although these are crucial, without which a person should be barred from ministry, competence is also a necessary quality, and it is not unspiritual to consider it. A competent minister performs his work with excellence, and along with a life of holiness and an attitude of charity, he brings honor to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Competence is demonstrated by divine power, not human approval. God endorses a person and his work by the stamp of the Holy Spirit. One of the most difficult things to do in the ministry is to convince believers to stop thinking like the world. One reason is that they are still in love with the world and hold on to everything about it with a superhuman obstinacy. The other reason is that the same is true with most ministers, so that there are very few who know to speak up about this.

Paul writes, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). This applies to competence in ministry. To the world, competence does not come from divine endowment but institutional training. It is seen not in one's life and work, but on a diploma. It thinks that it is not about what you know, but who you know. And it is not about how much you have studied, but where you studied. Admittedly, even some unbelievers have not thoroughly adopted this way of thinking. But it is too common among believers. The Bible does not teach this; they learned it from the world.

When this kind of thinking is imported from non-Christian society into Christian culture, the product is like the murderous hypocrisy of the incompetent Pharisees. They had all the human credentials and authorizations, but these have nothing to do with God and with truth – they were grounded on an agreement to praise one another. Then, when a man showed up to expose them, the Pharisees killed him. I will call you the King of Neptune – and make you a certificate to show it off – if you will call me the Master of Jupiter. This is how the world operates, and the church follows its example. But Neptune is not yours unless God gives it to you. My certificate means nothing, even if you passed some kind of test I made up to earn it. You have not passed God's test.

The Corinthians were troubled by false teachers and apostles, who apparently tried to undermine Paul by criticizing him from a worldly point of view. They probably said that Paul was not suave enough. He lacked charisma, presence, and strength. And he did not have the proper letters of recommendation. Even when it comes to human approval, we set our sights too low. A nod from grumpy Elijah is more valuable than any seminary degree or ordination certificate, or a letter of endorsement from some celebrity pastor. Elijah faced hundreds of false prophets and handled the very powers of heaven, while doctor so-and-so cowers before his mother-in-law in the name of Christian love. When will we stop coveting worthless praise? And even Elijah had his faults.

In any case, Paul teaches the Corinthians to stop judging according to the world's standards. He indeed has a letter of recommendation – the Corinthian converts are his letter from Christ. It was not written with ink but with the Spirit of God, and not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (3:3). Although the Corinthians have much room for improvement, the apostle's ministry effected genuine and permanent change in them, something that could not be manufactured by human power. This letter does not come from human institution or authority, nor is it subject to man's jurisdiction. Man has no power to produce it or to nullify it. The Holy Spirit himself authorized it. He did it according to his own will, for no one could have forced his hand. And no one could write it down or print it out – it was written on human hearts by divine power.

Competence is an endowment from God. Paul demonstrates true competence in ministry, but the source of this competence is not in himself. He explains, "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God." Again, "our competence comes from God." The defining factor is always something beyond man's contribution. Even if God uses men to confer this competence, no human training or endorsement can confer the heavenly power and effect that the gospel ministry requires. God uses men to preach the gospel, but no one believes it unless the Holy Spirit directly acts in the hearts of those who hear the message. Conversion comes from God. Likewise, in the training and improvement of ministers of the gospel, there is often – not always – some human involvement, but no man can make another man able in spiritual things. Competence comes from God.

This is a recurring theme in Paul's letter. He wants to teach his readers a new way of thinking, one that is according to the powers of heaven and not the standards of the

world. Thus he writes earlier, "Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (1:9). Then in 4:7, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." And there is the familiar passage, "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" (12:9-10).

He is aware of how the world thinks: "We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise" (10:12). This criticism is important because it is still the way Christians think and the way they judge competence in themselves and in others. Paul would say to them, "You are looking only on the surface of things" (10:7). This is what he means when he writes, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (10:3-4). He is not referring to spiritual weapons in some mystical sense, but he is making a contrast against "the standards of this world" (v. 2). Ironically, believers often use the standards of this world to evaluate competence in using spiritual weapons! The apostle pushes for a bigger shift in our thinking.

Competence is a basis for confidence. It is possible for a Christian to know that he is competent and to acknowledge it. There is nothing wrong if he is accurate and realistic about his abilities. Humility does not consist in denying competence, but in admitting that it comes from God and that other people can also possess it by his grace.

There are those who think that any acknowledgment of competence must stem from pride, and that the magnitude of arrogance is in direct proportion to the magnitude of the claim. However, this suggests that they associate competence only with themselves, that they think we ourselves are always the source of our own competence, so that to acknowledge competence is always to praise ourselves. Thus in reality, it is their attitude that stems from arrogance and self-centeredness. This is what the false teachers and false apostles do as they are referred to in Paul's letter. They measure themselves by themselves, and then they boast about themselves.

Those who boast about themselves often put up an appearance of humility. Since their confidence is based on their own opinion about themselves, and since even the most deluded egomaniac realizes that he has limits, these people acknowledge their limits. But what they think they have, they think they have because of themselves. What happens when someone more confident appears? They think that it must be because he thinks he has more in himself and because of himself. Thus in this way of thinking, a lack of confidence becomes a sign of humility, and boldness becomes a sign of arrogance. Is it not possible for someone to be confident because he relies on God's limitless resources and his grace to help in time of need? But they do not think like this, because they operate by the world's standards, and God has too little room in their thoughts.

There is a proper boasting that amounts to an act of worship and ministry, and that is to boast about the power and the grace of Jesus Christ, not apart from us, but in us and for us. This way of thinking applies to the whole of theology, from justification by faith to competence in ministry. We are nothing in ourselves, but we are not left by ourselves. Jesus Christ is with us by his Spirit. He makes us competent ministers of the new covenant. This honors the exceeding precious promises of the gospel, and it saves us from pride and false humility.



## 23. Plain and Honest Preaching

**But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. (2 Corinthians 4:2, ESV)**

The motive, message, and method of preaching should never be shrouded in mystery. There are those who equate complexity and ambiguity with profundity. Preaching is telling people about all that God has revealed in the Christian faith, that is, in the Bible. And nothing about this needs to be confusing. As Paul reminds the Corinthians, "We do not write you anything you cannot read or understand" (1:13).

Indeed, Peter notes that some things in Paul's letters are hard to understand, but he says "some things," not most things or all things, and he says "hard to understand," and not impossible to understand. He writes that "ignorant and unstable" people distort them to their own destruction. Since Christians do not need to be ignorant and unstable, and since Christians have received the same Holy Spirit that the apostles received, it is possible for a believer to, at least in principle, grasp all that the Scripture teaches. And there is no reason why our preaching should obscure the plain truth of divine revelation.

True Christian preaching, therefore, ought to be honest, clear, and easy to understand. This is the foundation to any legitimate homiletic theory. And by this conception of preaching, every believer should be able to communicate the gospel to his neighbors. There are indeed tactics that could manipulate the audience or exploit the personalities and backgrounds of the hearers so that one may gain influence over them. But once there is any element of deception, the whole exercise is no longer working toward its proper goal.

We do not want people to just call themselves Christians – that is not what we are after at all; rather, we want people to be changed in their hearts, to believe something new and wonderful, and to *become* Christians, to call themselves such because they are such. We wish to present to the Lord Jesus genuine and intelligent disciples, people who understand the Christian faith and believe that it is true, and that it is the only way to salvation and the only way to live.

For the same reason, we reject violence as a means to make disciples or to silence our opponents. This is not because violence is wrong in itself. There is some confusion about this that muddies many discussions on religion and society. Now and then Christians are challenged by their opponents regarding the apparent atrocities that the Old Testament saints committed against other nations. Why do Christians endorse this behavior in the ancient people, and if they do endorse it, why do they say it is unacceptable for the propagation of the gospel?

If Christians take up the groundless assumption that violence is wrong in itself, then they leave themselves open to all kinds of criticisms against the Old Testament saints, against the death penalty, against self-defense, against corporal punishment in parenting, and so on. But all criticisms against the Christian faith are defective, and this one is no exception. God told the Old Testament saints to kill the people so they can seize the promised land, and not to spread their faith. It was performed by a nation at war with other nations, and not by the church as a spiritual entity or by individual believers acting on their own. God had decided to expel the idol-worshiping heathens – their false religions were the true atrocities – and he fulfilled his promise concerning the land by granting victory to Israel. Later, God expelled the Jews themselves, and now Christians are God's people, and we do not fight for a land because our kingdom is spiritual.

The violence of the Old Testament saints is in this sense unrelated to the Christian agenda. Likewise, when we execute a criminal, it is not an attempt to convert his soul by that act, as if we wish to threaten him into the faith. It is a separate issue from gospel preaching. We want people to believe in their hearts, and not merely put on an appearance. Thus the use of violence is not only against God's command, but it is also powerless to obtain the result that we seek. The same applies to the use of tricks and gimmicks, flatteries and appeals to men's sinful desires. Either you want the wrong thing, or you will not get what you want by any other method than plain speech.

We set forth the message of the gospel as a matter of truth and error, and of righteousness and wickedness. Thus we drive it into men's minds that this is about right and wrong. We appeal to their conscience, and not to their wallets, or their appetites and sensuous desires. The propagation of the gospel is not a matter of oratory finesse, of politic maneuvering, of cultural relevance or social standing. It is a plain expression of truth that we deliver before God and toward men – unadulterated with ambition and unencumbered with human philosophy. This work is open to all believers. Any Christian can tell someone about the Lord Jesus Christ in strong and honest language, and expect the Holy Spirit to come in great power and conviction.

## **24. We Preach Not Ourselves**

**For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. (2 Corinthians 4:5)**

There is a sense in which we should never be modest in our preaching. Certainly we should not make great claims about ourselves, but we should not preach ourselves in the first place. In the proclamation of the gospel, we advance Jesus Christ as the one worthy of trust and worship. We declare Jesus Christ as supreme. And if we preach him and not ourselves, what is there to be modest about? We praise him without restraint, and without fear of exaggeration.

There is a place for humility, and it is in the fact that we draw attention to him and away from ourselves. This humility is invisible, because whenever it is present and succeeds, it directs the focus to the Lord. A constant self-abasement that everyone cannot help but notice signals that the person has already failed. True humility translates into an aggressiveness in our preaching, because if our preaching is faithful to its subject, it will reflect the quality of what is preached. So when we talk about Jesus Christ, we must be fearfully bold and forceful.

Even though we are weak in ourselves, and at times we approach the task with fear and trembling, in him we are strong, and in our speech we exemplify his strength and his truth. Thus with a firm tone and steady voice, we make the grandest boasts. We proclaim Jesus Christ with an indomitable spirit, not fueled by confidence in ourselves, but by our confidence in him. He is worthy to be declared as Lord of All, and he lives up to the claims that we make about him.

In the ministry of the gospel, we preach Jesus Christ as Lord, but we make ourselves the servants of those who hear us. There are some false notions as to what it means to be servants to those who receive our ministry. They stem from a failure to distinguish between being servants of men and being servants of God. "Servant" can refer to two very different things. Jesus made himself a servant of men – he said he came to serve and not to be served – but he never allowed men to control him. He served men, but he did not obey men. He served men in the sense that he did what was good for them, but he did this only under the Father's direction, often even against men's wishes.

A father hires a tutor to educate his child, thus the tutor works hard for the child's benefit, but the child has no authority to design the schedule and the curriculum of the lessons. Rather, the child must cooperate with the tutor or face the father's displeasure. Likewise, when we preach the gospel, we become servants of those who hear us in the sense that we work hard for their benefit, even the salvation of their souls. But even though we are their servants, they are not our masters. We work for their benefit under the Lord's direction. He is the one who dictates our message, our method, and our movements. Thus the

authority of the preacher is not nullified but rather established by his role as a servant to men under the command of Jesus Christ.

Some have misapplied the idea of servanthood to business, parenting, and leadership in general, with ridiculous consequences. Does the biblical teaching imply that we must be gentle and accommodating? No. Does it mean that we must listen to people's input? Although in many cases it is good to receive input, this does not come from the idea of being a servant to men. Servanthood does not mean some of the things that people think it means. In any case, it does mean that we must work hard for the benefit of others, and this often entails an exercise of strong commanding power, even against the desires and suggestions of those that we serve. We are the servants of all men, but only Jesus Christ is our master. The failure to grasp this simple distinction has produced a number of unbiblical and often grotesque results.

## 25. The Blindness of Unbelievers

**And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age 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....For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:3-4, 6)**

Although the gospel centers on the salvation of sinners by Jesus Christ, it includes and presupposes all the doctrines that make up the Christian faith, so that "the gospel" and "the Christian faith" do not mean very different things. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2). This has been taken as a repudiation of theology, but the internal evidence would require us to see this as a misinterpretation. In 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle indicates that the gospel that he preached included the resurrection of Christ, but he makes no mention of it in 2:2. This means that the expression "Jesus Christ and him crucified" is not intended to be inclusive of all that he preached, but rather representative of what he preached.

In 1 Corinthians 1 and 2, Paul contrasts the wisdom of man and the wisdom of God, and also human eloquence and divine power. He asserts that he did not bring a mixture of human wisdom and divine wisdom to the Corinthians, but he kept his message pure, and free from human science and philosophy. His preaching was not a display of his academic training and rhetorical prowess; instead, he waited on God's sovereign power, so that the outcome became a matter of the demonstration of the Spirit. Thus when he writes that he resolved to know nothing except "Jesus Christ and him crucified," he means that he preached only what was in the Christian faith, and included nothing from human learning and speculation.

This serves as a rebuke to those who incorporate science and philosophy in their preaching, especially not as something incidental and trivial. It is not uncommon for Christian leaders to borrow heavily from psychology, sociology, the natural sciences, and other foreign disciplines in their attempts to apply the gospel to men and women. The apostolic principle is that extra-biblical principles are unnecessary for the Christian ministry and in the preaching of the gospel. Those who say otherwise betray a sinful reliance on human wisdom and a lack of confidence in divine revelation.

This consideration of 1 Corinthians 2 also serves as a rebuke to the minimalist approach to gospel preaching. Paul resolved to preach nothing other than "Jesus Christ and him crucified," or only what is in the Christian faith, but there is much that is in the Christian faith. At least it includes the resurrection of Christ, and in the same context, he also mentions the resurrection of believers, the second coming, and judgment. To those unfamiliar with the theological background, all the presupposed and related doctrines

must be made explicit. Paul does this in his speech to the Athenians (Acts 17:22-31). There he alludes to the divine attributes, creation, providence, resurrection, judgment, and so on. The doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement are essential to the gospel, and without insisting on justification by faith, the message would not be the gospel at all (Galatians 1:6-9).

Therefore, to preach only "Jesus Christ and him crucified," does not encourage ignorance, since the expression excludes only human wisdom, but includes all that makes up the Christian faith. This means that anyone who preaches the gospel must know the biblical doctrines. This understanding of the gospel is important to our passage because Paul says that the gospel – this gospel that entails so many biblical doctrines, including the divine attributes, creation, providence, the incarnation (thus also the Trinity), the atonement, the resurrection, the second coming, the judgment, and a number of others – is "veiled" to those who perish. The apostle thinks that the biblical doctrines are plainly set forth. Sometimes preachers and theologians suggest that these things are shrouded in a cloud of impenetrable mystery, but according to Paul this places them in the position of unbelievers. For those who have received the Holy Spirit, the biblical doctrines are straightforward, obviously true, and not too difficult to understand.

Non-Christians wish to think that believers run on blind faith. They imagine that, if there is a God at all, he must be hiding in a cave somewhere, waiting for us to discover him. And why is he hiding if he wishes to be known? Christians too often accept this representation and respond with this as their starting point. They agree that God is hiding, that he makes himself obscure, and then they attempt to explain why he does it. But Christians, do you not see him? Is he really hiding from you, and from the rest of the world?

The Bible teaches something else. It says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world" (Psalm 19:1-4). And Paul writes, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:18-20).

The Bible always explains unbelief by saying that there is something defective in the non-Christians. There is something wrong with them. There is nothing wrong with the Christian faith, and there is nothing wrong with Christians. The problem is in the unbelievers. The truth is that we see clearly – not with eyes of flesh, but with the eyes of our intelligence. The non-Christians are the ones who are blind, that is, blind in their minds. They run on blind unbelief. The sun shines everywhere; it is not hiding from anybody. But the blind man cannot see it, because there is a defect in him.

Never be embarrassed when non-Christians refuse to believe the gospel and when they ridicule our faith, but realize that there is something wrong with them and proceed on that basis. Paul writes, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers" (4:4). In other words, non-Christians are supernaturally stupid. No man can make himself or someone else this stupid, so fantastically stupid that he cannot perceive the truth of the Christian faith.

It follows that no mere man can repair someone like this. Such a stupid person needs a supernatural cure, even a miracle from God. Paul likens this to the act of creation, when God commands light to shine in darkness. The non-Christian mind is completely dark – there is no trace of wisdom there, and thus it is impossible for him to generate even a spark of insight by his own ability. But as we preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, God shows mercy to some of our hearers and fills their minds with light. Now they see the Christian faith as obviously and undeniably true, and they perceive Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation. This is true conversion, and the beginning of wisdom.

## **26. God's All-Surpassing Power**

**But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 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. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.**

**It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 4:7-15)**

The Christian faith is simple. There is one God, and the Christian Scripture is the only infallible source of information from him and about him. There it is said that humanity has fallen into a bad state because of transgression, and the only way back is through faith in Jesus Christ, a complete reliance on him who sacrificed himself for his people. God raised him from the dead, and a time is coming when he will also raise us from the dead. Those who have believed on Christ will be raised to enjoy everlasting life, bliss, and fellowship, and those who have failed to believe on Christ, whether because of ignorance or conscious rejection, will be raised to suffer everlasting torture and insanity in hellfire.

Although it is simple, this gospel message wields incalculable power, and power that no non-Christian religion or philosophy can rival or imitate. Its power is seen in our daily lives and relationships. We praise it for its ability to deliver from enslaving powers, from alcoholism to homosexuality. It convinces mothers to spare their own unborn children instead of conspiring with people to murder them. Satan tells them that they have a right to kill their children because they reside in their bodies: "Kill them! Kill them! KILL THEM!" But Jesus Christ tells them that because the children are in their bodies, these mothers have a special obligation to guard and nurture the little ones. Our bodies do not belong to us, but to God. Thus the gospel changes women from murderers to protectors. How can we enumerate its many benefits? It restores marriages broken by selfishness, neglect, and immorality. It ends racial discrimination on the one hand, and on the other it rebukes the victim mentality. It instills a strong work ethic. It admonishes us to appreciate creation as God's handiwork. It lowers crime rates. It defends justice and integrity. It cares for orphans and widows and the sick. It builds up a nation.



Above all, the gospel saves men and women from the wrath of God, from the lake of fire, and from their own depravity and foolishness. It ushers them into the joys of heaven, where love and true worship shall flourish forever. It introduces the light of Jesus Christ into a heart of darkness, and fills it with mercy and compassion. No other message can accomplish this. Man's science and philosophy are powerless to better humanity and to save the soul, and non-Christian religions do not know how to talk about all of this. The Christian faith is not just the greatest force, but it is the only force for good in the world. All things that are righteous and excellent come from the Christian faith, and all things that are wicked, shameful, and disgusting come from non-Christian people and non-Christian ideas.

In God's wisdom, he has entrusted the propagation of the gospel to believing men and women, and he has deposited this treasure in vulnerable vessels, in ordinary containers. As Paul explains, this is "to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." Genuine Christians and faithful ministers of the gospel often face harsh persecutions, setbacks, and apparent failures. Their deficiencies are obvious and their errors are abundant. They are despised and ridiculed, and their good intentions often come to naught. They bleed when they are hurt, and they tire when they overwork. These do not indicate God's disapproval, nor does it suggest that God neglects his own enterprise; rather, he has ordained that gospel messengers should not be transformed into heavenly beings, even as the angels of God – that is, not at this time – so that it remains evident that the power of the Christian faith comes from God, and not our natural talents and resources.

Christians must never stumble over the problems and limitations that they face in the ministry, but they are to adopt the apostle's view of things. He came under dangers and assaults that would have crushed him if not for the faithfulness of God, who delivered him time after time, and sustained him in his troubles. Thus we refuse to be ashamed when we are slandered, persecuted, and brought low; instead, we glory in our weaknesses so that the power of Jesus Christ may become all the more evident. Paul preached the Christian faith not because it made life easy and comfortable for him. He preached it because he believed it, because he knew it to be true and important. Likewise, we also believe, and therefore speak.

## **27. We Walk by Faith, Not by Sight**

**So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.**

**For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened – not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.**

**So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10, ESV)**

The Bible maintains a sharp distinction between the body and the soul. The soul is also referred to as the spirit or the heart of man. This distinction is only one aspect of the ontological divide between matter and spirit. The teaching pervades Scripture and is assumed throughout. Paul lists several facets of this and distinguishes between the external self and the internal self (4:16), the seen and the unseen (4:18), the transient and the eternal (4:18), the earthly tent or home and the heavenly building or house (5:1), the mortal and the immortal (5:4), and so on.

Man is not an essential unity but a dichotomy consisting of a corporeal part and an incorporeal part. Paul likens the body to a tent (5:1) – a man is not the tent, but he lives in a tent. Then he refers to the body as something that can be removed like a piece of clothing (5:4). A disembodied state is possible – he says that we are "naked" between the time we take off "this tent" and the time we put on "our heavenly dwelling." Therefore, a man's identity is associated with his soul and not his body. His corporeal or physical part can be altered and even removed without affecting his true self. Although a man operates in close relation to his body, and in God's plan a disembodied state is only temporary, the body is a non-essential part of his identity and existence.

This results in a simple scheme for prioritization. The spiritual aspect of man is essential to him and receives the preeminence. Paul does not lose heart because "though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day." This would make no sense if the body is essential or if man is a unity. But the apostle means that the spiritual and important aspect of man thrives even as the physical and less important part of him suffers damage and decay. The body is inferior to the soul. Then, the seen is inferior to the unseen (4:18), and the transient inferior to the eternal (4:18). The earthly is inferior to the heavenly (5:1-4), and the mortal is inferior to the immortal (5:4).

Some theologians make the strange claim that this distinction between the non-spiritual and the spiritual, and between the body and the soul, is a tenet of Greek philosophy. Rather, it is said, the Bible affirms an "organic" view of man, in which he is a unity, so that man is not a "ghost in a machine." This is clearly false, and if the distinction is a Greek doctrine, then the scholars should be ashamed for being less biblical than the heathens. The Bible says that a man is like a person in a tent; in fact, considering the body's design and construction, a machine is an apt analogy. And if we are uncomfortable with the word "ghost," changing it to "spirit in a machine" perfects the expression.

In making their case, these theologians appeal to texts that refer to man as a unity. But these do not challenge the dichotomy view, since in language usage it often occurs that a part is put for the whole, or the whole for a part. When I say that Peter's hand was in the cookie jar, I most likely mean that the whole Peter was present as well. And it would be ridiculous to say, "Here comes the police officer with his uniform, his belt, his gun, his shoes, his socks, his hat, and his fingernails." No, I simply say, "Here comes the police officer." Although I probably include his gun as I mention this, I maintain a clear distinction between the officer and his gun. He can pull it out and fire it, or lose it, or put it in a locker and walk away, and all the while he would remain the same person. Regardless of its importance, the gun is non-essential to the man or to his position – he would still be a man and a police officer without his gun.

Thus the fact that the Bible sometimes refers to man as a unity contributes little to the discussion. Rather, for these theologians to establish their case, they must demonstrate that the Bible never distinguishes between the body and the soul, and that in cases where such a distinction is considered, it always denies the dichotomy view. Moreover, they must explain away all the instances where the Bible explicitly distinguishes between the body and the soul whenever such a distinction is needed. In other words, they must renounce the Christian faith.

There is the concern that the biblical teaching becomes a license for neglect or even sinful indulgence. So, supposedly, a main motivation behind the silliness is to encourage holy living and engagement with the world. However, we should not achieve this by inventing a false doctrine to deceive believers. It is the true doctrine that leads to holiness, fruitful ministry, and proper attention to the things of this world. There is no need to dissolve the biblical distinctions between the body and the soul, the non-spiritual and the spiritual, and the earthly and the heavenly.

Far from permitting neglect or detachment, the biblical distinctions provide the foundation for a faithful and fearless ministry. Although our bodies may wither away due to hard work, persecution, and harsh environments, in this life of gospel labor our spirits are renewed day by day. Even if we get weaker on the outside, we grow stronger on the inside. Paul writes, "We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen." How do we look to things that are not seen? Not with the eyes of flesh, but with the eyes of faith, the eyes of our intelligence.

We distinguish between the transient and the eternal, but does this mean that we neglect the former for the latter? No, it means that we can afford to suffer in this transient world, because "this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." The body is like a tent or a piece of clothing. Of course we do not want to be naked, or disembodied, but even death is not that bad, since "if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens," and "We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord...and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." It is because of this that "we are always of good courage."

We are able to engage this world in a faithful and persistent manner precisely because we have understood the biblical distinctions between the body and the soul, the non-spiritual and the spiritual, and the transient and the eternal. Again, there are theologians who want to demolish even a heaven-mindedness so that Christians would direct their attention to this world. This false doctrine is unnecessary. To produce holiness and engagement by stressing our earthly existence and by calling our future hope heaven misplaced is, ironically, to appeal to sinful and self-centered instincts.

The biblical way of thinking is preferred: "So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." We do not have to make this world our home in order to invest in it – the apostle appeals to our Christian instinct to please God "whether we are home or away." Then, the doctrine of judgment is a sufficient basis to promote holiness and engagement in the body, even though the essence of man is the soul.

## 28. The Ministry of Reconciliation

**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men'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. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21)**

What is the most pathetic spectacle you have ever seen? Is it a whimpering animal bleeding to its death? A starving child? Or is it the victim of a raging disease, reduced to mere skin and bones? Perhaps the most pathetic spectacle that I have ever seen is a satisfied and confident non-Christian. His whole life is in conflict with God, and judgment looms over him. Yet, like an imbecile, he laughs, and he skips and hops all over the war zone, not knowing that at any moment an explosion of divine wrath will blow him to smithereens. Meanwhile, sin eats away at his innards as maggots feast on a corpse. Oh, what a foolish and worthless person you are, if you are content to live without Jesus Christ!

How bitter and afraid I was, before I was reconciled to God by Jesus Christ. It was not because I was, naturally speaking, dealt an inferior lot in life; rather, by God's grace I was given a better grasp of reality than the happy infidel. If you understand the depravity of man and the futility of his sinful existence, then God has also given you this perception. A man ought to hate life and fear death at the same time, as long as he is estranged from God. The thief comes to steal and to kill, but Jesus Christ came to give us life, even life in abundance.

There is great conflict between God and the sinner. The unbeliever is oblivious, and an early step in our presentation of the gospel is to tell him about it: "Man, do you know nothing? You are at war with God. The calm that you feel is a lie based on ignorance and guarded by intellectual blindness. You are too stupid to see what is true, even what is plainly before you. Don't you know that, if you continue this way, you will fall into the bottomless pit?"

Then there are those who are openly hostile toward God. They know that they are in a war, and they enjoy every minute of the fight. But they are not any smarter than the others, and perhaps even more stupid. We say to them, "You are fighting God and blaspheming him, but you are the one in the wrong. He is the creator and you are the creature, but you deny him the rights of a maker and the rights of an owner, and you rise up in rebellion against him. You have transgressed his laws, but you are proud of it. You oppose him and harass those who follow him. Yes, right now he is your enemy – he

stands against your view of the world and your way of life. But why would you want him to be your enemy? Don't you know that the devil has blinded your mind, and you are as a pawn in his hands, charging ahead in a fight that will ultimately destroy yourself? You are fighting the wrong person, and you cannot win. Stop being so self-righteous! Your whole life is headed toward the wrong direction."

Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man, and thus the only hope for reconciliation. Since God has always remained perfect in his wisdom and holiness, but it is man that has become depraved through and through, this reconciliation entails a complete transformation of man's nature, so that he becomes a new creation by the power of God. And since God has done no wrong, but it is man that has transgressed the divine command, the reconciliation involves the forgiveness of sins, so that God would no longer count man's sins against him.

Such a reconciliation is not without cost. Sin must be punished, but any meaningful punishment would forever crush the sin-wrecked soul of man, who can never pay the debt that he owes to satisfy divine justice. Therefore, according to God's own design, which he ordained before the creation of the world, he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for the wicked. He was without sin, but for a time he suffered death and rejection as a substitute as if he was a sinner, so that through him perfect righteousness might be imputed to our account.

Therefore, a message that brings assurance before repentance and faith is dangerously misleading. Instead of effecting a reconciliation, it hardens the sinner and aggravates the conflict. Without repentance and faith in Christ, we cannot say, "God loves you and has saved you! I have come to proclaim peace throughout the land and to your soul. There is no more war." No, the war continues, and we must say, "As long as you remain a non-Christian, as long as you run after your idols and religions, or your own beliefs and desires, and as long as you pursue those dreams and ambitions that arise from your wicked heart, you are a spiritual whore, a spiritual slut. But now if you will admit your sins and depend solely on Jesus Christ, then even someone like you will be saved. And as Hosea married Gomer you are one of those for whom he died, and God is forgiving your sins and bringing you back to him now."

God has committed to us this message of reconciliation. What power we have in Jesus Christ! It is a power to produce real and lasting good, a power to build an eternal foundation in people's lives. So many say that they want to make a difference, but their aspirations are infantile. All their projects are trivial and unimportant, and in the long-term entirely insignificant. Only the Christian mandate of converting the nations and educating them in the faith is worth the energy, the money, the sweat and the blood. Any enterprise that is not a natural outgrowth of this gospel mission is really humanity's foolish and rebellious effort to save itself. This will only result in a greater delusion and confirm men in their eternal doom.

## **29. Touch No Unclean Thing**

**Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? 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."**

**"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1)**

The passage is sometimes considered a digression, but it can fit well within the context of the letter. There are those who undermine Paul among the Corinthians with their criticisms of the apostle's doctrines, methods, and personal traits. These constitute an open rebellion against the apostle's authority and authenticity, which in turn amount to rebellion against Christ and the Christian faith. Thus those who stir up trouble as well as those who commit themselves to their cause are regarded as unbelievers.

Later in the letter, Paul writes, "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve" (11:13-15). He compares the false apostles to Satan, and refers to them as the devil's servants. He notes that they will meet an appropriate end and thus implies that they belong to hell, even though these men claim to be Christians, even the apostles of Christ.

So it is not strange for Paul to mention unbelievers in our context, since for believers to align with the false teachers and their supporters would be to yoke themselves to unbelievers. As Paul later adds, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?" (13:5).

Thus one cause for confusion is that interpreters do not expect Paul to call "Christian" false teachers outright unbelievers. Another cause for misunderstanding is that some interpreters restrict the group to idol worshipers. Why does the apostle suddenly talk about idolatry? So this seems to be a digression. However, of the five contrasts that Paul makes, only one refers to idols, and it is not clear that he has in mind idols as such, since he may refer to them only as a natural contrast to the temple of God. Then, Belial represents Satan, and does not refer to idols as such.

Perhaps the error can be explained by careless exegesis. It is expected that scholars constantly make mistakes. But I have not seen a commentary that says this passage refers only to wickedness or to darkness, but everyone who limits its application restricts it to idol worshippers. I suspect that this tendency stems from a reluctance to accept its teaching. To the interpreters, at least those in much of the western world, restricting the passage to overt idol worshippers would doom it to irrelevance. This is so that they can keep their non-Christian friends.

Paul says, "Do not be yoked together *with unbelievers*," not just idol worshippers. What? Do you think he means, "Do not be yoked together with idol worshippers, but feel free to be yoked together with atheists and blasphemers"? The contrasts that follow make his meaning clear. The Christian is identified with righteousness, the non-Christian with wickedness. The Christian is identified with light, the non-Christian with darkness. The Christian is identified with Christ, the non-Christian with Belial, or Satan. The Christian is called a believer, the non-Christian an unbeliever. The Christian is identified with the temple of God, the non-Christian with idols. Paul is not referring to idol-worshipping unbelievers, but he is likening the unbelievers themselves to idols – in this context, just as believers *are* the temple of God, unbelievers *are* idols. His point is that there is no agreement between believers and unbelievers just as there is no agreement between God's temple and the idols. Thus the passage applies to all non-Christians, all unbelievers. And Paul says do not be yoked together with them.

The contrasts themselves are interesting. The Christian is said to be righteousness, light, Christ, a believer, and the temple of God. This is the tremendous privilege we possess in Jesus Christ. He has given us an altogether superior existence. 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." On the other hand, the non-Christian is referred to as wickedness, darkness, Satan, an unbeliever, and idols. A non-Christian is evil and dark, even like Satan. The Bible permits no middle place. There are no semi-believers or semi-unbelievers. You are either a believer or an unbeliever. If you are a believer, you are righteousness. If you are an unbeliever, you are wickedness.

A faith that is not extreme in this sense, therefore, is not the Christian faith. God allows us to see the world only in this way. Here he condemns religious diversity in the clearest terms. It has been said that all religions are essentially the same, and that although there are many expressions, they all lead to truth and goodness. But Paul shows that even if all non-Christian religions agree, the Christian faith stands against all of them. He says that between one who believes in Christ and one who does not believe in Christ, there is nothing in common (v. 14), there is no harmony (v. 15), and there is no agreement (v. 16).

Since believers are God's temple, so that God says, "I will live with them," and since unbelievers are not God's temple, but are like the idols, this means that there is no God in non-Christian religions. In fact, anyone who says that all religions are the same, or that the religion of Christians is essentially the same with the religion of the non-Christians,



also says that Christ is the same with Belial, or with Satan. Of course, anyone who says this must not be a Christian. Let him be publicly condemned and humiliated, and ejected from the church along with his religious diversity.

One application immediately follows from the text, since it accords with the original context. It should make many Christians uncomfortable, and so I am delighted to talk about it.

There are those who continue to resist the authority and authenticity of the apostles as well as the message that they preached. These people must be unbelievers, because the Christian faith is defined by the prophets and the apostles, or in other words, the Bible. If a person resists the Christian faith, he is not a Christian. This is true by definition, and it is easy to understand.

Like Paul's opponents, who claimed to be Christians, even apostles of Christ, but who tried to undermine the foundational messengers and teachings of the faith, today there are those who claim to be Christians but who reject or distort basic doctrines such as the inspiration of the Bible, the nature of God, the deity, incarnation, and atoning work of Christ, and justification by faith. What are we to make of them? Paul would tell us that these people are unbelievers, and he would command us, "Do not be yoked together" with them.

However, Christians have learned to compartmentalize heresies and blasphemies. They would reject what the false teachers say about some aspects of the faith, but then invite them to speak at their churches and conferences provided the focus stays on some other topic. After providing a disclaimer on how they disagree with the false teachers on their heresies, they would burst into unrestrained praise about their contributions, perhaps in some other area of theology in which they remained orthodox, or in apologetics, or in some area of historical research. They would continue to promote their writings and cite their works with approval. Or, although a false teacher misleads the people on justification by faith or preaches a heretical eschatology, he seems to be a skilled debater against atheism, and so they throw their support behind him.

Suppose someone raped and murdered your wife, would you say to him, "Although I disagree with how you raped and murdered my wife, you are still a good babysitter. Are you free Friday night?" But now we are talking about someone who blasphemes your God and who undermines the very foundation of your religion, and you say, "Teach me apologetics as long as you shut up about justification by faith"? Are you mad? What is wrong with you? Does Jesus Christ mean anything to you? Take heed lest, as you become yoked together with unbelievers, you are exposed as an unbeliever yourself. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough" (11:4). How about you? Huh? Answer me! How about you? Is Christ so impoverished that he needs Satan to preach for him?

But a different Jesus and a different gospel cannot save (Galatians 1:6-9). If you become yoked together with someone who preaches a different Jesus and a different gospel, he might just drag you to hell with him. So what if he is good at debating the existence of God? So what if he is able to engage culture with style and insight? So what if he is an expert on biblical covenants, or the resurrection of Christ, or if he has some other quality that you admire? If he rejects the inerrancy of Scripture, or the deity of Christ, or justification by faith, or some other essential doctrine, he is an unbeliever. There is no half-unbeliever. He is totally an unbeliever. Would you tell Satan to speak at your church as long as he behaves? What should Christians do? God says that the unbelievers are spiritually, intellectually, and ethically dirty. "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord," and "Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."

Then, the application is not limited to false teachers or to unbelievers in the church. Paul refers to unbelievers without distinction. It is not as if he forbids Christians to be yoked together with unbelievers within the church, but permits them to be yoked together with unbelievers outside the church. An unbeliever is an unbeliever, and he is unclean. He is wickedness, darkness, and Belial. Christ has nothing in common with Satan, whether inside or outside the church. Thus the passage must apply to all our dealings with unbelievers.

This requires some thought in application, and we can be glad that the Bible provides a number of principles to help us. Elsewhere Paul says that Christians must not associate with someone who claims to be a Christian but who is "sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler" (1 Corinthians 5:9-13). Combined with our present text, this means that we are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a Christian, but who resists apostolic authority in some overt manner, whether in the doctrinal or ethical sense.

But we cannot refuse all contacts with unbelievers outside the church, not that this is undesirable in itself, since it is what heaven will be like, but it is impossible in this life. Paul acknowledges that if we are to stay away from all unbelievers outside the church, "you would have to leave this world" (1 Corinthians 5:10). This is because there are so many non-Christians, so many unbelieving and immoral people, and they are everywhere. Of course, other than the impossibility of total separation, we are to preach the gospel to them as well, and in the name of Jesus Christ command them to repent.

What we must point out, so as to eliminate any excuse, is that to not disassociate with unbelievers due to the sheer impossibility as well as our responsibility to evangelize does not suddenly become a mandate to become best friends with them. Again, God says that the unbelievers are spiritually, intellectually, and ethically dirty. "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord," and "Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." A person who is converted after he has married will find that he is now joined with an unbeliever. Paul says that the Christian is not to seek a divorce. This is not an indication of acceptance, but rather the binding force of the marriage covenant. Even then, the apostle says that if the unbeliever wishes to leave, the Christian should let it

happen (1 Corinthians 7:12). This reinforces how difficult it is to be yoked together with unbelievers.

The conclusion is that no association is permitted with unbelievers who claim to be believers, and only loose association is permitted with unbelievers who admit that they are unbelievers. It seems that business transactions and casual friendships are usually acceptable. Just do not be close friends with them. This is not a common teaching because, I suspect, many Christians covet more intimate relations with unbelievers than is permitted. However, even if it is permitted, how is it possible for Christians and non-Christians to dialogue constructively, in a manner that entails a mutual exchange and without antagonism, about their deepest beliefs and desires? If you find that this is possible, either they are already Christians, or you are still a non-Christian.

Jesus said that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword, so that even the closest family members would turn against one another (Matthew 10:35). A believer's relationship with an unbeliever is like that of a man and a dog. It barks, you laugh. You feed it, it licks you. It relieves itself on the street, and you have to clean up the mess. You can play hide and seek with it, or fetch, and have a good time. But the relationship can never be more serious or meaningful than this. Like a dog, there is an entire ocean of thoughts and feelings in your heart that the non-Christian cannot perceive or grasp. On the other hand, Christians share a common understanding of reality, a common object of worship, a common mission, and a common destiny.

Jesus Christ transforms our relationships. Some would say that he ruins them. But I say that when you become a Christian, although you might lose a family, you will gain a better one in him, and although you might lose all your friends, much better friends will welcome you into their arms – smarter ones, kinder ones. You might wish to keep your old family and friends, but if they reject your faith, then where you go, they cannot follow. And if you are not prepared to let Christ become an obstacle in your relationships with unbelievers, so that you might even need to cut off some of them, then you are not prepared to be a Christian at all. God says, "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

What is it then? Paul concludes, "Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God." That is, since we have these promises, that God will receive us and be a Father to us, let us come out from the filth, separate from the unbelief, and join ourselves to Jesus Christ.

### **30. Godly Sorrow**

**Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. (2 Corinthians 7:10-11)**

All men and women are sinners – they are born this way. The Bible tells us that, although they are too foolish to perceive the full truth about it, and although they are too dishonest to admit it, in their hearts they realize that there is a righteous and powerful God whom they have offended by their transgressions, and who would punish them for their sins, for being who they are and doing what they do.

The Christian faith declares that people must trust Jesus Christ to save them or face the wrath of God themselves. Sinners, being evil, refuse to depend on the mercy of God, and so they look for alternate ways to assure themselves, and to alleviate the dread that holds them in bondage day by day. Thus they tell themselves that they are good and wonderful. They attempt to convince themselves that they do not need to change, and to change so much that they become new creatures. The issue, they say, is not about sin and conversion, but about acceptance.

Against this delusion, the Christian faith proclaims the truth about mankind. It teaches that all men and women are sinful; they are repugnant and unacceptable in every way. But change and salvation can come only by the power of God through Jesus Christ. The non-Christian doctrine of self-acceptance without repentance is spiritual loser-talk. Instead of overcoming wickedness by faith in Christ, unbelievers simply pretend that they have already won. And instead of attaining self-mastery, or the fruit of the Spirit, they practice self-acceptance, or surrender. But even if they manage to convince themselves, God remains unconvinced.

When God converts a person, he directly works in his soul and alters his basic disposition from one that favors wickedness to one that favors righteousness, and one that hates God to one that loves him. Even so, a Christian is still imperfect in this life and continues to sin. Yet the basis of his confidence is never self-acceptance as such, but the knowledge that he is accepted by God because of Jesus Christ. Guilt – whether the objective obligation or the subjective feeling – is purged not because sin is ignored, but because it has been resolved. The proper way to deal with guilt is not to smother it and move on, but to repent and receive forgiveness for our sins.

The Corinthians were in the wrong, and so Paul previously wrote a letter to them that caused them hurt and sorrow (v. 8-9). This was possibly not what we call First Corinthians, but another letter that was more severe. The apostle's main intent was not to

cause them sorrow, but it was a means to an end, and since the desired purpose was achieved, he did not regret writing it. Now as he admires the result that the letter effected, he distinguishes between two kinds of sorrows – godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. He says that the former brings repentance that leads to salvation, but the latter does not bring repentance and leads to death.

A biblical ministry of the word, therefore, should sometimes inflict emotional injury on the audience. Whether we are talking to unbelievers or believers who are in disobedience, our conversation and preaching ought to make transgressors unhappy. We ought to upset sinners. Whenever it is needed, and when speaking to non-Christians it is always needed, we should cut deep. Do not hesitate. Just do it. It is the right thing to do, and it might save their lives.

Again, there are two kinds of hurt, and two ways to react. It is somewhat cliché to say that worldly sorrow refers to being sorry for getting caught in sin. This is certainly included, since worldly sorrow would embrace any sorrow over sin that does not lead to Christian repentance; however, the idea is broader and more complex than this, because there are other ways of sorrowing over sin without repentance. Worldly sorrow can denote a genuine indignation over sin, but the standard by which the sin is measured is never God's holiness and majesty, and his rights over all creation, but the reference point is always something else.

A non-Christian might be a perfectionist, and so feels a measure of dissatisfaction when he cannot live up to his own idea of perfection. This sorrow has nothing to do with reverence toward God. Or, some people are competitive. They feel frustrated when they fall behind in courage, generosity, and self-control, but they have no sense of accountability toward God and no respect for his commandments. There are many other possibilities, and it is unnecessary to list all of them, because as long as it is not a sorrow that arises from a God-centered perspective, it is a worldly sorrow and a sinful sorrow, and one that leads to death.

There are many ways that a person experiencing worldly sorrow may react. Perhaps he will attempt to vindicate himself by denial or by argument. He may adopt a hostile posture toward his accuser. He may try to right the wrong by self-effort, by making compensations and by improving himself according to the standards of this world. Or, if someone either by speech or example has exposed his shortcoming, he might lash out against him. Cain was displeased that his offering proved deficient, and inferior to that of his brother Abel. God told him to do better, but instead he murdered his own sibling. Worldly sorrow can lead to murder. In the case of Judas, it ended in suicide. Again, it is unnecessary to consider all the ways that worldly sorrow might express itself, because anything other than Christian repentance comes under it, and leads to death.

Godly sorrow can come about only when one sees from God's perspective as revealed in Scripture. When he realizes that his beliefs, thoughts, desires, motives, and actions have transgressed or fallen short of God's standard, the result is an intelligent recognition of the wrong. Godly sorrow can exist only when the person looks at himself relative to

God's teachings and commandments, and when there is a sense of accountability to God and a sincere desire to please him. For this reason, it occurs only in someone who has been converted or who is being converted. Both Christians and non-Christians can feel sorrow when rebuked for their sins, but in Christians there is an entirely different perception, and also a different response.

Christians are also eager to vindicate themselves and to right the wrong, but for them this takes on a different meaning. Paul says that godly sorrow produces earnestness, indignation, alarm, longing, concern, and also punishment. Suppose a church has been harboring a troublemaker or immoral man in its midst. What happens when it is confronted, and the rebuke produces godly sorrow? The Christians would become alarmed about the situation. They understand that they have been wrong to put up with it, and now they are eager to clear themselves. Thus righteous indignation arises, and the congregation punishes the wrongdoer by some form of church discipline or even by excommunication. By this they would show themselves willing to repent of their spiritual laxity and stand up for what is right. Where there is no godly sorrow, righteousness is supplanted by tolerance. As Paul writes later in the letter, "For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough" (11:4). Evidently, the Corinthians needed another reminder.

Paul was willing to inflict hurt and cause sorrow, so that there may be true repentance, a repentance that is toward God and that ends in salvation. Some preachers disagree with this approach. Their guiding principle is to make people feel good regardless of whether they have a biblical basis to feel good. Their ministries are engineered to prevent sorrow, even godly sorrow. The effect is that people become hardened against the gospel. Now when we speak the truth to them, they say, "How dare you speak to me like this? Where's the Christian love? That other pastor never condemned me or made me suffer so much guilt." And this is because that other pastor never really preached the Christian faith to them. Without digging up his sinfulness and pressing for repentance, and without telling him to abandon all to follow Jesus Christ, who alone can save his wretched soul, you can convince a sinner that God loves him, that God has a great plan for him, and that there is nothing that he has to change. You can feel good about yourself, that you have been so loving, that you have been such an encourager. But after not many years this person will be sent to hell. As he burns there, he will curse your name.

We are here to preach the truth about the righteousness of God, the depravity of man, and the saving work of Jesus Christ. If people do not repent and believe, they ought to feel guilty. We are not here to make people feel good about themselves. They can feel good after they repent and believe in the gospel. Christians, especially, should feel terrible when they have sinned. If people will not become happy for the right reasons, then let no one be happy under our ministries. Nevertheless, the feeling itself is not repentance. Some Christians tend to identify spiritual virtues with emotions and feelings, but this is just another attempt to replace the real thing. Christian repentance is not measured by the amount of tears shed – it is not founded on feeling, but on intelligence. It is based on an understanding of holiness, of sin, of judgment, and of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, repentance is measured by one's relation to truth, by the doctrines that he knows and how he responds to them.

If our preaching is designed to prevent sorrow, then how can it ever produce godly sorrow? And if our preaching never produces godly sorrow, then how can it bring repentance and lead to salvation? A ministry that cannot produce hurt and sorrow over sin is a powerless and useless ministry. When it comes to this, perhaps we should experience some godly sorrow of our own. If you have compromised the faith, and backed off from proclaiming it with a fierce and unrelenting courage, now repent and assert it stronger than you ever dared to before. If you have been too non-judgmental, now seek out that person who slipped through your fingers and declare to him his sins, so that an overwhelming sorrow may drive him to repentance.

As a church, if you have put up with an immoral person, now take hold of him and throw him out of your church. Or, if you have partnered with heretics against Christ because, even though you reject their errors, you wish to derive some benefit from their teachings, it is time to do the right thing – break with them and denounce them in public. Become alarmed with your own sins and the sins that you have allowed to fester all around you. Do something about this. Become dissatisfied with a ministry that practices tolerance rather than righteousness. Become indignant. Become concerned. Become eager to vindicate yourself, to show that you are not a spiritual jellyfish, someone without spine or principle, but a man of God and a true preacher of the faith of Jesus Christ.

### 31. False Humility and The Denial of the Gospel

Does grace save us but leave us unchanged, or are we changed by the grace that saved us?

D. A. Carson says, "Christians never have the right to say, 'I am smarter than you are,' because Christians deep down know that they can never be more than fools who have been shown forgiveness and grace."<sup>3</sup>

But the Bible says, "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 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." (Ephesians 4:17-24)

I do not need to go "deep down" to admit that without Christ I would be a fool just like any non-Christian. But I am not without Christ. He did not save me and then left me a fool; rather, by his saving act, he made me wiser. He gave me knowledge and gave me a believing mind to understand the truth. To a non-Christian, I have no right to say, "I was smarter than you," but likewise, I have no right to say, "I am still not smarter than you." Rather, I must say, "I am now infinitely superior to you in wisdom, because God's revelation is infinitely superior to anything that a non-Christian believes. But God made me this way as a gift, a gift that he grants to all those whom he has chosen."

D. A. Carson says, "We are never more than poor beggars telling other poor beggars where there is bread."<sup>4</sup>

If this is true, then Christ did nothing for us. But the Bible says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might be rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9)

The Prodigal Son was poor when he shared a place with the pigs, but to say that he remained poor after he returned home would be a slap in the father's face. Rather, a Christian says, "I was very poor, but Jesus Christ made me rich. I did not become this way by my wisdom or strength, but solely because of his kindness. But the fact remains that I am now rich."

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<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, *The God Who Is There* (Baker Books, 2010), p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



Surely, if Christians are superior to non-Christians, it is because of God's grace through the gospel of Jesus Christ. But grace and the gospel effect actual changes in those who believe, so that their power cannot be forever said to be other and external. A grace that is not internalized is a grace scorned. A gospel that is not personalized is a gospel denied. A Christian who has not been made wiser and holier than a non-Christian, is a non-Christian. A humility that denies this is a lazy and ungrateful humility.

You preachers and theologians, may your false humility burn in hell along with the devil's pride. Stop poisoning Christ's sheep. Teach a humility that honors the work of Christ.

## 32. The Most Heartwarming Doctrine

Does it never seem horrendously heartbreaking to you that God would eternally torment the majority of men for a faith he himself denied them?

Never – never dared to, never needed to, never wanted to think this way.

A long time ago I would have found the question perplexing. I had read the Bible for a few years before I started to encounter Christians from different churches and cultures, and it was not until then that I became familiar with how many Christians think – that is, exactly the opposite of what the Bible teaches. Now I am usually not surprised because I have learned that for Christians, unbelief is the default, and man-centered thinking is the norm. Jesus marveled at the Gentile's faith. Now I also marvel when a Christian truly believes what the Bible teaches.

I remember that I was very surprised when I first heard about the so-called problem of evil, that the existence of evil has been used as a logical or evidential argument against the existence of God, and that many professing believers in fact struggle with it, if not from the logical viewpoint, at least from the existential viewpoint. It never occurred to me that the existence of evil could pose any challenge to the existence of God. I was amazed that it was a big deal, and that many people, over thousands of years, have debated over it. Since then I have written about it, showing that it is one of the easiest objections against Christianity to answer.

Thus my confusion was never about the existence of evil, but about why anyone would ever think that it is a problem. Then I realized that the Bible also teaches me the answer to this. That is, I have learned that there are many people whose intellectual positions and emotional sentiments do not stand with the Bible, and these people are *stupid* and *sinful*. They are intellectually incompetent and dishonest. This cleared up everything for me. When people's thoughts and feelings are not aligned with what God has revealed – when we do not think like God – their thoughts and feelings are wrong. But they do not realize it because they are stupid, and they do not admit it because they are sinful.

Non-Christians are in complete disagreement with God, and this is why they are stupid through and through. You cannot even teach them to improve their understanding because they are too stupid, so that there is nothing to work with, nothing for you to help or to improve. As Paul indicates in 2 Corinthians 4, for conversion to occur it requires something like the creation of the world, where God made everything out of nothing. He had nothing to work with, but he spoke, and the world came into being. Likewise, an unbeliever is so stupid that there is nothing to work with. There is no spark of intelligence there that you can fan into flames with a proof here or a fact there. Arguments are to be given to vindicate the honor of God, and if he pleases, for the Holy Spirit to use as means

to convert the sinner, but in themselves they are powerless to cure a lifeless mind. Rather, the God who said "Let light shine out of darkness" must make his light to shine in their hearts, so that they may perceive the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (4:6).

On the other hand, Christians have been enlightened by the light of Jesus Christ, so that they at least affirm the basic principles of the gospel. However, there is much room to grow, so that stupidity and sinfulness remain, and so senseless doctrines and foolish questions also persist. This is not so much a condemnation as it is a statement about reality, and as long as we press on in the knowledge of Christ, there is no need to be discouraged. That said, some are pleased to stay with worldly standards and false traditions. They need to be whipped out of their sinful stubbornness. There is no need to be lenient toward them.

With this background, let us consider the question. In the first place, it makes no sense. Some people would try to wiggle out of it by saying that God does not really "deny" the faith to those who perish, but that he simply passes over them, or that it is his sovereign decree but their free choice at the same time. You would not get this nonsense from me. Elsewhere I have explained why these answers are all unbiblical, and how they fail to answer the challenge. Instead, I affirm that God is the one who actively denies salvation to those whom he has chosen for damnation, and who actively prevents them from either hearing the gospel or from believing it when they hear. With Paul, I believe that God created the elect and the reprobates "out of the same lump." He did not create out of an elect lump and a reprobate lump, and he did not draw the elect out of a reprobate lump. The Bible says that he made both out of the same lump. Thus I believe in active and unconditional reprobation. And instead of finding ways to soften this, I will state it as hard as I please.

But what in the world does this have to do with what you are asking?! In the context of the question, it is evident that what leads to the horrendous heartbreak is the eternal torment and not the active reprobation. If for the moment we assume that everyone shares my taste, would not the whole world rejoice if God by an active and unconditional decree eternally withholds eggplants from our diet? If this is what the issue is about, would you still ask me about the horrendous heartbreak, or would you consider the matter rather trivial? If you still want your eggplants, I will cover this in the course of what follows. But it seems that the issue is really about the eternal torment. The question arises because *that* there will be eternal torment and not *how* or *why* there will be eternal torment. If this is not about eternal torment, you might not care so much about the way it is decided.

But why would changing the how or why also change how I should feel about the eternal torment? Do you mean that I should feel better about it if people have genuine free will and choose to dive into hell? Does it really make a big difference to you, if the result is the same? If it is the people that I care about, why should it change my feelings about it even if they are the ones who choose to go? Would it not cause horrendous heartbreak to you if your child freely chooses to become a serial killer instead of being divinely ordained to become one? If what you care about is whether the child becomes a serial

killer, then why would you care about divine sovereignty and human freedom? Would you not prefer to have God sovereignly prevent your child from becoming a serial killer? Or, would you say, "I would rather my child become a serial killer than leave it up to God's choice and power"? But if you can say this, then the real issue is that you hate God, and not that you love your child. You do not really care about what your child becomes and what he does to other people. You just detest the idea that God is in control.

If your main focus is on the welfare of the people, then the complaint should remain as long as there is a hell. You can reject the biblical teaching on divine sovereignty and still say, "Does it never seem horrendously heartbreaking to you that God would eternally torment the majority of men for a fall that he himself has ordained?" or, "Does it never seem horrendously heartbreaking to you that God would eternally torment the majority of men for a fall that he himself has permitted?" or, "Does it never seem horrendously heartbreaking to you that God would eternally torment the majority of men when he created them knowing that they would fall?"

Again, it appears that the latter part is irrelevant. The question arises only because the issue is about eternal torment, not eggplant. Thus the question might as well be, "Does it never seem horrendously heartbreaking to you that God would eternally torment the majority of men?" Now the essence of the question becomes even clearer, and it is, "Does it never seem to you that God is horrendous?" If it does not seem to you that God is horrendous, or if you do not wish that I would think so, then I see no basis for the question to arise. If you think that God is perfectly good, that his decisions are perfectly good, that the fact that everything comes from his decree is perfectly good, so that eternal torment itself is perfectly good, then how could you ask the question? Does it never seem horrendously heartbreaking to you that something perfectly good and righteous happens because God is sovereign? Well...no, never. How about you?

On a human level, or for the lack of a better term, on the horizontal level, we are not pleased that even a cat has to suffer. But God enables us to perceive the world with divine intelligence. As Jesus said, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). We know the Father's business, and we can see from his perspective. There is no excuse for a man-centered theology or for a man-centered set of priorities.

Any thought or feeling that even remotely implies disapproval of God must be wrong. It is not sinful to see and feel on the horizontal level, but to remain on this level as if it represents the whole scope of reality is sin and leads to sin. Grieve about your friend's unbelief, but when you think that he will suffer eternal torment "because you, God, denied to him the faith that saves," as if to accuse God, then you ought to tremble and repent, because now you are the one in trouble. Does a person deserve hell only if he freely rejects the gospel? As a sinner, does he not deserve hell to begin with? Man, why does it seem to you that God owes it to anyone to deliver the gospel to him and to have him believe the gospel?

As for me, even if there is horrendous heartbreak over something, it is dissolved once I know that it is actively decided and caused by a God who can do no wrong. It is a most heartwarming doctrine to know that all things occur according to his perfect wisdom and total control. I love him, and I am always happy to agree with him. When I do not, it must be my fault, and if he shows me kindness he will enable me to change my thinking and agree with him again. What if it hits close to home and we are talking about a close relative? Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). You fool! If you have true love for humanity and for your family, where do you think it came from in the first place?

How can I find fault with his sovereignty, when it is his sovereign love that saved me? How can I be so ungrateful as to harbor even a hint of disapproval? And how can I disapprove, when I care about God first of all, and by this reprobation and eternal torment of the wicked, he will show forth his wrath and glory? If there is horrendous heartbreak in you over something that God does, it is never something that a greater love and gratitude toward God cannot heal. Thank you, Father, for vindicating yourself and for revealing your wrath in the eternal torment of the wicked! And thank you, Father, for rescuing me from all this by choosing me for salvation through Jesus Christ!