

Marks of Maturity

Biblical Characteristics of a Christian Leader

by

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Marks of Maturity

Biblical Characteristics of a Christian Leader

Introduction

It should be stressed at the outset that this subject is being addressed, not because this writer sees himself as the perfect example of a Christian leader or of maturity, but because this is one of the most lacking elements in the church today, and because the qualities of spiritual maturity are so determinative to the life of the church and society as a whole. This series of studies was originally developed because I recognized the need of these qualities in my own life and ministry as one in a position of leadership as a pastor or teaching elder and leader of men.

These studies were developed in a team training environment where men were being trained for their role as church leaders, as fathers, and as effective members of a society that desperately needs to see what authentic, biblical Christianity looks like. One of the motivations for this study was a series of tapes I purchased called, *Motivation/Leadership*, by one of my former teachers at Dallas Seminary, Dr. Howard Hendricks. One of the tapes was titled, "Characteristics of a Christian Leader." And, as the title of the tape suggests, this was tremendously motivational to me and moved me to develop a series of studies on this very subject.

The qualities that should characterize Christian leaders are also the marks of spiritual maturity as described in the Bible. While all of the qualities that will be discussed in this series are not unique to Christianity and are often promoted and taught in the secular world, many of them are, by their very nature, distinctive to the Bible or biblical Christianity. Thus, the characteristics that should mark out a Christian leader are also the marks of biblical maturity which are in essence the product of true spirituality. In fact, biblical spirituality can be described by the term *maturity* since Christian maturity is the result of growth produced by the ministry of the Spirit in the light of the Word over time.¹ It is this biblical/spiritual element, at least in part, that makes the marks of Christian leadership distinctively Christian.

However, as we consider these marks of maturity, we are confronted with the reality that they are qualities that should be found in the life of every believer—man or woman. So let it be emphasized that this study has application to all of us regardless of our particular roles in the church or in society. As members of the body of Christ, we are all potential leaders to some degree whether a husband or wife, a father or mother, or a fellow worker in an office. As Christian men and women, we have a leadership role as we seek to lead others to Christ and as we seek to function as salt and light within society. For men or women these are qualities which will enhance their capacity as husbands or wives, as fathers or mothers, or as co-laborers in the gospel of Christ whether in ministries like AWANA, Sunday school, or in a home Bible study.

A Primary Objective Personally and Corporately

One of Paul's primary personal goals and ministry objectives was to reach greater and greater levels of spiritual maturity and to see all Christians do the same. The goal of evangelism is never just seeing people come to Christ. Indeed, the primary command of the Great Commission is not evangelism, but making disciples. Making disciples naturally includes evangelism, but it goes far beyond that.²

¹ See the article by Charles C. Ryrie, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 126:503, July 69.

² There is only one main verb in this verse, "make disciples" (*mathe,teusate*, an aorist imperative of *mathe,teuo*,, "be or become a disciple," "make a disciple, teach." "Go...baptizing...teaching" are all participles. The first participle fits all the characteristics of an attendant circumstance participle which gets its mood from the main verb that follows. It has an imperatival emphasis, but the fact Jesus used the participle shows his main emphasis is on making disciples. The following participles, "baptizing...teaching" are adverbial participles of means and tell us how we are to make disciple, by baptizing (this includes evangelism) and by teaching. For a detailed explanation, see Daniel Wallace's B. Wallace's *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1996, pp. 640-645.

That spiritual maturity was a major concern and a key objective of Paul and other writers of the New Testament epistles is clearly seen in the following passages (see Eph. 4:12f; Phil. 3:12f; Col. 1:28; 4:12; 1 Cor. 2:6, 16f; Jam. 1:2; Rom. 8:28-29; 1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:18).

One of the key Greek words used here is *teleios*, “having attained the end, purpose, complete, perfect.” It was used of a full-grown, mature adult. A comparison of Hebrews 5:13 with 14 and 1 Corinthians 2:6 with 3:1 we find an instructive contrast. *Teleios*, “mature,” is contrasted with the word for “babe,” *nepios* in both of these passages. Thus, in a spiritual sense, *teleios* speaks of one who is fully developed, spiritually mature according to the spiritual qualities detailed in the New Testament.

Thus, spiritual growth and greater and greater levels of maturity are key objectives of Scripture and a key responsibility for church leaders (Eph. 4:11f) and for individuals to be concerned about in their own lives (1 Pet. 2:2; Jam. 1:2f).

The Agents God Uses for Growth

Growth and maturity do not occur by naturally. The babe in Christ requires sound and consistent ‘spiritual pediatrics’ and there are certain agents God uses to bring about spiritual growth to bring us to deeper and deeper maturity in Christ:

1. The Word is obviously a key and necessary element for spiritual growth (1 Pet. 1:23-2:3; 2 Pet. 1:3-4; 3:18; John 17:17). In John 17:17 the Lord prayed for the church and said, “sanctify them through your word, your word is truth.” The reference to “sanctify” or sanctification is fundamentally a synonym for growth and maturity and expresses the Lord’s objective for all believers.
2. Church leaders (Eph. 4:11ff; 1 Thess. 5:12; Jam. 5:14).³
3. The care and concern of the body of Christ as a whole (Eph. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:11ff).
4. Suffering or the trials of life (Jam. 1:2-5; 1 Pet. 1:6; Ps. 119:67, 71, 75, 92)
5. Last, but not least, the indwelling and teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:16f; 1 Cor. 2:6-3:4)

But What Does a Mature Christian Look Like?

One Who is Becoming Christ-like in Character (Eph. 4:13)

So, exactly what does a mature Christian look like? A mature Christian is a believer whose life begins to take on the character of Christ-likeness. But what exactly is that? What are the specific qualities that mark out a person as Christ-like? This is the focus and point of this study, but before we begin to consider some of these qualities, there are a number of other things that we want to cover as a foundation before actually defining and looking at the qualities of maturity.

Defining the Marks of Maturity

In general, how may we define the marks of spiritual maturity? These marks, as used in this study, involve three things:

(1) They are *goals* and provide us with a target for which every Christian should earnestly aim. Here are goals for which—if we mean business with Jesus Christ—we will strive like an athlete reaching for the tape at the finish line. In essence this should encompass part of our purpose for living because as these marks are realized, we will also be attaining other goals God has for our lives.

³ James 5:14 is used here because there is good evidence that this passage may refer not to physical sickness, but to those who are spiritually weak and need the encouragement, edification, and help of church leaders in their growth and victory over sin. For a detailed explanation of this view, see Daniel R. Hayden’s article in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 138, # 551, July 1981, pp. 258f.

As we have seen, spiritual growth and maturity are important themes of the New Testament, but there are two passages which approach spiritual growth and maturity from the standpoint of goals or targets for which we should aim.

Philippians 3:12-16

12 Not that I have already attained this—that is, I have not already been perfected—but I strive to lay hold of that for which I also was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have attained this. Instead I am single-minded: forgetting the things behind and reaching out for the things ahead, 14 with this goal in mind, I strive toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us who are “perfect” embrace this point of view. If you think otherwise, God will reveal to you the error of your ways. 16 Nevertheless, let us live up to the standard that we have already attained (Phil. 3:12-16).

In this passage the apostle describes his constant striving for growth toward spiritual perfection (spiritual maturity), and though we never arrive at total maturity as long as we are in this earthly body, this pursuit is presented as a goal (*skopos*, “a goal, a mark on which to fix the eye”). To stress his earnestness in this pursuit, the apostle used two picturesque words. The first is seen in 3:12 with the term “strive.” This is the Greek *dioko*, which means “to run after, pursue, hasten toward,” and so, “strive for, seek after.” The other word is found in verse 13, “reaching out.” This is the Greek *ep-ek-teinomai*, a triple compound word used in the middle voice which literally means, “to stretch oneself out toward something.” The metaphor behind the words used here is that of a foot race probably drawn from the Isthmian games of ancient Greece. The terms used portray a runner bent forward with his body and his hands outstretched toward the goal with his eye fastened on reaching it.

1 Timothy 1:3-6

3 As I urged you when I was leaving for Macedonia, stay on in Ephesus to instruct certain people not to spread false teachings, 4 nor to occupy themselves with myths and interminable genealogies. These promote useless speculations rather than God’s redemptive plan that operates by faith. 5 But the aim of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. 6 Some have strayed from these and turned away to empty discussion (1 Timothy 1:3-6).

Here we again see the idea of a goal, but verse 6 approaches this from a negative standpoint by showing what happens when one fails to keep focused on the right goals or aim. “But the aim of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. Some have strayed from these and turned away to empty discussion” (1 Tim. 1:5-6).

As a Christian leader, Timothy was charged with the responsibility to instruct the false teachers he was facing in Ephesus against being occupied with what amounts to man’s religious and futile speculations. Two reasons are given:

The first reason is that such speculations are useless and fail to promote the administration of God. This refers to God’s redemptive plan which includes spiritual growth and maturity which is by faith in the truth of the gospel, the Word (vs. 4).

But the second reason is a gross failure to both understand and pursue biblical goals. The goals mentioned in this text are two-fold: (a) that which promotes God’s redemptive plan or the stewardship of promoting the message of Christ and (b) that which is to be the result of accurate biblical teaching—authentic Christian (*agape*,) love.

In relation to this aim, Paul asserts that these false teachers had strayed. In verse 6, “have strayed” is *astocheeto*, “to fail to aim carefully,” and so, “to miss the mark.” Not only must we have biblical goals, but we need to stay focused on them, like a runner focusing and stretching toward the finish line. One of the greatest dangers we all face is that of failing to stay alert and focused on biblical goals. It is too easy to become sidetracked by the varied problems of life and by the allurements of the world.

(2) The marks of maturity are also marks of identification and confirmation. They identify and confirm the reality of Christ in one’s life. As such, they make us people marked with the brand of Christ emblazoned across our lives. Again, it should be stressed that no one ever totally arrives here; there will always be room for growth, so these

are things that we must ever keep in focus (cf. 2 Pet. 1:12-15). Today, the church has, to a very large degree, lost its distinctiveness. It's often very hard to tell believers from unbelievers from the standpoint of their character, values, priorities, and pursuits.

(3) As marks of identification and confirmation, they make the possessor of these qualities an *example*, a *pattern to follow*. These qualities demonstrate the reality of Christ and make believers truly influential in the right way. So one of the great goals and products of aiming at the marks of maturity is that these marks enable Christians to become examples of the Christian life and of the life-changing power that is available in the person and work of Jesus Christ. All Christians, but especially those involved in roles of leadership, must come to recognize that God has called them to become models of Christ-likeness. More will be said on this issue below.

The Nature of Maturity as the Product of Spirituality

While this has already been briefly mentioned, the relationship of maturity to spirituality is important enough to warrant elaboration. Unless one recognizes the elements of spirituality and their role in biblical maturity, many of the qualities listed below will be sought by people in their own energy or strength. The result will not be true spirituality or maturity, but rather human reformation (see Luke 11:23-26 and Col. 2:20-23).⁴ As I hope the next point will make clear, many of these mature qualities which are also qualities of biblical leadership are unique because of the element of biblical spirituality and its role in bringing about Christ-like change and maturity. Biblical spirituality involves four distinct factors.⁵

(1) Biblical spirituality that leads to maturity first involves *regeneration*, being born anew by the Spirit of God through faith in the person and work of Christ. By the new birth, one is brought into a vital relationship with God. This new spiritual life provides the necessary spiritual foundation and spiritual equipment (a new nature, the indwelling Holy Spirit, united to Christ, etc.) for spiritual growth and change (see Eph. 1:15-19; 3:16-19; 1 Cor. 2:14-16; Jam. 1:18-21; 1 Pet. 1:22-2:3). In 1 Peter 1:23-2:2, Peter makes it clear that the new birth is foundational and necessary for spiritual growth to occur. Based on the reality of their conversion or their spiritual regeneration, Peter appeals to the expression of fervent love for one another. This regeneration purified their souls, it brought forgiveness of sin and a new spiritual nature or inner person, one with capacity to know and fellowship with God. However, this was the work of the living and abiding Word of God (vs. 23). So in this passage we are shown the vital role of the Word of God in both instances. This naturally leads to the next vital element in biblical spirituality so needed in Christ-like change, which Peter quickly moved to in 1 Peter 2:2, "...like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (spiritual grow and change).

(2) Biblical spirituality that leads to biblical maturity is also the result of *biblical wisdom* imparted by the Holy Spirit and the study of the Word. It is this biblical wisdom that gives spiritual discernment because God's Word enlightens the believer's understanding with the spiritual principles and the moral directives of the mind of Christ to guide his or her life (see Col. 1:9, 28; 2:6-7; 1 Pet. 2:1-2; Ps. 119:105, 129-130). This is also evident from Paul's comments about the *spiritual man* in 1 Corinthians 2:15-3:3. There he says, "the one who is spiritual discerns all things." While some see the phrase "the one who is spiritual" (*pneumatikos*, "pertaining to the spirit, spiritual," or "of that which belongs to or is activated by the divine Spirit.")⁶ to simply refer to one who is saved in contrast to the purely soulish, unregenerate person (vs. 14), the context supports a different understanding of the word *spiritual*. The apostle is talking about a person who, through the control and teaching ministry of the Spirit, has grown beyond

⁴ The point of this story is that change brought about through any human means (like Jewish exorcism or human reformation) will fail. The only kind of change that is truly effective is through faith in Christ and growth in His life. The key is that there has been not faith in Christ which means the Holy Spirit has not come to indwell. If an exorcism or some other kind of human reformation occurs and there is no response to God through Jesus Christ, then the way is free for the demon to return or worldly patterns to dominate again.

⁵ This material is adapted from "What is Spirituality?" by Charles Ryrie, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 126:503, July 69, Theological Journal Library CD, Galaxie Software.

⁶ Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Fredrick W. Danker, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media and G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, T. & T. Clark, 1973, p. 368.

the basic ABCs of the milk of the Word (cf. 3:1-3) and is thus able to discern all things. Just being saved does not give one the capacity to have this kind of broad discernment. Such discernment is the product of spiritual growth in the knowledge and application of the Scripture which requires time (cf. Heb. 11:11-14).

(3) Biblical spirituality that leads to maturity involves the *work of the Holy Spirit* in the life of the believer.

We hear a great deal today from the secular world about spirituality using such terms as “getting in touch with your spirit” or “getting in touch with a higher power,” but this is New Age thinking and is actually a part of Satan’s deceptions and false doctrine that seeks to promote human reformation in seeking to get man to become like gods himself. Satan’s methods always bypass the person and work of Christ. Biblical spirituality is the work of the Holy Spirit who comes to indwell every believer and only the believer in Jesus Christ at the moment of faith in Christ. Thus, the Holy Spirit is a prominent member of the Godhead who is involved in producing spirituality in every believer in Christ. As Ryrie comments,

This is not to say that the other persons of the Godhead do not have their particular work in this, nor that the believer himself has no responsibility, nor that there are not other means of grace; but it is to affirm His major role in spirituality. The ministries of the Spirit involve teaching (John 16:12-15), guiding (Rom 8:14), assuring (Rom 8:16), praying (Rom 8:26), the exercise of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:7), warring against the flesh (Gal 5:17), and all of these depend for their full manifestation on the filling of the Spirit (Eph 5:18).⁷

Believers are commanded to “be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18) and to “walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16), which means to be controlled, led, and empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit.⁸

(4) Biblical spirituality that leads to maturity involves *time*—time to grow and mature in one’s walk with the Savior.

If the spiritual person judges or examines or discerns all things (1 Cor. 2:15), this must involve time in order to gain knowledge and to acquire experience for discerning all things.... This could not be accomplished overnight; it is something which is true only of a mature Christian.

In that word maturity I think we have the key to the concept of spirituality, for Christian maturity is the growth which the Holy Spirit produces over a period of time in the believer. To be sure, the same amount of time is not required for each individual, but some time is necessary for all. It is not the time itself which is determinative of maturity; rather it is the progress made and growth achieved which is all-important. Rate multiplied by time equals distance, so that the distance to maturity may be covered in a shorter time if the rate of growth is accelerated. And it will be accelerated if none of the control which ought to be given to the Holy Spirit is retained by self.

Here is a proposed definition of spirituality which attempts to be concise and at the same time to keep these above-discussed factors in mind. Spiritually is a mature and maturing relation to the Holy Spirit. While this may simply be another way of saying that spirituality is Christian maturity, it tries to delineate more openly the factors of Spirit-control over a period of time. Certainly the definition satisfies the requirements of the description of a spiritual man in 1 Corinthians 2:15, for one who is experiencing a grown-up relation to the Holy Spirit will be able to discern all things and at the same time not be understood by others.⁹

The biblical characteristics needed in a Christian leader are only found in one who has reached a certain degree of maturity in Christ. It is no wonder that the apostle, when discussing the qualifications of elders in 1 Timothy 3, warned against choosing a recent convert (3:6). But the fact still remains,

Even though a Christian is mature, there is always room for further development... Spiritual maturity does not mean there is a cessation of spiritual growth. Full grown people develop in physical prowess; emotionally mature individuals grow emotionally; and the mentally mature

⁷ Ryrie, Theological Electronic Library, Galaxie Software.

⁸ For more detail on this issue, see Part 2, Lessons 4 and 5 in the *ABCs of Christian Growth: Laying the Foundation* on our web site at <http://www.bible.org/docs/splife/abc/toc.htm>.

⁹ Ryrie, Theological Electronic Library, Galaxie Software.

expand intellectually. So it is in the spiritual life. Because of his discernment, a Christian may be considered to be spiritual, but he is never to cease his spiritual development. As Paul said: “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:12-14).¹⁰

The Distinctives of Christian Maturity and Leadership

Before actually considering the qualities that should characterize mature Christian and Christian leadership, it would be well to consider its uniqueness. It is hoped that in doing so it will focus us on the supernatural element involved and how Christian maturity and leadership is to find its source in a personal relationship with the living Christ through the Holy Spirit and in the light of the special revelation of God, the Holy Bible. The following is a summary of six distinctives.¹¹

(1) Christian maturity and leadership is distinct because of the nature of a leader’s *position* as a servant, as opposed to the viewpoint of the secular world. Christ spoke emphatically of this on a couple of occasions (see Luke 22:24-27; Mark 10:35-45). Further, regardless of one’s position in the home or the church, the biblical principle is that there is only one who is “number one,” and that is Christ Himself. It is He who is to be preeminent in the life of the church (cf. John 13:13; Col. 1:18 with 3 John 9-11). Submission to Christ’s authority and leadership is one of the hallmarks of leadership.

(2) Christian maturity and leadership is distinct because of the nature of its *character* requirements. While the secular and corporate world may speak of the need of moral character, it will lack certain qualities of character that are strictly Christian in nature like submission to the Lordship of Christ, complete trust in the tenets of Scripture, and those characteristics listed in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:7-9.

(3) Christian maturity and leadership is distinctive as to its *source*. In Scripture, the special ability to be a Christian leader is explicitly declared to be the product of the gift of the Spirit. While all Christians have a responsibility to lead in certain capacities—as parents, Sunday teachers, and as members of society—the Holy Spirit, the giver of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:7), gives a special gift of leadership as described in Romans 12:6-8.

6 And we have different gifts, according to the grace given to us. If the gift is prophecy, that individual must use it in proportion to his faith. 7 If it is service, he must serve; if it is teaching, he must teach; 8 if it is exhortation, he must exhort; if it is contributing, he must do so with sincerity; **if it is leadership**, he must do so with diligence; if it is showing mercy, he must do so with cheerfulness (Rom. 12:6-8, emphasis mine).

Leadership is a gift sovereignly bestowed by the Holy Spirit, as with all spiritual gifts, at the point of salvation when a person is joined to the body of Christ by the baptizing work of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12-13). This gifting of the Spirit equips each believer for service in the body. For some, this involves the gift of leadership.

Human beings can neither choose their gifts, take credit for their gifts, nor assume that their gifts make them superior people. “Gifts are shared out among Christians; all do not receive the same gifts but all the gifts come from the Spirit, so that there is no room for rivalry, discontent, or a feeling of superiority.”¹² The fact that the Holy Spirit is the source of leadership capacity and that

¹⁰ Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Spiritual Man,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 125:498, April-June 1968, Theological Electronic Library, Galaxie Software.

¹¹ For a full treatment of each of these distinctives, see the article by William D. Lawrence in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 144:575, July 1987, pp. 318f. Lawrence lists seven, but I have combined two of these because they are related so closely to each other. Also, where his focus is just on Christian leadership, I have included the concept of maturity in these distinctives.

¹² Lawrence, quoting Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 5.

leaders are chosen sovereignly by Him produces freedom from pride and arrogance among those who are responsive to Him.

The gift of leadership is not a matter of a certain personality type. Peter was a leader by virtue of personal strength (Acts 4:8–12), James by virtue of practical wisdom (Acts 15:12–21), Paul by virtue of intellectual capacity (as seen in his sermons and epistles), Timothy by virtue of sacrificial service (Phil 2:19–21), and John by virtue of his heart for God and man (as seen in his writings). All these leaders shared all these virtues, but each of them had a distinct personality strength that uniquely marked him. This demonstrates the fact that leadership is not a matter of human personality but of divine sovereignty. Just as the Spirit's gifts are not reserved for a few outstanding people¹³ so the Spirit's gift of leadership is not reserved for a particular kind of personality.

The gift of leadership is discovered and developed in the same way as other spiritual gifts, that is, through life experience, training, and the maturing process. Even though it is the product of the Spirit's presence and God's grace, this gift requires diligence, faithfulness, hard work, and commitment if it is to be exercised effectively.¹⁴

(4) Christian maturity and leadership is distinct as to its *enablement*. The Christian character required to be a godly leader, biblically speaking, has its source in a personal abiding relationship with Jesus Christ. It is to be the product of a Word-filled, Spirit-filled (controlled) life (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:18) that results in the Christ-exchanged life. Writing to those who were seeking sanctification by law or legalism, Paul wrote,

20 I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not set aside God's grace, because if righteousness could come through the law, then Christ died for nothing! (Gal. 2:20-21).

Leadership requires great wisdom and strength and endurance, but the Christian leader can always count on the presence and provision of the Spirit of God along with the abiding presence of the Savior.

Christians who possess this gift may exercise it in secular settings such as business, politics, or education, but non-Christian leaders in those areas cannot claim the Spirit's power. This truth is one of the most unique elements in Christian leadership. Christian leaders have many things in common with non-Christian leaders: both must provide vision for their followers; both must earn the trust of their followers; both must communicate to their followers; both must use their abilities effectively in providing leadership.¹⁵ But only Christian leaders can count on the Holy Spirit to accomplish their purpose of affecting and changing others in the spiritual realm. The Spirit's power will not make their leadership perfect,¹⁶ but it will guide them in a model of growing Christian maturity as well as enable them to have a spiritual impact that cannot be had in any other way or by any other kind of leader.¹⁷

(5) Christian maturity and leadership is distinctive as to its *ambition and motivation*. An ambition is a strong desire to accomplish something or reach a specific goal. The difference between a worldly or godly ambition is the nature of the ambition (fame, power, prestige, position, effective service, God's glory, etc.) and the motives behind the ambition. In 1 Timothy 3:1, the apostle wrote, "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man **aspires** to the office of overseer, it is a fine (*kalos*, "beautiful, useful, noble, praise worthy, advantageous, etc.) work he **desires** (*epithumeo*., "set one's heart on, long for, desire") to do" (emphasis mine). This aspiration (ambition) to be an elder, a position of leadership and responsibility in the church, is a desire for a fine, noble, or godly work. But the

¹³ Lawrence, taken from Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958, p. 170.

¹⁴ William D. Lawrence, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 144:575, July 1987, pp. 320-321.

¹⁵ Lawrence, for a secular discussion of these elements see Bennis and Nanus, *Leaders*, pp. 19–86; for such thinking from a Christian perspective see Fred Smith, *Learning to Lead* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), pp. 32–44.

¹⁶ Lawrence, taken from Sanders, *Paul the Leader*, p. 41.

¹⁷ Lawrence, pp. 321-322.

apostle defined this as a “fine work.” This takes the focus off the idea of **position** and places it on the **function** or **responsibility** that goes with the job. But as noble as it may be, if one’s motives are wrong (i.e., for prestige, to build up a sagging ego, for power and control over others rather than sacrificial servanthood, etc.), then the ambition becomes tainted and wrong. For a classic illustration of a good ambition that became tainted by selfish motives, compare Mark 10:35-45 and Luke 22:24-30.

Nothing could be uglier than the attitudes found here. But nothing could be more surprising than Christ’s response to these attitudes; He did not attack them for being ambitious, nor did He reject them for having drive and desire. Instead He redefined ambition and turned it into service for others without taking away any of its drive for achievement. Ambition is transformed into a humility directed toward serving others rather than a proud serving of self. Ambition is redefined from self-service to self-sacrifice (Mark 10:43-45), and included in this is instruction in how to be first. It is accomplished through the holy ambition of slavery in accord with the model of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He demonstrated ambition at its best as the One who willingly sacrificed Himself for the sake of others.¹⁸

Selfish motives (for dominance, personal agendas, control, praise, prestige), that do not truly spring from Spirit-produced love, lead to some of the most destructive behaviors in the body of Christ. Thus, a true mark of maturity that is needed in Christian leaders is purity of motives as is modeled for us in the life and ministry of Paul and his associates (see 1 Thess. 2:1ff).

(6) Christian maturity and leadership is distinctive as to its *authority*. A Christian leader’s authority comes from Christ, but in his responsibility as a leader, he is a servant in a two-fold way. (a) He is a servant of Christ and operates under the authority and leadership of Christ. Christ is the head of the church, the Chief Shepherd, and the One who is always to be preeminent and in charge. Christian leaders have no authority in themselves. (b) The Christian leader is to function as a servant to those he leads. This is beautifully expressed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:5 “For we do not proclaim ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves [*doulos*, “bond servants”] for Jesus’ sake.”

In the context of the nature of Christian maturity and the distinctiveness of Christian leadership, certain qualities have been briefly touched on like the leader as a model, the source of enablement, and the servant concept. Now a more detailed discussion will follow concerning the marks of spiritual maturity which are naturally also the marks or characteristics of Christian leadership.

¹⁸ Lawrence, pp. 323-24.

Mark #1: An Example for Others to Imitate

Introduction

With this first mark of maturity we come to a study of the qualities that describe what Christ-like maturity looks like. Since becoming Christ-like makes one an example to follow, we will begin here. A mature Christian is someone who is a model, a pacesetter; someone who influences others in positive ways according to biblical standards! Modeling Christian virtues, virtues of true spirituality, is crucial to effective ministry in the world. Without biblical and godly models we are cast into a restless sea that can only toss up refuse and mud (Isa. 57:20). William J. Bennett recently said, “We—all of us, but especially the young—need around us individuals who possess a certain nobility, a largeness of soul, and qualities of human experience worth imitating and striving for.”¹

People can never be biblical leaders and truly mature until they come to realize that God has called them to be examples to others. As the Lord Jesus pointed out, “A disciple is not greater than his teacher, but everyone when fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). In this context, the Lord was showing that one’s true spirituality, or godliness (or lack thereof) is revealed in our actions and that such actions will of necessity influence others either for good or for evil. Students, sons, daughters, and the flock, tend to emulate their leaders, parents, guardians, teachers, or heroes. The tendency is for us to shy away from this responsibility and reality, but in order to be truly mature and a leader, one must accept this as a reality of leadership.

Principles Related to Being Examples

In regard to being examples to others, it is helpful to consider the following principles:

(1) Being a godly example is not an option, it is commanded in Scripture. Several passages dealing with this issue will be considered later in this study.

(2) We have no choice in being an example of some kind and having an impact on those around us, but we do have a choice in the *kind* of witness and impact we provide. Someone is going to follow us and be influenced by us. The questions are: Do we know where we are going? Are we providing the kind of example that will enhance their lives, or are we like the blind leading the blind?

I think it was Professor Hendricks who said in his tapes on leadership, “I once saw a bumper sticker that said, “don’t follow me, I’m lost too.” That’s the state of the world and, unfortunately, of many well-meaning Christians. They are like the commercial pilot who told his passengers, “I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is we are lost, but the good news is we are making good time.”

Motion in itself does not mean direction. Activity in itself never means effectiveness. We can be like the cowboy who rushed into the coral, bridled and saddled his horse and rode off in all directions. We need quality lives with quality motion aimed in the right direction with specific, biblical objectives.

(3) We need Christian maturity that provides people with real honest-to-God examples of *authentic Christ-like living*. Effective ministry to others is often equated with such things as dynamic personalities, with talent, giftedness, training, enthusiasm, and with charisma. But these things alone are inadequate, as is so evident by the leadership we have seen in the top government positions in our country the last few years. Much more is needed. In the Bible, the qualities that lead to effective ministry are found in the elements of spiritual character, in the character of Christ reproduced in us by the ministry of the Spirit (see Eph. 4:12f.; Gal. 5:22ff).

In his unique style, Dr. Hendricks used to tell the story of a student who came to him with a problem. The interchange went something like this as I recall:

¹ *Kindred Spirit*, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 10. Dr. Mennett served as President Reagan’s Secretary of Education and gained national acclaim as President Bush’s “drug czar.” He is the author of *The Death of Outrage: Bill Clinton and the Assault on American Ideals*, and he served as editor of *The Book of Virtues*.

Student, “Hey Prof, I have a problem.”

Hendricks, “Yea, What’s your problem?”

Student, “Why did the Lord choose Judas?”

Hendricks, “Ah, that’s no problem. I have a bigger problem than that.”

Student, “Yea, what’s that?”

Hendricks, “Why did the Lord choose you? Why did the Lord choose me?”

His point was—look at the disciples. How would you like to launch a worldwide campaign with the likes of Peter and his compadres? Yet, with these common, average, uneducated men, the Lord launched a campaign that has spanned the globe and turned the world upside down.

Was this because of their unique and imaginative methodology? No! It was because these common men knew the Lord and began to experience His life and His qualities of godliness. He took common men and made them into great men who became spiritual leaders because they were experiencing Him through the power of the Spirit of God.

(4) Mature Christians and leaders have a responsibility to maintain a consistent example. This is a constant theme of the Bible. Other than the raw power of the Word itself, nothing is so determinative for spiritual change in the lives of others as one’s own example. This truth is strongly taught in 1 Thessalonians 2:1ff where Paul recalls his manner of life and that of his team to the Thessalonians.²

Problems We Face in Being Examples

(1) The problem of distinctiveness or manifesting biblical character. This relates to the issue of living so we truly show that what we are, our character, is distinctively the result of knowing and walking with Christ. But, sometimes what Christians speak so loudly that it completely turns people off or puts them in reverse. If our lives are not what they should be, others not only will not want to follow us, they will become repelled by what we are. When a Christian’s life is contrary to what he or she says, it indicates either we are unreal or what we advocate and believe isn’t true and doesn’t work.

(2) The problem of direction or the wrong example. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. Some people will follow us. In this case, not so much in what we say, but in the way we live—in our priorities, values, and attitudes as well as our actions. If our lives are not what they should be, we become inverted examples who take people away from the Lord and the life He has called them to. I have heard, and perhaps you have also, of children who have said, “Daddy, if the President can lie, why can’t I?”

If we teach our children about the priority of the Lord, of loving others, of the Word, and the importance of assembling ourselves with others believer to worship, grow, and minister to others (Heb. 10:24-25), do we demonstrate the reality of this by following the right priorities ourselves? Or do we find every possible excuse to stay home? Do we consistently allow our family to engage in pursuits that keep us and our families away from church or fellowship with believers? This sets a model that says these other pursuits are more important than the Lord or the assembling together with the body of Christ for Bible Study, prayer, or worship. **Actions speak so much louder than words!**

Do we teach our children the principles of being on time, of doing all things decently and in order? Then are we consistently late? Do our children often miss Sunday school or church because we are so disorganized that we are unable to make it? Again, **Actions speak so much louder than words!**

(3) The problem of definition. By definition we mean giving a clear reason for the way we live or the clear distinctives of our lives. As Christians, if our lives are different, as they should be, and we never let others know why we are different, we may have still failed in being examples. “But set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts and always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess” (1 Peter 3:15).

Passages on Being Examples

Because of the power of our example and the way one’s life either negatively or positively influences others, the Scripture repeatedly addresses this vital responsibility. Leaders and Christians as a whole are to be models for others to imitate. In truth, every believer’s life is to become a source of motivation and direction for others. We are to be a

² See the author’s commentary on this at <http://www.bible.org/docs/nt/books/1th/jhk3/toc.htm>.

picture of reality, a proof that Jesus Christ saves and changes lives so we can become a powerful magnet that draws others to Christ.

1 Corinthians 11:1 and 1 Thessalonians 1:6

“Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1)

“And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, when you received the message with joy that comes from the Holy Spirit, despite great affliction” (1 Thess. 1:6),

I don’t know about you, but the idea of telling someone to be an imitator of me is scary. What a responsibility! You mean people are supposed to follow me? That’s right. That’s the way it works whether we like it or not. As this passage points out, the issue is who are WE following? Paul said “be imitators of me,” (i.e. follow me). But then he quickly added, “... just as I also am of Christ.”

Obviously then, the issue here and the key to leadership and spiritual maturity is not how great we are, but how much we are following Jesus Christ who is our supreme example. How much are we allowing Jesus Christ to be the Lord of our lives? Are we in hot pursuit of knowing and experiencing the life of Christ as was the apostle Paul?

The verb “be” is a present imperative of *ginomai*, “to become.” Again, it emphasizes this is not an option. It is a command. The present tense and the meaning of this verb reminds us this is a process, a target, a goal to set our sights on and pursue daily. None of us ever arrive—but it should be a daily goal. A key question is, “Are we aiming at the target?”

“Imitate” is *mimeteis* and refers to one who mimics another. It is an active noun which brings out the concept of an active responsibility, but we should not let the word “mimic” fool us. This is not a superficial mimicry or a mere imitation. According to New Testament truth, this involves the process of reproduction. The Lord Jesus seeks to reproduce Himself in us as we appropriate His life by faith through the knowledge of the Word and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Christ-likeness is the direct and exclusive consequence of God’s activity in us. It is not the consequence of our capacity to imitate God, but the result of God’s capacity to reproduce Himself in us through the Holy Spirit as we learn His Word and learn to walk by faith.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul wrote, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord” (1 Thess. 1:6). The teaching and example of the missionaries (though only for a few weeks) and the afflictions they faced plus the ever-present ministry of the Spirit were the tools God used to produce spiritual growth and changed lives. As mentioned, our word *imitate* may lead to the wrong impression. Christian imitation has nothing to do with outward conformity where someone merely copies the actions, mannerisms, or speech of another. The Greek word *mimeteis* is from *mimomai*, “to imitate, emulate, use as a model.” The main idea here is to follow someone as an ideal model or example. But, as the New Testament context makes clear, this is not merely a matter of external conformity, but change from the inside out by means of the Spirit and the application of biblical truth as seen in the life of the mature Christian model.

Hebrews 13:7

“Remember your leaders, who spoke God’s message to you; reflect on the outcome of their lives and imitate their faith.”

This verse teaches us that the secret to leading others flows out of the recognition by others of the rightness of the life of the leader. The leader’s life becomes the ‘proof of the pudding,’ as they say.

The word, “result” is the Greek *ekbasin*, which refers to the outcome or product of something. In this context, it is the manner of life of the leader which has made him an example. It refers to the manner of the lives of their leaders that had been centered in the Word and the walk of faith. This had a specific outcome—Christlikeness or godliness.

Note the word “considering.” This is *anatheoreo*, which means “to scan, look closely.” The basic root of the word means to look at something, not indifferently but purposefully, in order to arrive at a conclusion. In other words, people are going to be watching us and to a certain degree, the example of our lives will affect the conclusions at which they arrive, not only about us, but about Jesus Christ and Christianity. In this context in Hebrews 13, we should perhaps also note verse 17, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over

your souls and will give an account for their work.” The willingness of people to follow and be persuaded greatly depends of the kind of examples we become.

Philippians 3:17-18

17 Be imitators of me, brothers and sisters, and watch carefully those who are living this way, just as you have us as an example. 18 For many live (about whom I often told you, and now say even with tears) as enemies of the cross of Christ.

In the context of this passage, one clear sign of maturity is the pursuit of holiness, a heart set on heavenly treasures and divine objectives (see 3:8-14, 19-20). We might note two things here: (a) the mature man (and there are varying degrees of maturity) will aim at letting go of the past and his previous pursuits and treasures, and he will set his sight on reaching forth to the goal of growth in Christ-likeness. (b) If he thinks he has already arrived, or if his standards are different, then God will seek to expose this error in his life because anything else is contrary to the purpose of God.

In this pursuit, one must have his course fixed on the right beacon or have his radio tuned in to the right frequency, or he will arrive at the wrong destination. In other words he needs the right example and standard. He needs those who stir him on to higher and higher standards.

In this believers have a two-fold responsibility: (a) They must find mature believers, those who are truly following Christ and His Word, and use them as examples and seek to become imitators of them (vs. 17). But (b) they must also be on alert to the fact that there are those who are not walking after the pattern of godliness found in scripture as seen in the lives of Paul and his cohorts (cf. Phil. 3:18, 19 and Rom. 16:17-18).

Naturally, the Lord Jesus is our supreme example, goal, and authority, but Scripture does authorize the legitimacy of following godly people as examples. We need godly examples. Such people demonstrate the possibility and reality of following the Lord and of progress in Christ-like growth. They provide us with *godly incentives*. It is motivational to find men and women who have truly grown in their walk through the power of the Spirit of God.

In this pursuit and according to the emphasis of this passage in Philippians, the crucial test for being a biblical example and one for others to follow is found in one’s perspective of the person and work of Christ as epitomized by the cross. A biblical view and understanding of the finished work of the Savior on the cross and the believer’s union with Christ does three things:

(1) It provides a proper foundation and motivation for godly living and service It provides a protection against legalism and works done either to gain salvation or to keep it or to gain merit with God (Phil. 3:4-8).

(2) It promotes a commitment to God’s standards of behavior (Phil. 3:9). It recognizes that freedom does not mean license, but provides the power to serve God according to His standards through faith in a living Savior who has made us acceptable to God and provides us with the motivation and means for change (1 John 3:1f).

(3) It gives an eternal perspective. Understanding the finished work of Christ on the cross and our union with Him provides assurance of eternity. This reality of eternity should lead to an eternal perspective which in essence means a new set of values, controls, and pursuits (cf. 3:20-21 with 1 Pet.1:17f; 2 Cor. 4:15-18; 1 John 2:28-3:3).

In essence, then, a proper grasp of the person and work of Christ should produce a personal reevaluation that leads to a denunciation of our old attitudes, values, and priorities (see Phil. 3:3ff). But what we need in the church are men and women who demonstrate this as examples to their families and others.

1 Timothy 4:11-16

Command and teach these things. 12 Let no one look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in your speech, conduct, love, faithfulness, and purity. 13 Until I come, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. 14 Do not neglect the spiritual gift you have, given to you and confirmed by prophetic words when the elders laid hands on you. 15 Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that everyone will see your progress. 16 Be conscientious about how you live and what you teach. Persevere in this, because by doing so you will save both yourself and those who listen to you.

The apostle begins this section with the charge to “command and teach these things (a reference primarily to 4:1-5, a warning against legalistic doctrines which have their source in demonic influence).” But Timothy’s ability for this is dependent on two things contextually: (a) nourishing his own soul on the words of the faith, i.e., godly discipline in his own life (vss. 6-10), and (b) being an example for other believers (vs. 12).

Failure to be a solid example ruins or at least gravely hinders one’s credibility because it causes others to look down on and reject one’s ministry (vs. 12). “Look down” is *kataphroneo*, from *kata* “down” and *phroneo*, “to think, contemplate.” So this word means “to have contempt for, despise, disdain, think little or nothing of.”

“Youthfulness” suggests that Timothy was a young man and with youthfulness comes immaturity. But young men and women can, through spiritual maturity in the Lord, overcome their typical, youthful behavior and become examples and models even for older people.

The words “speech, conduct, love, faith and purity” warn us that to be an example, one needs Christ-like change in all areas of life. Failure in one area can harm our ability to be an example.

“Show yourself” (NASB), “set” (NIV), “be thou” (KJV), “set” (NET) represent various translations of the Greek word *ginomai*, which means “to become, come to pass, happen.” Paul’s use of this verb may suggest the idea of a process and progress, i.e., growth (cf. 4:14).

Paul adds the words, “for believers,” (NET) or “of those who believe” (NASB). Since the context is dealing with our ministry to the body of Christ, the emphasis is on our need to be an example to fellow believers, but this in no way exempts us from the responsibility of being an example to unbelievers (see Col. 4:5; 1 Pet. 3:15-17; 4:15-19).

In 1 Timothy 4:13-16 Paul gives six commands that are needed to be effective models of the Savior. Verses 13-14 deal primarily with public ministry and the stewardship of his spiritual gifts. Obedience to these commands would allow Timothy to become an example to follow in public ministry when the church is assembled. Verses 15-16 deal more with his private life and stresses the idea of dedication, diligence, endurance, and discipline, a fitting challenge against laziness and just going with the flow.

Titus 2:6-8

6 Encourage younger men likewise to be self-controlled, 7 showing yourself to be an example of good works in every way. In your teaching show integrity, dignity, 8 and a sound message that cannot be criticized, so that any opponent will be at a loss, because he has nothing evil to say about us.

We should note that verse 7 flows out of the charge to encourage younger men to be self-controlled (vs. 6) because being an example to them is so important to their encouragement or motivation. We should also note the all-encompassing nature of this command as seen in the words, “an example of good works in every way.” This reminds us of the need to be well rounded in Christian character in every sphere of our lives.

The words, “showing yourself” is the middle voice of the Greek word *parecho*, which means “to offer, show or present one’s self to be something.”

1 Peter 5:3

“And do not lord it over those entrusted to you but be examples to the flock.”

Some people are what we might call “controllers.” These are people who seek to dominate or lord it over others as a means to get followers, but in doing so they ruin their capacity to be an example of Christ-like leadership. Thus, in this passage, Peter warns of the tendency to lead by dominating others, a characteristic that is typical in the world, but that should not exist in the body of Christ. To be a biblical and Christ-like example a believer must have the character of one who *leads as a servant* (Mark 10:45). This is one of the distinctive characteristics of Christian leadership and will be discussed below. In this, there is a note of warning: As we seek to be examples, we must learn to serve from godly motives. Too often people serve from neurotic reasons—to feel good about themselves, to be praised and accepted, or to be in control, etc. Some use their position of leadership as a way to get their own needs met outside of faith in Christ and the sufficiency of their new life in Him.

In order for mature Christians and leaders to become examples for others (i.e., a living evidence of the power of Jesus Christ to change lives), they must develop a number of Christ-like qualities that mark them out as examples to follow. Thus, the marks discussed in this study are the kind of qualities that enable one to become a biblical example of Christ-like maturity and leadership whether at home or in the office or in the church.

In summary, the biblical plan and order of modeling and following is as follows:

(1) With Christ and the heavenly Father as their own personal model (John 15:13; 1 Pet. 2:21; Eph. 5:1), mature Christian leaders need to recognize they have a vital responsibility to model the reality and character of Christ to those whom they teach and minister (1 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 2:7; 1 Pet. 5:3).

(2) Leaders may even encourage others to imitate or follow their example as long as they take heed to their own walk (1 Tim. 4:12-16) and are sure they are seeking to follow the example of the Savior themselves (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 2 Thess. 3:9).

(3) The ultimate goal of the leader must always be to help others become imitators of Christ. At first, disciples become imitators of their spiritual parents or teachers, which is the normal and natural pattern. But teacher and student alike must recognize that the ultimate goal is to become like the Savior who is our perfect model and objective (1 Pet. 2:21). Since Paul's objective was to be like Christ, he could encourage his disciples to imitate his walk, but always with the goal in mind of imitating the character of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1)

(4) The basic order or process is: (a) Leaders are to imitate Christ (1 Cor. 11:1) that they might be models for others (1 Pet. 5:3); (b) new converts and the flock as a whole are to imitate their leaders, assuming of course their leaders are following Christ (Heb. 13:7); (c) other churches are to recognize their responsibility to be a model of godliness or Christ-likeness as the Thessalonians were to the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess. 1:7); (d) All believers are to become imitators of God who is revealed to us in Christ (Eph. 5:1).

Following the example of others has nothing to do with imitating the style or charismatic personalities of certain Christian leaders. What we are to provide as a model for others and imitate in others is Christian character as illustrated in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) or in Paul's attitude and behavior as it pertained to some of the doubtful issues like eating meat offered to idols. Paul's pattern was that of love, putting the needs of others above himself as Christ did for us. It is really this Paul had in mind contextually in 1 Corinthians 11:1 when he said, "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (for the immediate context see 1 Cor. 10:31). The same principle is seen in the context of 2 Thessalonians 3:9 as it pertained to working to support one's self and one's family (see 3:6-15).

Mark #2: Full of the Spirit and Wisdom

1 Now in these days, when the disciples were growing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Greek-speaking Jews against the native Hebraic Jews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 2 So the twelve called the whole group of the disciples together and said, “It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to wait on tables. 3 But carefully select from among you, brothers, seven men who are well-attested, *full of the Spirit and of wisdom*, whom we may put in charge of this necessary task. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:1-4, emphasis mine)

As pointed out previously, one of the distinctive characteristics of Christian maturity and leadership is its enablement. Vital to everything else as roots are to the fruit of a tree, the spiritual maturity needed in a Christian leader can be manifested only by Spirit-filled and Word-filled believers. The other qualities to be highlighted in this study are important and desirable, but to be filled with the Spirit and the Word (full of biblical wisdom and understanding) is absolutely indispensable for it is the ultimate source of spiritual maturity and godly leadership. In God’s plan for the Christian, all the qualities that will be discussed are to find their source in the power of the Spirit and the teaching of the Word—the tap root of spiritual growth, maturity, and leadership.

The book of Acts is a book marked by true spirituality and biblical leadership. In it we are constantly treated to men of great maturity and Christ-like character, but, as it has often been pointed out, rather than being a book of the Acts of men or the apostles, it is really the Acts of the Holy Spirit and Word-filled lives. It is the story of men who established the church and led its missionary enterprise, but without exception, these were men endowed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Everywhere you turn, you see the work and leadership of the Holy Spirit; you see men who are said to be full of the Spirit and acting by His directions and under His power. The Holy Spirit is referred to some 46 times in the book of Acts. In nearly every chapter there are references to the ministry of the Spirit.

In this book, we see God’s call to all kinds of ministries and, whether it is a call to witness or to serve tables or to solve a problem or the need of guidance, the work of the Spirit is essential. The indispensable requirement is for men and women who first are filled with the Spirit.

Unfortunately, we miss this. We think the first requirement is changed character or service or ministry. Men are called to witness (2:8), to serve others (6:1f), to preach the gospel (3:12f), etc., but Scripture first calls us to be filled with and to walk by the Holy Spirit because this constitutes God’s enablement so we can be the Christians we have become.

This principle is evident in Mark 3:13-15 and Luke 6:12. Following a whole night in prayer, the Lord (an evidence of His own dependence on the Father) called and appointed disciples. In this He commissioned them to two major responsibilities: (a) that they might be with Him and (b) that He might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons. The nature of this commission and the order is significant. Being with Him, fellowship with the Savior, was foundational and the source of enablement for their task of preaching and power over demonic forces (cf. Acts 1:8). Another passage that points to this important quality of a word-filled, spirit-filled life is Acts 6:1-7.

The Problem (vs. 1)

Now in these days, when the disciples were growing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Greek-speaking Jews against the native Hebraic Jews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Wherever there are people, there will naturally be problems. This is a fact of life. There is no board of elders or deacons that is perfect. There are no perfect churches and no perfect families. Why? Because they are all made up of imperfect people, sinners saved by grace.

A lady complained to a well-known Bible teacher that she couldn’t find a church to her liking. She found fault with every church she visited. He said, “it sounds like you are looking for a perfect church, with perfect people. If

you find such a church, let me know, but please don't join it." "Why," she asked? "Because you would ruin it, and so would I!"

Dealing with problems is a necessary part of life, especially for leaders. It goes with the territory, but the most indispensable need is men who are filled with God's Spirit manifesting God's wisdom, patience, and loving character.

Problem Solving (vs. 2)

So the twelve called the whole group of the disciples together and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to wait on tables.

Problem solving includes: (a) identifying the problem, (b) evaluating it, and (c) solving it through investigation, study, prayer, and the wise application of information to the specifics of the problem. But for that we need the leading of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we simply do not experience His leading, not because of any reluctance on the part of the Holy Spirit, but because there are spiritual rocks in the gas line—we haven't met the requirements for the filling of the Spirit. But this was not the problem here in Acts (cf. Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31).

"So the twelve called the whole group of the disciples together" (vs. 2). The twelve, being the leaders at that time, took the leadership in seeking ways to solve the problem. But they summoned the people only after they had studied the problem, and as spiritual men acting on the principles of the Word, they came up with a solution that would not only solve the problem, but that was in accord with the principles of the Word. They refused to act out of expediency or as mere pragmatists, i.e., the end justifies the means, or by looking for whatever might work and that would get the people off of their backs. Rather, they demonstrated spiritual discernment. After studying the situation, they then declared to the people what they could not do and why. Ministry and leadership is a matter of identifying God's priorities, knowing what God has called us to do, and then spending our time in those pursuits rather than in secondary issues no matter how important those things are. Secondary matters can render leaders ineffective in their primary responsibilities and will spread them so thin they become ineffective in everything. This means spiritually mature leaders must learn to train and recruit others to share in the work of the Lord. Thus, to solve their problem, they engaged in the process of selecting others who were qualified to serve. Note the following principles we learn from their action:

(1) The principle of biblical selectivity (vs. 3) "But carefully select from among you, brothers, seven men who are well-attested, *full of the Spirit and of wisdom*, whom we may put in charge of this necessary task." The actions of the apostles highlight the importance of biblical selectivity in the recruitment process. The essential principle in recruitment no matter what the ministry need is to select people for ministry based on the principles of the Bible rather than expediency.

In order to find people to help or do the work of ministry, church leaders often become desperate and will take just about anyone if they are alive and moving. There is a great temptation here when they see needs and hear the complaints and criticism of others because needs aren't being met. Naturally, problems are blamed on the leaders, so the tendency is to panic, jump the gun, and recruit people regardless of their qualifications. But the needs would be better left undone in many situations than for the leaders to select the wrong people or try to do everything themselves.

God knows the needs and our responsibility is to rest in His sovereignty and stick to the principles of the Word (cf. our Lord in Mark 1:29-39; 3:12f; Luke 6:12). To select those whom God has not selected, those who are not willing to count the costs, who are carnal and full of the wisdom of the world, is to forfeit God's blessing and power on our ministries.

The essential issue, regardless of the need, is not in the nature of the task whether it's teaching the Word, ministering to the sick, or sweeping the church, or greeting people at the door. The great need is for spiritual people regardless of the task. Giftedness for a task or ministry is another matter and issue.

(2) The requirements of selection (vs. 3). "But carefully select from among you." Normally, God wants us to go into our own ranks for people. This means the church needs to be training, building, and thus developing servants for ministry from among our own people. Here is a priority for leadership that is far sighted and provides for the future. "Select" is the Greek. *episkeptomai* from a root which "denotes the activity of looking at or paying attention

to a person or thing.”¹ The verb can mean, depending on the context, “to observe, review, superintend, watch over, inspect, examine, care for, and select” (i.e., after examination). This is clearly the opposite of “grabbing” someone who is not spiritually qualified. simply to fill a need.

For instance, apart from Acts 6:3, *episkeptomai* is used for the loving and seeking care of God.² An important passage is Numbers 27:16, 17. Here it is used in the LXX in the sense of appoint, but it is used in connection with God’s loving care for the cares and needs of His people. In Acts 6:3, *episkeptomai* means “to select,” but obviously only after examination according to the standards given in the passage. Here it is used of an appointment that occurs after searching and finding those who had a heart for the care of others, of those who had come to realize that, as Christians, they did not exist for themselves alone, but for others.

It becomes evident that this word and its active form, *episkopeo*,, “to oversee,” became important in the selection of these first servants and in the selection of the title, *episkopos*, “overseers,” for the leaders of the church. This word and its use in the rest of the New Testament suggests we are to look for men and women who possess an attitude of godly concern for the Christian community, an obvious work of the Holy Spirit.

“Seven men.” The number seven was not the issue though in Scripture seven is the number of completion. If the number seven means anything it simply means we are to survey the need and seek to select as many as are needed to fill the need. It could be five or twelve, but the number is never to exceed the number qualified.

“Men of good report.” The idea here is men who possess a good testimony among the congregation. It refers to men whose lives witnessed to the next two qualities as the proof of their authenticity.

“Full of the Spirit” is the most indispensable requirement. Men who are full of the Holy Spirit are men whom the Holy Spirit can control, lead, and work through. This means men who have God’s heart and concern for others, men who display the fruit of the Spirit.

A man may have a good reputation, but is it such that it is clearly the manifestation and work of the Spirit of God? We often see men who have good reputations, they are religious, moral, likable, talented, and genuinely nice guys, but this can be the product of their own activity produced from their own neurotic needs like the desire for recognition, position, power, applause, or even to soothe a guilty conscience.

God wants only those in places of leadership and responsibility who are controlled by His Spirit, because only these are in hearing distance of His voice; only these will have the capacity to care for others with the heart of God. Such are His selection and such must be the criterion for our selection. Those we select for leadership and places of responsibility should give unmistakable evidence of the power of the Spirit in their lives, i.e., His fruit in attitude, expression, and action.

“Full of wisdom.” Wisdom is *sophia*, which often includes two things: (1) content, the wisdom of the Word, Bible truth, but it also includes (2) the wise use or application of truth to the details of one’s life. This means the practical application of the Word so that it results in biblical and Christ-like change. Scripture is never an end in itself but it is God’s means to Spirit-produced results (cf. Eph. 4:20f; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

(3) The goal of the selection (vs. 3): The goal is seen in the words “whom we may put in charge of this task” (lit. need). But this appointment was dependent upon following the requirements. As is evident in the preceding chapters, behind the activity of the apostles was the executive ministry of the Holy Spirit. In the church, it is to be the Holy Spirit who puts men into ministries or places of responsibility. He is the heart and power of the church and its missionary activity and loving concern for the body as in the need here in Acts 6.

As Oswald Sanders so pointedly reminds us:

Behind the actions of the apostles, the executive activity of the Spirit is seen everywhere. As supreme Administrator of the church and chief Strategist of the missionary enterprise, He is everywhere prominent. It is abundantly evident in the record that the Holy Spirit is jealous of His prerogatives and will not delegate His power or authority to secular or carnal hands. Even men

¹ Colin Brown, General Editor, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Zondervan, Vol. 1, p. 188.

² Brown, p. 191.

whose duties would be largely in the temporal affairs of the church must be men mastered and controlled by Him. Their selection must not be influenced by considerations of worldly wisdom, financial acumen, or social acceptability; they should be chosen primarily because of their genuine spirituality. When a church or other Christian organization departs from that pattern, it amounts to a virtual ousting of the Spirit from His place of leadership. As a consequence He is grieved and quenched, with resulting spiritual dearth and death.”³

As the Holy Spirit controls a man, so He controls a body of men. If the leaders are not walking by the Spirit, the Holy Spirit can't lead the body. If those appointed to various tasks are not controlled by the Spirit, then the tasks will be done in the energy of the flesh rather than by the Spirit's enablement. Oswald continues:

The Holy Spirit does not take control of any man or body of men against their will. When He sees elected to positions of leadership men who lack spiritual fitness to cooperate with Him, He quietly withdraws and leaves them to implement their own policy according to their own standards, but without His aid. The inevitable issue is an unspiritual administration.

The church at Jerusalem was sensitive to the exhortation of the apostles and selected seven men possessing the requisite qualities. As a result of their Spirit-filled activity, the disaffection was quickly healed, the church was blessed, and the men selected to dispense earthly benefits were soon seen as the Spirit's agents in dispensing heavenly blessings. Stephen became the first martyr for Christ, and his death played no small part in the conversion of Saul. Philip became the first lay evangelist and was used by the Spirit to lead the great revival in Samaria...⁴

The inevitable result of unspiritual leaders is spiritual failure. Why isn't the body of Christ more effective today in truly following the principles and mandates of the New Testament? Why aren't we seeing more ministries devoted to both evangelism and the equipping of the saints for service and ministry, the kind that reproduces itself in mature and serving believers. This is the mandate of the New Testament (Matt. 28:19-20; Eph. 4:11-16; 2 Tim. 2:1-2), but something is missing.

Could the answer be that a large percentage of the church is not walking by the Spirit and biblical wisdom? Could it be that by-in-large the church today is just religious, going through the motions, going to church, and even working in the church but often for selfish reasons? Does the church today exist for itself only? Let's make this more personal. Do we worship God only for what we get out of it? Are we trying to use God rather than be used by God? The irony of this kind of worship is that such isn't really the worship of God nor does it lead to genuine love for God. It is the worship and love of self, not God. When people truly love and worship God it results in the love of neighbors, in reaching out to the world around us, first in the body of Christ and then to the world (Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; 1 John 3:17-18; 4:7-8).

But why does this situation exist today? With so much in the Bible on the ministry of the Spirit as the believer's enablement or power and the power and necessity of the Word in the life of the Christian, why do we see churches that are so weak, at least biblically speaking? Of course, there are mega-churches with mega-programs and mega-bucks, but are they producing mature believers and leaders who are multiplying themselves in the lives of others? Certainly this is one of the true evidences of the work of the Spirit!

May I suggest that part of the reason for anemic churches is because a large part of the church today has lost the *evangelical essential*. The evangelical essential is a renewed emphasis and commitment to the study of the Word and particularly the teachings of the epistles with their strong emphasis on sound doctrine. The key note of this sound doctrine is salvation (delivered from sin's penalty) and sanctification (delivered from sin's reign) by faith alone in Christ alone as revealed in Scripture. Too often today, the emphasis is more on deeds, especially social reform and political correctness, rather than on Bible doctrine. Such an emphasis is simply man's continuing attempt to change the world by human effort as though we can have biblical, Spirit-produced works without sound doctrine. Granted that sound doctrine must never be considered an end in itself, it is nevertheless a vital means to Christ-like transformation. Even a casual study of Paul's epistles, and especially his instructions to Timothy and Titus, should put such an idea to rest. Sound doctrine is the foundation for deeds of mature Christian growth that are the result of

³ Oswald J Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1967, 1980, pp. 97-98.

⁴ Sanders, p. 98-99.

the ministry of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth who takes the truth of the Word and uses it to transform lives (cf. John 17:17; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Thus, if churches want to produce godly and mature leaders who have the marks of maturity they must return to teaching what could be called the ABCs of Christian Growth (see 1 Cor. 3:1f; Heb. 5:11f). For instance, how many Christians today really know, understand, and live by the basic biblical truths of the Spirit-controlled life? I am afraid the answer to that question is overwhelmingly sad. Unfortunately today, many are being prodded and manipulated into doing good works and changing their lives, etc., but without understanding how to live the Christian life in the power of the Spirit in the light of the Word.

For studies on this aspect of New Testament doctrine, may I suggest the following:

ABCs for Christian Growth: Laying the Foundation especially Part 2: "The Transformed Life." on our web site at <http://www.bible.org/docs/splife/abc/toc.htm>.

He That is Spiritual, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Zondervan, Grand Rapids.

True Spirituality, Francis A. Schaeffer, Tyndale House, Wheaton.

Growing Deep in the Christian Life, Charles R. Swindoll, Multomah Press, Portland.

Keep In Step With the Spirit, J. I. Packer, Fleming H. Revell, Old Tappan.

The Wonderful Spirit Filled Life, Charles Stanley, Thomas Nelson, Nashville.

Mark #3: A Powerful and Productive Private Life

Introduction

There is a phenomenon that occurs in certain parts of the country known as a sink hole. A sink hole occurs when the ground underneath the surface gives way and everything collapses creating a huge hole in the ground. Sinkholes can swallow cars, entire buildings, or whatever is above the ground where the hole occurs.

Sinkholes occur, scientists say, when underground streams drain away during seasons of extreme drought, causing the ground at the surface to lose its underlying support. Suddenly everything simply caves in, leaving people with a frightening suspicion that nothing—not even the earth beneath their feet—is trustworthy.”¹

The sinkhole phenomenon forms a parable of sorts for this mark of maturity. In fact, this mark is undoubtedly the bedrock upon which strong Christian character and spiritual maturity is built. Without it we become just like a sinkhole: the public life, that which people see, finally caves in because our streams of living water which are there to undergird us become dried up (or quenched, see 1 Thess. 5:19). That which is to form the foundation or resource of our spiritual life simply has no substance or is replaced by the underlying shallow waters of turmoil, fatigue, frustration, and self-management, and we begin to cave in from an inability to remain occupied with the Lord and His sufficiency. In the words of the psalmist, we need to get still (stop striving) and recognize that He is God (Ps. 46:10). Some consider this statement to be addressed to the hostile nations, indicating they should cease their efforts to destroy God’s people, but it is much more likely that the Psalmist was addressing Judah, calling on them to rest secure in God’s protection and sovereignty. For this to occur, however, they needed to stop their activity and quit trying to solve their own problems and focus their hearts and minds on the Lord—His presence and promises.

...Instead of choosing a negative option, the people of God distinguish themselves by the pursuit of godliness: “Know that I am God.” The “knowledge” of God includes a factual knowledge about him, his past acts, and his promises. But in this context the psalmist calls on them to commit themselves to the Lord and to seek his “refuge,” “strength,” and “fortress” (vv. 1, 7, 11). The life of faith is lived continually in commitment to God’s sovereignty, rule, and ultimate exaltation over all the nations (vs. 10; cf. Hab 2:13-14)...²

So what is this mark that provides a bedrock, the essential underlying strength necessary to sustain our lives? It is a powerful private life. Simply put, we can never know and focus on God as our strength and fortress and experience Him as the bedrock of life unless we take time to get still before Him in prayer and Bible study which allow us to focus the heart and mind on the Lord.

By a powerful private life I am referring to the believer’s inner life nourished up by the springs of the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and a life of prayer. This is a life made luxuriant and productive as believers spread their roots deep by the streams of the Word through quiet, meditative study and prayer. After extending their roots deep in private, they can become truly productive and authentic in public. To simply use the words of Isaiah, as the remnant would take root downward that they might bear fruit upward, so believers today need to do the same in their personal lives (Isa. 37:31).

This emphasis on one’s private life, sometimes referred to as one’s quiet time, is based on four truths of Scripture:

¹ Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World*, Oliver Nelson Publishers, Nashville, p. 13.

² Willem A. VanGemeren, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Old Testament*, Frank E. Gaebel, General Editor, 1976-1992. Zondervan Publishing House. Electronic edition, 1998.

- We simply do not possess in ourselves the spiritual resources we need to either direct our path or to find the strength and wisdom we need to handle life (Jer. 10:23; 2:12-13; 17:5f).
- The indwelling Christ desires to be at home in our lives and desires to bring order into our private world—the world of our attitudes and thinking, our values, priorities and goals, and our sources of trust (Eph. 3:17).
- The indwelling Holy Spirit was given by the Lord to strengthen and fortify our inner person with His might as a stream of living water (John 7:37-39; Eph. 3:16).
- It is based on the marvelous life-changing power of the inspired Word of God with which we are to feed the inner man (Ps. 119:9-11; 1 Thess. 2:13).

It must become obvious to us, as Scripture everywhere makes clear, that if we neglect our private life with God, our inner man will simply not be able to sustain the weight and pressures of life. If the inner man is not supported by the bedrock of intimate fellowship with God wherein we come to know Him more and more deeply, it is going to be undermined by the shallow waters of the secular and destructive currents of the world and our inner life will simply not be able to sustain us in the pressures and dry periods of life.

But it is here we face an important question. What is a powerful private life? What needs to take place in one's personal time with God? Obviously many things should be taking place, but may I suggest three things:

(1) It is the place of refocusing and renewal. It needs to become a place where we focus our lives upon the living God, a place where we, away from the hustle and bustle of life, get to know God more and more intimately, where we get still and know that God is God (Ps. 46:10; Heb. 12:1-2). It thus becomes a place where we get our eyes off of self, problems, conditions, circumstances and on the Lord. It becomes a place of refuge, not so we can run away from responsibilities, but to be strengthened to serve by a renewed awareness of God's person, power, and purposes.

(2) It is the place of reevaluation and rearrangement. This is where we seek to reevaluate our lives and rearrange our values, motives, goals, attitudes, behavior patterns, and pursuits. It is also a place where we come to grips with our sources of self-trust and our self-management patterns. Included here is the principle of rejection. Have you ever noticed how we tend to evaluate and throw something away when we rearrange a garage or spring clean a house, etc.? So likewise, as we spend quality time alone with the Lord, we often find things, attitudes, fears, false sources of trust, etc., that need to be rejected and thrown out.

(3) It is the place of restraint and resistance. It is where we must learn to deal with our ourselves to restrain and resist, by God's enablement of course, anything that might hinder our personal walk with God as well as our relationships with others. The goal is God's control of more and more of our lives.

One's public life naturally consists of various works, service, labor, ministry, and leisure activities, but it is our private world which becomes the fountain of supply and the foundation of support (cf. Ps. 36:9 and Prov. 4:23 with Jer. 2:12-13). It is our private time alone with God in His Word, that nourishes the inner world of our spiritual lives, which in turn governs the outer world of our activities.

The principle is simply that no one can do enough for others if he or she is always surrounded by others. THE EMPHASIS HERE IS NOT ON DOING, BUT ON BEING. Gordon MacDonald writes, "if my private world is in order, it will be because I am convinced that the inner world of the spiritual must govern the outer world of activity."³ In the atmosphere of hurry and business with such a multitude of interests vying for attention, we can easily lose God's power and hand on our lives and ministries as well as our courage and vision for what God wants to be doing both in us and through us.

The majority of us spend our lives working on surface issues while ignoring the foundations. We get an education, learn a trade, work in the home or at our jobs, build houses, buy furniture, and accumulate things. We work in the church, teach the Word, or serve in a dozen different ways. We may have a certain amount of time set aside for preparation for a Sunday school class or a home Bible class, and we may, for personal devotions, grab a few minutes with our Bibles and quickly run through a prayer list, but if we are not very careful, this can be done in the spirit of legalism or, as one friend used to say, "Doing a little nod-to-God routine."

³ MacDonald, p. 19.

Why does this become just surface activity or merely routine? Because what we really are on the inside, our goals, aspirations, motives, frustrations, attitudes, phobias, and our self-dependent strategies for living all go untouched and unchanged. We remain the same people today that we were five years ago, though very religious in many ways.

We may hear sound Bible teaching, be encouraged or exhorted by a brother or sister in Christ, but if this is not reinforced through a personal private life with God, much of the impact of this sound teaching and exhortation will be lost; it will be like water over a ducks back. The result? Our hearts will grow hard and become lukewarm, if not down right cold.

With this in mind, let's look at a number of passages that address our need of a powerful private live alone with the living God.

Key Passages on Getting Alone With God

1 Kings 17:2-3—God's Command to Elijah

2 And the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 3 “Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan.

Following the prophet Elijah's public confrontation with King Ahab and in preparation for his ministry that would follow, especially the confrontation on Mount Carmel, what was the word of the Lord to Elijah? It was simply, “Go away from here,... and hide yourself.”

People often complain about how hard it is to know God's leading, but the biggest difficulty is not God's leading. It's our listening, and too often, *our listening is colored by our false expectations*. We want the Lord to answer us and use us in our own way. We want God's blessing on our will rather than seeking God's will. We tend to make up a list of what we would like to do for the Lord, and then present it to the Lord for His approval.

But what the Lord would now tell Elijah was most likely contrary to what he was expecting. After all was he not a prophet, and had he not come to proclaim the Word to Israel? Was he not there to serve, to preach, to perform miracles, and to be active for the Lord? *But please note that the Lord didn't tell Elijah to do any of these things*. In view of this, the command that follows is very interesting and illuminating. It reveals one of the great insights and priorities of the Word, one that busy, self-sufficient, workaholic people who have been bitten by the bug of activism and/or materialism have a hard time grasping. So, why is Elijah commanded to go and hide himself? Some think for protection from Ahab. Perhaps that was part of it, but it was certainly not the primary reason. Later, when the Lord was ready, He would send Elijah to face the king, and when next Elijah met Ahab, the king made no attempt to slay him (1 Kings 18:17-20). Rather, it seems to me, the reason was **seclusion or concealment**.

The Hebrew word for “hide” is *sathar*. It means “to hide conceal, cover,” and in the Hebrew text it is a reflexive stem and refers to what one does to and for himself. So it means “to hide, conceal yourself.” It refers to a deliberate and decisive choice. A main idea of the verb is “to be absent, out of sight.” So literally it means “**absent yourself**.” The noun form, *sether*, is used of the womb as a secret place and a place of shelter (Ps. 139:15). Finally, the verb form is used in relation to God's presence as the omniscient One who becomes like “a hiding place, a shelter for His people.” Psalm 17:8 says, “keep me as the apple of the eye; **hide** (*sathar*) me in the shadow of Thy wings.” Psalm 31:20 says, “Thou dost hide (*sathar*) them in the secret (*sether*) place of Thy presence from the conspiracies of man; Thou dost keep them secretly in a shelter from the strife of tongues.”

Elijah faced a number of tests or challenges in 1 Kings 17:3-7, but the first one came from this command to go and hide himself. This was a test of Elijah's basic orientation and attitude toward life. The question that Elijah faced was “why does God want me to go and hide?” In the answer he was faced with a fundamental need of life.

This time by the ravine was designed to maintain Elijah's inner life with God, the life of faith and occupation with the Lord that would allow God to become his hiding place. The test comes in Elijah's faith, particularly as it pertained to the need of seclusion when there was so much that needed to be done. Because we tend to be so self-dependent and so neurotic about staying busy, we don't see the need to get alone with the Lord for extended times. We have come to equate spirituality and character with business or activity. This time by the brook was to further prepare Elijah for the testing and the ministry that would follow. It would become a place of testing and growth for him.

Elijah needed, as we all do, a time of *seclusion*. We need time alone—away from the hustle and bustle and the comings and goings of the rest of society—even from our own family, church, and friends.

To be used of God. Is there anything more encouraging, more fulfilling? Perhaps not, but there is something more basic: *to meet with God*. To linger in His presence, to shut out the noise of the city and, in quietness, give Him the praise He deserves. Before we engage ourselves in His work, let's meet Him in His Word...in prayer...in Worship.⁴

How many of us truly hear the inaudible or see the invisible realities of God. What does it mean to have ears to hear? Let me share a story that illustrates the point:

An Indian was walking in downtown New York City alongside a friend who was a resident of the city. Right in the center of Manhattan, the Indian seized his friend's arm and whispered, "Wait. I hear a cricket."

His friend said, "Come on! Cricket? Man, this is downtown New York!"

He persisted, "No, seriously, I really do."

"It's impossible!" was the response. "You can't hear a cricket! Taxis going by. Horns honking. People screaming at each other. Brakes screeching. Both sides of the street filled with people. Cash registers clanging away. Subways roaring beneath us. You can't possibly hear a cricket!"

The Indian insisted, "Wait a minute!" He led his friend along, slowly. They stopped, and the Indian walked down to the end of the block, went across the street, looked around, cocked his head to one side, but couldn't find it. He went across another street, and there in a large cement planter where a tree was growing, he dug into the mulch and found the cricket. "See!" he yelled, as he held the insect high above his head. His friend walked across the street, marveling, "How in the world could it be that you heard a cricket in the middle of downtown, busy Manhattan?"

The Indian said, "Well, my ears are different from yours. It simply depends on what you're listening for. Here let me show you." And he reached in his pocket and pulled out a handful of change—a couple of quarters, three or four nickels, and some dimes and pennies. Then he said, "Now watch." He held the coins waist high and dropped them to the sidewalk. Every head within a block turned around and looked in the direction of the Indian.

It all depends on what you're listening for. We don't have enough crickets in our heads. We don't listen for them. Perhaps, like that crowded street full of people, you have spent all your life searching for a handful of coins and you've missed the real sounds of life?⁵

You see, there is no life in any one of those coins, nor can they really buy life or happiness even if you have millions of them. The only way we find true satisfaction or meaning in life is to hear the invisible, the inaudible voice of the living God, the Lord Jesus through developing our capacity to hear and see Him by getting alone with Him.

So then, spiritually speaking, time alone with God where we can drink and feed on His Word and think on the Lord becomes a *kerith* to us, a place of cutting, a place where God can chisel away on our character and cut the world away from our hearts. It enables us to divorce ourselves from the world and its pulls. Without it we become married to the world. We need this that we might draw upon and use our supernatural resources in the Lord, His Word and prayer. We get alone with God, first to just know and love Him, and then to bring order and strength to our inner life. We do this to bring the Savior's control over every area of our lives, over our **motivations**, what moves us, the things that pull us to conform or to compete; over our **perspective** of life, why we are here and what are we seeking, over our **priorities and values**, the use of our *time, talents, treasures, and truth*, and over our *thought* processes (2 Cor. 10:4,5).

My friends, getting alone with our God is not *optional*. If we want true spiritual success it is **fundamental**. It's a key part of God's plan by which His people are first strengthened by the underground spiritual streams of life in

⁴ Charles Swindoll, *Quest For Character*, Multnomah, Portland, 1987, p. 38.

⁵ Charles Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, Word Books, Waco, 1985, p. 37f.

Christ and changed and cut into the ravine that God wants to use to make us a channel for the blessings of Christ to others.

Here is the key to power or weakness. While this has varied as a problem from age to age, one of the battlegrounds of life and especially of this age is the inner, private world of the individual and the need to slow down and to hide oneself alone with his God.

It is here that we either experience the power of God or the defeat of Satan and his world system.

To put it bluntly, life on planet Earth *without* God is the pits. And if I may repeat my point (Solomon does numerous times), that's the way God designed it. He made it like that. He placed within us that God-shaped vacuum that only He can fill. Until He is there, nothing satisfies. **NOTHING** (my emphasis).⁶

And I might add, that is why so many people stay so eternally busy and become workaholics or preoccupied with pleasure. They are bored and empty and seek to fill their lives with activity.

We who “worship our work and play at our worship” need to wake up to reality. The preacher of Ecclesiastes warns us about the stark reality of the nothingness that exists in a life lived primarily “under the sun.”

Commenting on Solomon's “futility of futilities” expressed in Ecclesiastes, Allan Hubbard, president of Fuller Theological Seminary wrote: “This futility is akin to irony, because it is full of surprises... Values that we treasure prove false; efforts that should succeed come to failure; pleasures that should satisfy increase our thirst. Ironic futility, futile irony--that is the *color of life*.”⁷

We dare not forget that Solomon, the author of Ecclesiastes was a man who had everything, indeed, he had everything in luxurious abundance. The issue here is not more, or a great society, or the removal of all the problems of society. When you add the conditions of a society like Elijah faced or like we face in the world today, then the feelings of futility, the pain, the frustration, the troubled hearts, the dashed expectations, the sense of chasing the wind are magnified many times over.

Here, then, is one of the key themes of Scripture. God has designed it this way in a fallen world. You see, the brilliance of our hope in the Lord needs the stark, black backdrop of the utter futility of life under the sun to cause us to see our need and drive us to our knees. Indeed, the word of the Lord which came to Elijah, “go hide yourself,” needs desperately to be heard by every one of us.

Mark 1:35-39—Christ Withdraws for Prayer

35 And in the early morning, while it was still dark, He arose and went out and departed to a lonely place, and was praying there. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for Him; 37 and they found Him, and said to Him, “Everyone is looking for You.” 38 And He said to them, “Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may preach there also; for that is what I came out for.” 39 And He went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out the demons.

This passage in Mark gives us another example of the importance of our private world through the life and priorities of the Savior Himself. But the context of this passage makes its instruction even stronger. This time that Christ sought alone with the Father was very early in the morning. It occurred in the midst of great popularity when people were clamoring for the Lord's attention and when there were needs all around Him. He could have become enamored with His popularity, or preoccupied by the needs pressing against Him. But what does the Lord do? He protected His private time alone with the Father so that he might be and do what God called Him to do. Again we see how one's *being* precedes *doing*! The Lord Jesus was driven neither by His own impulses nor by the needs of people. Rather, he was guided from the hidden resources of His intimacy with the Father. Thus, He could do what God had called Him to do. He was not seeking from others or from activity what He could find only in the Father.

⁶ Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, p. 85f.

⁷ David Allan Hubbard, *Beyond Futility*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1976, pp. 13-14, Quoted by Swindoll in *Living on the Ragged Edge*, p. 27.

Mark 6:30-32—Christ Calls His Disciples to a Remote Place

30 And the apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. 31 And He said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while.” (For there were many *people* coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) 32 And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves.

Another beautiful illustration is found in this passage of our need to be alone with the Savior to focus on Him. Here again the context is one of activity. In this case, the disciples had been preoccupied with “all they had done and taught,” but the Lord called them to come away to a lonely and quiet place. They were to learn the lesson of the dailies, of the need of daily time alone with the Lord because service and ministry must flow out of fellowship with the Savior as the source and resource of one’s life and ministry. In this endeavor, they were interrupted by the large crowd that ran ahead and were waiting on the shore when the Lord and His disciples arrived. But the Lord used this interruption place as an opportunity. Through the feeding of the 5000, the Lord sought to teach His disciples that if they were to be effective in ministering and see their ministry effectively multiplied, they must learn to first draw from His resources which required times of pulling aside from the hustle and bustle of the daily grind to spend time alone with the Lord in the Word and in prayer.

Psalm 1:1-3—Planted by Streams of Water

1 HOW blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 And he will be like a tree *firmly* planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season, And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers.

Again, in this wonderful Psalm, we see the principle that our fruit (vss. 1 and 3b-c) is always based on the proper root system, which, by the analogy of the context, is one’s private life with God in His Word (vss. 2- 3). One of the great battles we all face daily is the battle for our private world wherein we feed and draw upon the living Christ, where our minds are fortified and focused on the Lord. MacDonald writes:

There is a contest that must be fought particularly by those who call themselves practicing Christians. Among them are those who work hard, shouldering massive responsibilities at home, at work, and at church. They are good people, but they are very, very tired! And thus they too often live on the verge of a sinkhole-like collapse. Why? Because...they become too public-world oriented, ignoring the private side until it is almost too late.⁸

We live in a society of secular humanism that seeks to live life apart from God through dependence on man alone. This evil mentality has emptied over into the mind-set of the Christian community. While giving lip service to God in various religious ways, we too often forsake the Lord to build our own cisterns, but they turn out to be broken cisterns that hold no water (Jer. 2:13). As the Savior points out in Matthew 6, the unbelieving world worries about what it eats, drinks, and wears in its search for security, safety, and even significance. This amounts to depending on one’s own wisdom and solutions to life rather than in the living God (Matt. 6:25f). Such thinking invariably leads to a search for happiness in the details of life like possessions, power, and pleasure. But the Christian is certainly not exempt from this mentality as the admonitions of Matthew 6:19f make clear. Thus, the Christian’s first priority must be to seek to know the Lord more deeply and to rest in the Lord more completely (Matt. 6:33-34). Vital to that is time alone with the Lord in the Word and in prayer as Psalm 1:2 stresses.

In speaking about the important role of Scripture meditation, Paul Meier writes:

Because man is a holistic being, his spiritual, psychological, and physical faculties are complexly intertwined. Every aspect of man’s nature affects him as a whole being. Daily meditation on the principles of life passed on from man’s loving Creator is more important for his health than food or sex or any other factor.

A primary reason Scripture meditation is vital for holistic health is that God’s thought patterns and values are in sharp contrast to mankind’s. Man is totally depraved being, possessing selfish and ultimately self-destructive thought patterns and behavior. Show me a natural man, untaught in

⁸ MacDonald, pp. 15-16.

God's principles, and I'll show you a natural man who suffers from emotional pain. I'll show you a man who experiences the guilt and discomfort of a God-vacuum. I'll show you a man who is unconsciously fighting and struggling for a sense of significance, using world ways (e.g., sexual fantasy, materialism, power struggles, and prestige) in a vain attempt to attain significance, all of which will fail. The ways of the world bring temporary relief, like bandaids on open flesh wounds, but not ultimate relief from man's inner awareness of his insignificance apart from God....

Ultimately, man's sense of holistic well-being can come only from a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. But man needs more than salvation for joy and peace in his daily existence. Many of my anxious, depressed, and even suicidal patients are born-again believers who have not yet been taught how to appropriate personally God's thought patterns and behavioral principles, as outlined in the Bible. Instead, they have been misinformed by their parents, their peers, and frequently even by their churches. They have learned to think negative, self-critical, other-critical, destructive thoughts. They have become accustomed to behavior patterns that result in increased guilt, insecurity, and feelings of insignificance.⁹

In the paragraphs that followed these comments by Meier, he described the results of an extensive research study on the mental health (i.e., true spiritual maturity) of seminary students. The study showed that "Students who practiced almost daily Scripture meditation for *three years* or longer were significantly healthier and happier than students who did not meditate on Scripture daily."¹⁰

⁹ Paul Meier, *Renewing Your Mind in a Secular World*, Edited by John D. Woodbridge, Moody Press, Chicago, 1985, pp. 25-26.

¹⁰ Meier, p. 27.

Mark #4: A Biblical Concept of Oneself

Discerning Who You Are and How You Fit Into the Plan of God

Introduction

Every age has its own special characteristics and our age is no different. The apostle Paul warns that in the last days, men would be “lovers of self...rather than lovers of God” (2 Tim. 3:2, 4). In our day the concept of self image, self esteem and self love has become a hot topic and the subject of much discussion.

One of the big debates going on today is the place of psychology in Christianity. A host of writers and theologians have criticized psychology for being self-centered, humanistic, ineffective, and anti-biblical. Others argue for the legitimate use of psychology maintaining it is a science and thus legitimate. In a recent article in *Christianity Today* entitled, “The Mind Doctors,” the author, a Christian psychologist, writes, “Few Christians today would say we need know nothing more about chemistry or physics than the Bible teaches. The same holds true for psychology, itself a science (p. 19, *Christianity Today*, April 8, 1988).

Without getting into that debate, one thing is clear and I believe true. As Paul warns us, we are living in a day in which we have become lovers of self and our society has become self-centered and satiated with self and self-hyphenated, self-fixated words like self-actualization, self-esteem, self-worth, and self-fulfillment.

Christian books also reflect this. Some examples are: *Love Yourself, The Art of Learning to Love Yourself, Loving Yourself, Celebrate Yourself, You're Someone Special, Self Esteem: You're Better than You Think*, and probably the best known of all, *Self Esteem: The New Reformation*, by Robert Schuler.

A leading Christian psychologist has said, if a prescription could be written for the women of the world that would provide each one of them with a healthy dose of self-esteem and personal worth (taken three times a day until the symptoms disappear) this would fill their greatest need. But is this statement really true? Part of the problem here is semantics and there is no doubt that wrong thinking about ourselves is at the heart of a lot of misery, fear, doubt, loneliness, and withdrawal. But we do need to be careful here. Is the problem one of low self-esteem or a collection, indeed, a barrage of self-centered thoughts rather than biblical God-centered thoughts about who we are and how we fit into the plan of God? Is the issue one of exalting, lifting up ourselves, or one of exalting God and His plan and revelation concerning who we are?

What is the solution? What do we need? Well first, we must not attempt to scripturalize some psychological fad or world viewpoint, nor should we allow ourselves to become self-centered and caught up in the ‘selfism’ of the world. But it is true that having a right (biblical) self-concept or thinking properly about ourselves in the light of God’s grace is important to spiritual maturity, to healthy spiritual lives, and effective ministry. This is an issue that is addressed in Scripture as is evident in a number of passages (Rom. 12: 3f; 2 Tim. 1:7-8; 1 Tim. 1:18; 4:12-15; 1 Cor. 16:10).

The subject of our self-concept or self-image creates a kind of paradox. The Bible-believing Christian knows that he is a sinner, that in himself dwells no good thing, and that in himself he has no merit with God; yet, like a paradox, at the same time, he also knows, as a creation of God, created in God’s image and redeemed by His grace, he has value and purpose in life.

So how do we hit a proper balance? How do we avoid the self-centered approach and focus of the world and at the same time have a biblical concept of self, a proper viewpoint of our own value and purpose that sets us free to serve the living God, that sets us free from those thoughts and feelings that tie us in knots and ruin our personalities, create false agendas and motives that so people are incapacitated for ministry?

That we think properly about ourselves is important and is even commanded in Scripture. In Romans 12:3, the apostle wrote, “For by the grace given to me I say to every one of you not to think more highly of yourself than you ought to think, but to think with sober discernment, as God has distributed to each of you a measure of faith.”

The basic word for “think” in this passage is *proneo*, which means “think, form or hold an opinion, judge.” “Sober discernment,” is *so,phroneo*, “be of sound mind.” It means “to be in one’s right mind, be reasonable, keep

one's head." But first, the apostle warns us against thinking more highly of ourselves than we should." The Greek word here is *hyperphroneo*, "to think too highly of oneself, to be haughty." Ironically, quite contrary to our society today, the apostle does not warn against thinking too little of ourselves. Regardless, the sound thinking Paul is calling for is grounded in biblical revelation and faith in the work of God for us in Christ. Paul is calling for thinking and personal evaluation based on the authority of God's revelation and on the facts of God and His grace. It means we are to look at ourselves through the lenses of Scripture.

To Timothy, whom some expositors have nick named "Timid Tim" because he seems to have been having problems with his self-confidence (or confidence in God's gifts and ministry for his life), Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 1:7, "For God has not given us a Spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline" (or sound-mind thinking). The Greek word for "discipline" here is related to the word used for *thinking* in Romans 12:3. It is *so,phronismos* from *so,phro,n*, "sensible, prudent." It comes from *so,s*, "safe, sound, and *phre,n*, "the heart, the mind, or the inner man." *So,phronismos* refers to "control, self-discipline, prudence" that stems from right thinking. A controlled life, one that demonstrates self-discipline stems from soundness of mind, from knowing and acting on the truth of Scripture in the light of God's grace in Christ. In both passages, Romans 12:3 and 2 Timothy 1:7, the context deals with God's gifts to us and the bold expression of those gifts in loving ministry for the sake of the body of Christ.

Thinking properly about ourselves stems from right thinking about God, but then that extends to right thinking about others so that it results in a freedom to serve according to the grace of God.

Now, let's ask some questions: What am I worth as a person? Do I feel good about who I am or do I wish I was someone else? Have I accepted who I am as a person, not my sin or sinful habits, but the uniqueness God has created in me as a person (Ps. 139:13-14)? How we answer these questions may play a key role in what we do with our lives, how we live our lives, in the joy we experience in life, in the way we treat others, and in how we respond to people and to God.¹ "Research has shown that we tend to act in harmony with our mental self-portrait. If we don't like the kind of person we are, we think no one else likes us either. And that influences our social life, our job performance, our relationships with others."²

A biblical concept of self developed out of our concept of God and His grace is important to solid spiritual maturity, to ministry, to our ability to lead others, and especially to our ability to be servants. Without a biblical concept of self, we end up playing spiritual king-of-the-mountain and engage in promoting personal agendas to build up a sagging ego. We seek from position, power, and praise what we should get from resting in God's grace.

Thus, in order to effectively lead or minister to others we must think biblically about who we are. This means two key things: (a) we need to know our abilities and limitations while (b) always keeping in mind a biblical view of God, His grace to us in Christ, and knowing our sufficiency is always in God regardless of our abilities or weaknesses (see 2 Cor. 2:16-3:6).

Why is thinking in these terms so important? Because without it we will vacillate between fear and pride or between insecurity and overconfidence. Without this we will become either withdrawn and introverted or we will find ourselves running around in a hubbub of activity trying to feel good about ourselves because of our achievements. Paul's spiritual maturity and qualification as a leader is seen in his freedom to serve others because, resting in who he was in Christ as a servant called of God by grace, he was not seeking to protect a poor self-image or to impress men with his greatness (cf. 1 Cor. 4:1ff; 1 Thess. 2:1-6).

An inadequate self-image robs us of the energy and powers of attention to relate to others because we are absorbed with our own inadequacies. That is especially true when we're in the presence of people who remind us of our shortcomings or whose judgment about ourselves we value and want to influence. In such situations we are so self-conscious that we cannot give sufficient attention to others. As a result we may be regarded as being either uncaring or proud. Our feelings of inadequacy prevent us from reaching out to love and care for others...

Persons with an inadequate self-image look to other people's opinions, praise or criticisms as determining factors in how they feel or think about themselves at a particular moment. Persons

¹ Josh McDowell, *His Image, My Image*, Here's Life Publishers, San Bernardino, 1984, p. 11.

² McDowell, p. 18.

with a poor sense of self-worth are slaves to the opinions of others. They are not free to be themselves.³

What we need is a holy boldness and a relaxed confidence based on knowing God and resting in Him while also knowing that we are each His unique creation both physically and spiritually.

But how can we arrive at a state of mature spiritual equilibrium? May I suggest that this involves a number of things that we need to know, apply, and relate to. There are at least five biblical truths that are needed for a mature concept of one's self-image. Understanding and relating to these five concepts will enable a person to relax in who they are without fear or pride, or without insecurity or a false sense of pride or arrogance.

Mature Believers have a Biblical Concept of Their Self-Image

Mature believers derive their sense of self-worth and value from their union and co-identification with Jesus Christ in all His fullness, personal gifts, and provision, and from knowing He has a will and purpose for each believer (cf. Rom. 12:3f; Eph. 1:3; 2:10; Col. 2:10 with 1 Tim. 1:12-15; 1 Cor. 15:9-11). Unfortunately, many people perceive themselves according to a portrait they developed early in life from the messages they received from their environment—parents, friends, teachers, etc. These may be good or bad, true or false, but it is this perception that forms the basis of how most people feel about themselves. Part of the maturing process as believers is the ability to see ourselves anew according to our new life in Christ, having been recreated according to and in God's image for a new kind of life.

21 if indeed you heard about him and were taught in him just as the truth is in Jesus. 22 You were taught with reference to your former life to lay aside the old man who is being corrupted in accordance with deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and to put on the new man who has been created in God's image—in righteousness and holiness that comes from truth (Eph. 4:21-24).

9 Do not lie to one another since you have put off the old man with its practices 10 and have been clothed with the new man that is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the one who created it. 11 Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all (Col. 3:9-11).

(1) The alternative to the self-love of the world or a self-image based on religious or ethnic background or social status is not self-hate or rejection of one's worth or value, but a recognition of where and how that value is to be derived through God's grace to us in Christ.

(2) The alternative to the world's kind of self-esteem (one based on social status, performance, appearance, religious background, etc.) is not self-negation, but an understanding and acceptance of God's grace and provision for us in Christ which alone gives us true meaning and value.

(3) The alternative to the self-fulfillment of the world is not a life of meaninglessness or aimlessness, but a life totally engrossed in God and His purposes so that fulfillment is experienced naturally (or spiritually) through relationship and involvement with God rather than through preoccupation with self.

Note the following verses:

- Romans 12:3 teaches the responsibility to discover, know, and think rightly with faith about who we are based on the gracious work of God in Christ.
- Genesis 1:26-27 teaches that we are all created in the image of God. This means our lives have special value even though the image has been marred by the fall and sin.
- Psalm 139:12f teaches us we are each uniquely created according to God's own purpose—warts and all.
- Proverbs 16:1-4, 8 teaches us about God's sovereign and providential hand in each person's life to work out His purposes.

³ McDowell, p. 21.

- Ephesians 1:3, 6; 2:10; and Colossians 2:10 teach the fact of God's spiritual re-creative work in us and for us in Christ, which includes His complete provision, our spiritual union with Christ, and a special purpose in God's plan.
- Romans 12:4f; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:7; and 1 Peter 4:10 teach the fact of our giftedness and capacity to serve as members of the body of Christ. This means each believer is needed and has great value.
- Colossians 3:10 and 2 Corinthians 3:18 teach the responsibility and the potential as new creations in Christ to be conformed bit-by-bit to the image of God as revealed in the person of Christ through the Word and the filling (control) of the Holy Spirit. This means we are each earthen vessels, instruments for the glory of God with purpose.

What does all this mean? It means these spiritual truths should give every believer a sense of special purpose, a sense of destiny and conviction of God's hand on his or her life. Such a sense of destiny can drive men or women to unbelievable lengths and enable them to achieve unprecedented things for God if they will just grasp and act on these facts of Scripture rather than focus on mankind's standards for success or meaning.

But the problem is that people tend to look at others and their gifts, achievements, and popularity and measure themselves by what they see in others. We compare people with people. This not only gets our eyes on men and off God and His grace and plan, but it creates feelings of inferiority, jealousy, pride, and factions. This leads to a second important principle in thinking biblically about ourselves.

Mature Believers Use the Right Standard (Yardstick) for Judging Success

The Lord Jesus and the principles of Scripture must become our yardstick or the means by which we measure our value and self-image (cf. 1 Cor. 3:4-7; 4:1-5; 15:9-11; 2 Cor. 10:12; Eph. 4:13). The following set forth a few of the biblical reasons why this is so necessary to have a right tool of measurement.

(1) We are instruments of God. Effectiveness is always a product of God's activity regardless of our labor or methods or cleverness or wisdom (1 Cor. 3:4-7).

(2) What counts with God is faithfulness to His grace! What counts with God is faithfulness in the use of the opportunities, abilities, and ministries that He gives us and not success as it is so often measured by men (Luke 12:42; 2 Tim. 2:2; 1 Cor. 4:1-2).

(3) All that we have is the product of God's Grace. Whatever we have by way of abilities, talents, ministries, and even opportunities are gifts of God's grace, even the very breath we draw (Rom. 12:3a; 1 Cor. 15:9-11).

(4) Jesus Christ is our standard and goal, not men. As mentioned previously, men may become examples of Christ-likeness, but even then, they become examples only as they point us to the Savior as they themselves become like Him (1 Cor. 11:1). Christ, as our standard, is the standard of excellence, but we don't measure this by the opinions and standards of measurement used by the world or men. We measure it by the precepts of Scripture, the mature moral characteristics of Christ-likeness. Let's note two key scriptures in this regard:

Ephesians 4:13 ...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God—a mature person, attaining to the measure of Christ's full stature.

Church leaders are to equip the saints (vs. 12) with a view to spiritual maturity in Christ. But this also points us to the standard, the measure by which we judge true biblical maturity and effectiveness. Note the three goals here of the edification process of the equipping of the saints. God wants unity and He wants maturity, i.e., spiritually-mature people, but the measure of that unity and maturity is nothing less than the very fullness of the stature of Christ. "Measure" is the Greek *metron*. It was used of "a standard of measurement, the gauge by which something was measured," and "of what was measured out, the portion." For the Christian life, Christ is in essence both our standard for growth and maturity and the portion we experience as we grow in Him and become like Him by the grace provisions of God.

1 Corinthians 4:1-3 "People should think about us this way—as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Now what is sought in stewards is that one be found faithful. So for me, it is a minor matter that I am judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself."

We should desire to be thought of as simply faithful servants and stewards of God. This means we are not to measure ourselves nor allow ourselves to be measured by the standards men so often use as was the case with Corinth. God may use others in various ways to help us learn and grow in Christ-like standards, but the final test is Scripture, not the opinions of men.

(5) A right standard is important to spiritual stability. Having and using a right standard for effectiveness or success is important to sound spiritual growth, maturity, and effective leadership or ministry. Why? Because without it you will be measuring yourself, your value, your progress, and success by the standards of men and their response to you. Typically, man's standards are such things as numbers, names, personality, charisma, and the like. This is wrong, it is pure folly. Paul wrote, "For we would not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who recommend themselves. But when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding (unwise)" (2 Cor. 10:12). Why is it unwise? Because wrong standards of measurement will harm to our ability to serve and do our job as unto the Lord for the blessing of others according to the purpose of God (cf. Jer. 1:17-19; 1 Cor. 4:1-5; with 2 Cor. 10:10 and 6:11-13). The simple principle is that false standards for success always lead to a number of problems that are detrimental to effective ministry and spiritual well being.

The following illustrate a few of the problems created by false standards of measurement:

- False standards lead to false motives like selfish ambition and to a spirit of competition wherein we view others as opponents to beat rather than friends to enjoy or fellow workers with whom we share work as co-laborers in Christ (Phil. 1:17).
- False standards lead to guilt, frustration, depression, and feelings of failure because we think we haven't measured up to these man-made standards. We end up working to please men rather than God (1 Thess. 2:4-6). False standards can also lead to the opposite—feelings of pride and often a false sense of success (1 Tim. 3:6).
- Trying to measure up to man's standards may also lead to fear of failure which can result in withdrawal. This may cause an unwillingness to try something or to get involved in ministry or it can lead to forsaking a ministry. For sure, it can cause one to lose the joy of ministry or service (2 Tim. 1:6-7).
- False standards can lead to self depreciation with the belief that we don't count and can't because we do not measure up.

Because of a failure to become and stay oriented to God's grace to us in Christ, or because of grace disorientation and the false thinking which naturally follows, many believers end up functioning in ministry out of neurotic needs. They feel inadequate and so may often serve in some form of ministry to compensate for their bad feelings: to overcome guilt, to get recognition, or simply to feel better about themselves. Others may fail to function at all because of the same kinds of feelings. They are afraid of failure or of what others might say.

This leads to a handicapped people who are often divisive and unloving because they end up competing with others and with themselves for a personal sense of significance. This leads to all kinds of spiritual and emotional problems. As a result, people go around wearing their feelings on their sleeve, they become touchy, difficult to deal with, and incapable of receiving correction or suggestions. To be corrected is to be belittled or to lose face. So they become more concerned for themselves than they are about Jesus Christ, His glory and for others. They become defensive, argumentative, and at the same time, fearful.

The problem is grace disorientation (Heb. 12:15). What is grace? It is the name for God's provision for us in Christ. The problem is we fail to rest in God's grace for our lives, that is, our new life and position in Christ and the principles and promises of the Word along with the filling of the Spirit.

But what are some of the false standards that we often use like rungs to climb the ladder of success and personal feelings of significance?

- **Comparing appearances, abilities or personalities:** God does not give us all the same abilities, intelligence, aptitude, or personality. I am not to look at another man's ability or personality and decide that I can or can't take on a particular ministry or responsibility based on my comparison with him. I am not to think or say, "If I had his way with words or his personality, then I could..." (cf. Paul [1 Cor 2:1-5; 15:7-11; with 3:1-3 and 2 Cor. 10:10], Moses [cf. Ex. 4:10-11 with Acts 7:22 and God's estimation]).

- **Comparing bank accounts or possessions:** Most people get their sense of value and competence from how much they make, from the size of their home, or from the kind of car they drive. But compare the Lord Jesus (Matt. 8:20). Money is never the basis of success nor of our ability to serve God. The amount we earn is simply not a barometer of God's blessing. God has chosen the poor of this world rich in faith (Ja. 2:4-8; I Cor. 1:26-30).
- **Comparing friends or people we know:** In talking to some people you wonder if they shouldn't write a book entitled, *The Ten Most Important People Who Have Met Me*. Who we know has absolutely no bearing on our success or ministry or leadership abilities unless knowing them has been a means of our learning or an indication of our training and qualifications for a particular ministry (cf. 1 Tim. 2:2; 2 Tim. 3:14). But even then, unless appropriated, it means nothing.
- **Comparing results like nickels, names, and noses:** Results can be a product of God's blessing (Acts), but not necessarily. Results can also be the product of catering to the whims and fancies of the world that is looking for emotionalism, entertainment, and the sensational (2 Tim. 4:3), or to human manipulation as seen in some of the various cult leaders that have been successful in drawing a large number of people after them.

For an illustration of God's evaluation of success in contrast to man's evaluation one only needs to compare Numbers 20:8-12 and Psalm 106:32-33. In the eyes of men Moses was a success because he got results, but in God's eyes, he, at this point, was a failure. THE ISSUE OF SUCCESS IS ALWAYS OBEDIENCE TO GOD, not pleasing men nor seeking to satisfy man's whims or standards of success (cf. 1 Thess. 2:4). On the other hand, the results we see can be negative and considered by men a failure, but are successful in the purpose and eyes of God. One only needs to compare both Isaiah's and Jeremiah's call and success (Isa. 6; Rom. 11:25 with Isa. 28; 55:11; Jer. 1:17f). Both Isaiah and Jeremiah were told in advance they would not be a success by the world's standards. They were to preach messages of judgment to which Israel would react rather than repent. Part of the reason for their assignment was to give further evidence for God's judgement of Israel (cf. Isa. 6:9-10; Acts 28:25-28).

As Isaiah 55:11 shows us, our preaching can be a means of 'back door evangelism.' God's purpose with His Word for Isaiah was not positive. It was negative to demonstrate the hardness of Israel's heart and the necessity of judgment. The point is we can't always evaluate spiritual maturity or leadership or our success by names, nickels and noses and certainly not by the methods the world uses for success.

Another illustration is seen in Mark 4 with the parable of the soils and the purpose of this parable. The people were wondering why the leaders and the nation as a whole were not responding to the message of Christ. The parables of the *soil*, the *sower*, and the *seed* answer this question. They show that the problem was not in the message (the seed) nor with the messenger (the sower), but in the condition of the soil.

Another illustration is that of 2 Timothy 4:9f. Paul had been deserted and was in prison waiting to die, but he was anything but a failure. He could have very easily begun to feel sorry for himself, "no one wants to follow me, my men have deserted me; I must be doing something wrong, I am a failure." But as a mature man in Christ, Paul had a very different perspective and wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

In his book, *Failure: the Back Door to Success*, Erwin Lutzer tells the following story that provides an excellent illustration of a mature man who derived his sense of significance and self image from the Lord rather than from the opinions of people.

A friend of mine who pastored a small church told me how depressing it was for him to attend pastors' conferences. There he would suffer through the reports of the wonderful success of other churches. It seemed that all churches had either doubled in their membership or tripled their income during the preceding year.

His church, on the other hand, was small and had a history of difficulties. It had problems with bitterness, complaining, and factions. On some occasions the pastor was publicly humiliated by irate members. His story (which could be the subject of an entire book) reminds us that carnal Christians can be just as obstinate as worldly pagans.

What did the pastor do? He lived with the abuse. He preached the Scriptures and taught doctrine. Eventually, a few individuals began to show signs of spiritual growth. In the lives of a handful, there was fruit. But most of the seed fell by the wayside; it was choked by thorns of worldly anxiety or drowned in the slough of resentment.

When I heard the full story, I said, “Roy, I would not have stayed there for a month!” His reply was a rebuke: “I’ve always wondered if I had love for people. God put me in the most trying situation I could endure. He wanted to teach me how to show love in a place where there was none!”

Was he a success? Not if nickles [sic] and noses are the measuring sticks! Results *can* be a barometer of God’s blessing but not necessarily.⁴

A spirit of comparison, whether it involves comparing others with others or ourselves with others, is biblically defined as carnal, worldly, immature, and can even be devilish (see 1 Cor. 3:1ff; Jam. 3:14-16). It leads only to hurt and harm, failure and malfunction.

Finally, Peter’s response to the Lord’s revelation regarding Peter’s future and the Lord’s response to Peter’s question about John’s future in John 21:18-22 provides us another illustration of our tendency to make false comparisons or question God’s dealing with us in comparison to His dealing with others. Our tendency is to look at others and wonder, “Why me? Why do I have to face this trial while other believers do not?” Or “Why doesn’t God do with me what He is doing with so and so?” But the point is, “If God wishes to bless others more than us, if they are famous and we are unknown, if they are wealthy and we are poor, if they are highly gifted and we are less gifted (at least by men’s standards) what is that to us? Christ calls upon each of us to trust and follow Him. As long as we are pursuing the Savior with all our heart and doing our best in accordance with His supply, our responsibility is to simply follow the Lord.

The last words of our Lord in John 21 form an important message for all believers and especially for leaders. We must follow Him AND leave the results to Him as well. God is sovereign and we are His creatures. We are tools of His grace.

Mature Believers Live by Faith in Biblical Truths

(1) They will act on the truth of their identity in Christ. The Bible teaches us that every Christian is created in God’s image (Gen. 1:26,27), that each believer is uniquely and personally crafted by God from the womb (Ps. 139:12f), that each believer in Christ, has been recreated and is a new spiritual creation in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17), and that through faith in Christ, every Christian is a child of God by the new birth (John 1:12-13; 3:3-6; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23; Jam. 1:18). What a marvelous identity and heritage! Such a heritage means value beyond compare regardless of the responses of others or of the opinions of men.

(2) They will rest and act on the fact of their God-given abilities—natural talents and spiritual gifts. In Psalm 139:1-12, the psalmist declared his faith in the Lord’s knowledge of all the details of his life. However, the Lord not only knows and perceives the nature and needs of his people in general, but the psalmist believed in God’s personal purpose for his life. God is not only the Sovereign Creator, the Transcendent One, but He is also the Immanent One who is intimately concerned with the individuals He has created even from the womb and before!

In verse 13, the psalmist continues the emphasis on God’s personal involvement by an emphatic use of the pronoun “you” and by the use of the pronominal prefixes and suffixes to the verbs and nouns in the Hebrew text, which are translated by the English pronouns “you” and “your.” By God’s personal involvement, each individual is the result of the creative work of God (spiritually and physically) in the womb. The psalmist declares “You created my inmost being (the spiritual aspect)” and “you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (the physical aspect, cf. Job 8-11; Jer 1:5). All beings owe their existence, including their individual gifts and abilities, to God as the Sovereign Creator. Reflecting on the reality of this truth had a tremendous impact on the life of the psalmist. He knew that the Lord had formed him as a unique person with gifts and abilities according to God’s sovereign purposes.

⁴ Erwin W. Lutzer, *Failure: The Back Door to Success*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1975, 1984, pp. 23-24.

In verses 14-17, therefore, the psalmist personally responds to this awesome truth of God's immanent involvement in his very being. Acting on this truth and realizing the distinctiveness this gave to his life, the psalmist properly responded with praise to God for his life.

14 I will give you thanks, because your deeds are awesome and amazing. You knew me thoroughly, 15 my bones were not hidden from you, when I was made in secret, and sewed together in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw me when I was a fetus. All the days ordained for me were recorded in your scroll before one of them came into existence. 17 How difficult it is for me to fathom your thoughts about me, O God! How vast are their sum total! (Psalm 139:14-17 NET).

Compare also Romans 12:3f; 1 Corinthians 12:4-5; and 1 Pet.4:10.

(3) They will act on the fact of God's purpose and the nature of this life. Such creative activity and personal involvement by God naturally includes a purpose for our being in a given place and time in history. Regarding the response of the psalmist in Psalm 139:14f, VanGemeran writes:

...God is concerned with the individuals whom he has formed for his purpose. Therefore praise is the proper response to God's grace of discernment, perception, and purpose. The child of God sees God's presence everywhere (vv. 7-12) and experiences the joy of God's watchful eye over him. All of God's "works" are "wonderful," but the believer senses more than any other part of God's creation that he is "fearfully and wonderfully made." Though God's grace to him is like a "knowledge ... too wonderful for" him (vs. 6), he lives with a personal awareness of God's gracious purpose ("I know that full well"). The psalmist reveals a unique awareness of God's grace toward him and responds with a hymn of thanksgiving ("I praise you").

...The idea of purpose comes more clearly to expression in v. 16. The Lord's writing in the book (cf. 51:1; 69:28) refers to God's knowledge and blessing of his child "all the days" of his life (cf. Eph 2:10). His life was written in the book of life, and each of his days was numbered.⁵

This element of God's purpose for us is also seen in Ephesians 2:10, "For we are his workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared beforehand so we may do them." Simply put, God has a special purpose for each of us: no one is excluded. While some aspects of His purpose are the same for all of us (to glorify the Lord and live for Him, etc.), this includes a special destiny for each person according to the way God has gifted and brought us into this world.

But the nature of this life, who we are in Christ (blessed with every spiritual blessing and complete in Him, Eph. 1:3; Col. 2:10), and our ultimate destiny as believers in Christ should impact how we view who we are as individuals.

And if you address as Father the one who impartially judges according to each one's work, live out the time of your temporary residence here in reverence (1 Pet. 1:15-17).

Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to keep away from fleshly desires that do battle against the soul (1 Pet. 2:11).

If we truly know and act on WHO we are in Christ, WHY we are here (as ambassador sojourners), and WHERE we are going (our eternal destiny), we should be able to rest and relax while reaching out to serve and love people regardless of the success of others or of the response we get. This means living out of the fullness of Christ and our unique: (a) a new identity in him, (b) the spiritual ability that comes through him, (c) God's individual purpose for each believer because of him, (d) and the heavenly and imperishable rewards that come from him. Note the apostle's sense of this in the following verses even though he was being maligned and compared with others.

1 People should think about us this way—as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Now what is sought in stewards is that one be found faithful. 3 So for me, it is a minor matter that I am judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not acquitted because of this. The one who judges me is the Lord. 5 So then, do not judge anything before the time. Wait until the Lord comes.

⁵ VanGemeran, Electronic Edition.

He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the motives of hearts. Then each will receive recognition from God (1 Cor. 4:1-5).

Mature believers who know who they are in Christ, why they are here, where their strength lies, where they are going, and their ultimate destiny and reward—issues that are to be settled in one's heart by faith—will no longer be dependent on man's standards of success or on the response of others for their happiness or sense of identity or value. Why? Because they are comprehending and accepting by faith the value God places on their lives.

So, do we have an identity crisis every time we are challenged, questioned, or rejected in some way, or when we hear of the success of a fellow believer, or fail to see the success we expect or want? If so, Why? Perhaps because we are (a) seeking our sense of well being from the response of others or (b) from always wanting to be right, or (c) from our own evaluation of our success based on the standards of men. Could it be because we are dependent on the responses of others or our visualization of that response to: How do I look (**appearance**)? How do I do (**performance**)? Or how important am I (**status** or **position**)?

Such a perspective is not only immature, but it will ruin us for ministry. It will turn us from the servant to the served. This is why men often act authoritatively or why some are afraid to delegate jobs or responsibilities or why some become prima donnas.

In John 13:1f we see Christ knew who He was, why He was here, and where He was going. Though rejected by men, these three things, "Who," "Why," and "Where" formed the mental foundation for faith and for His ability to love and serve others. He never sought His sense of identity from men or from the typical comparisons of the world.

Think of this: Christ left the eternal glory of the Father to suffer the ultimate humiliation of a shameful *human* death. Yet, He never complained because He had to abandon the glory that the other two members of the Trinity retained. If He had compared His role in redemption with those of the Father and the Holy spirit, He might have felt cheated. Why should He—equal with the other two members—be the one to become the scum of the earth?

If Christ had compared Himself with other men (remember, He was fully human), He might have thought that He should be the greatest of them. Yet (incredibly) He became the lowest of them! When the disciples were wondering who would perform the duties of a household servant, Christ took a towel and basin of water and washed their feet!

How could the one who was so high stoop so low? One reason is that He did not compare Himself with others but cared only about meeting the standard that the Father had ordained. "I delight to do thy will, O my God" (KJV). That's all that mattered."⁶

By the world's standards, Christ was a miserable failure. He was born in a cow stall, raised in the despicable little town of Nazareth, unschooled in the accepted schools of the day, lived without money and without a home of His own, was tried and crucified as a criminal, and died naked with the Roman soldiers casting lots for His robe, His only possession.

Now, an important question to ponder: What is one of surest signs of mature spirituality? It is possessing the heart and mind of a servant. But servanthood is impossible if we are comparing ourselves competitively with others and seeking our sense of well being and success by comparing ourselves with other men. When that occurs, we are seeking to be served by our environment—indeed by our own service.

To be an effective and mature servant, we too must know who we are, we must have an identity derived from God and His standards, and we must know why we are here, and have a sense of God's destiny and purpose for our lives. We must serve with a view to doing God's will no matter what, and with a view to heavenly treasures and rewards, not those based on human comparisons (1 Cor. 4:1-5; 2 Cor. 10:12).

In regard to our self concept and maturity, leadership, and ministry, spiritually mature believers also live in view of another vital biblical principle.

(4) They will have a high God-confidence level; Christ's presence and provision becomes the source of their lives and ministry. Knowing who we are, what we can do and can't do is important, but above all we must

⁶ Lutzer, pp. 26-27.

have confidence in the Lord followed by boldness to move ahead. This is important to the servant himself and to those to whom he ministers (Phil. 4:13; 1 Cor. 3:6f; 4:1-5; 2 Cor. 2:14f). None of us are ever sufficient in ourselves regardless of who we are, regardless of our training, our physical qualities, our spiritual maturity, or our gifts and talents. This is wonderfully illustrated in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16; 3:4-6, and 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. These passages remind us that God may use our abilities, as He used Paul's training and keen mind—both gifts of God—but sometimes He gives us weaknesses and then works through us anyway to demonstrate His grace and power.

(5) They will seek to discover and correct those weaknesses that can be corrected. While all believers have God-given gifts and abilities, they also have weaknesses. Some of these can be changed and some cannot. Part of spiritual maturity is discovering those that can be changed and then seeking to correct them by the grace of God while learning to live with those that cannot be changed. God made us the way we are, not in our sinfulness, but in our basic makeup as to physical and intellectual limitations and as to our gifts and talents (Ex. 4:10-13; John 9:1f; Rom. 12:3, 4; 1 Pet. 4:10; Ps. 139:14, 15).

How should knowing this concept affect one's life? This doesn't mean that we are to accept sin as a way of life or sinful tendencies, habits, or mediocrity. It means we are to do the best we can with what God has given us (1 Cor. 15:9-10). It means we should be satisfied with our best and never covet another man's greater ability. However, we should seek to change what can be changed through the grace of God and according to the standards of the Word, not the world.

For instance, if I am physically out of shape so that I can't go up a flight of stairs without breathing hard, I should get in shape through the proper exercise and diet. If I can improve my mind by study for the glory of God and to enhance my ability to serve Him, I should. If I am in school and I can make A's, I should, but if, after hard work, consistency, and faithfulness, I end up with C's, then I need to thank God and move on. I should not sit around and mope because of my inability or another person's ability.

Understanding this concept should lead to at least four important steps:

- We need to thank God for who we are, unique and distinct with a message to unfold (Eph. 2:10; Ps. 139:14; Rom. 12:3; 1 Pet. 4:10).
- We should seek to know our strengths and develop our abilities to the fullest degree. In other words, we need to be all that we can be according to the creative and providential work of God in our lives. Remember, we are each the product of: (a) God's creative handiwork, (b) His providential direction and provision, and (c) our response to Him. For God's providence and provision compare Proverbs 16:1f; Mark 4:8,20; and 1 Corinthians 3:5-7 For man's Responsibility compare Colossians 3:17,23; 1 Corinthians 10:31; 15:10; and 2 Chronicles 31:20-21.
- We should seek to correct and change in our life what can be corrected as good stewards of God's grace and according to the directives and standards of the Word.
- We need to accept those things that cannot be changed, trust the Lord's design, and utilize the strengths of others in the body of Christ. No one should never try to be a one-man show.

The things we cannot change: Some weaknesses or deficiencies we can't change; these are not moral issues or problems of sin. Rather, these are what we can call the *unchangeables*. There are certain things in our lives that we cannot change and from which we may inherit certain limitations (cf. 1 Cor. 2:1f; 2 Cor. 12:5-10). They include: ancestors, time in history, race, national heritage, gender, family, physical features, mental abilities (natural aptitudes, mental limitations, and talents), physical size, abilities and handicaps, and aging and death.

The things we can change: These we will call the *changeables* and include things that we can do something about. In some cases these become issues in one's spiritual life while in other cases they are not issues at all. Where they are an issue and hinder one's walk with the Lord or capacity to minister, they become issues for change. The changeables include: weight, physical condition, physical strength, spiritual character or maturity, knowledge and its use, dress, posture, attitudes and viewpoint, facial expressions, habits or patterns, and skill, etc. Obviously, anything that is clearly contrary to the Word or the moral will of God is sin and needs to be dealt with by God's grace (Rom. 6:1f; Eph. 4:22f; Col. 1:9f; 3:4f; Proverbs., Ps. 119).

Conclusion

There are two large problems that face us as we seek to appropriate this mark of a Christian maturity:

(1) Our pride—the spirit of covetousness and the desire for public recognition, fame, applause. Let's face it. This is a spiritual issue. It is basically an unwillingness to rest in God's purposes for our lives and an unwillingness to wait for His evaluation (1 Cor. 4:3-5; Prov. 3:3-6; Ps. 37:4-6).

(2) Man's yardstick and scale of values. This has always been a problem even in the church as we see in 1 Corinthians 3 and 4 and in 2 Corinthians 10:10-12, but it has become an even greater threat and problem in our day because of the mediums of modern communication and the great notoriety that men so often receive. We face the "superstar syndrome" and people begin to compare their leaders and their churches by those of the superstars. The yardstick they use is far too often not that of the Word, but that of the world.

Naturally, this often results in (a) discouragement—I couldn't make a dent, I am not good enough or smart enough, (b) apathy—why try, I could never compare with so and so, (c) fear—I would fail. I simply can't measure up to people's expectations, (d) pride in self or other people, the fan club syndrome—"I am of so and so" (see 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4) and (e) divisions, cliques (1 Cor. 1:11f).

Again I would call our attention to the apostle Paul as an illustration of a spiritually mature leader who knew who he was in Christ, why he was here and where he was going. As a result, he was always able to minister to others as a mature servant in the most difficult of circumstances as is so clearly evident from the following passages.

1 People should think about us this way—as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Now what is sought in stewards is that one be found faithful. 3 So for me, it is a minor matter that I am judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not acquitted because of this. The one who judges me is the Lord. 5 So then, do not judge anything before the time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the motives of hearts. Then each will receive recognition from God.

6 I have applied these things to myself and Barnabas because of you, brothers and sisters, so that through us you may learn "not to go beyond what is written," so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of the one against the other. 7 For who concedes you any superiority? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as though you did not? 8 Already you are satisfied! Already you are rich! You have become kings without us! I wish you had become kings so that we could reign with you! 9 For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to die, because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to people. 10 We are fools for Christ, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, we are dishonored! 11 To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, poorly clothed, brutally treated and without a roof over our heads. 12 We do hard work, toiling with our own hands. When we are verbally abused, we respond with a blessing, when persecuted, we endure, 13 when people lie about us, we answer in a friendly manner. We are the world's dirt and scum, even now (1 Cor. 4:1-13).

12 For we would not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who recommend themselves. But when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding. 13 But we will not boast beyond certain limits, but will confine our boasting according to the limits of the work to which God has appointed us, that reaches even as far as you. 14 For we were not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach as far as you, because we were the first to reach as far as you with the gospel about Christ. 15 Nor do we boast beyond certain limits in the work done by others, but we hope that as your faith continues to grow, our work may be greatly expanded among you according to our limits, 16 so that we may preach the gospel in the regions that lie beyond you, and not boast of work already done in another person's area. 17 But "***The one who boasts must boast in the Lord.***" 18 For it is not the person who commends himself who is approved, but the person the Lord commends (2 Cor. 10:12-18).

For you yourselves know, brothers and sisters, about our coming to you: it has not proven to be purposeless. 2 But although we suffered earlier and were mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of much opposition. 3 For the appeal we make does not come from error or impurity or with deceit, 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we declare it, not to please people but God, who examines our hearts. 5 For we never appeared with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is our witness— 6 nor to seek glory from people, either from you or from others, 7 although we could have imposed our weight as apostles of Christ. But we were little children among you—like a nursing mother caring for her own children (1 Thess. 2:1-7).

Mark #5: Single-Minded Devotion to God

Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work (John 4:34).

So Jesus answered them, “I tell you the solemn truth, the Son can do nothing on his own initiative, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise (John 5:19).

I can do nothing on my own initiative. Just as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just because I do not seek my own will, but the will of the one who sent me (John 5:30).

The gifted men listed in Ephesians 4:11 are given by the Savior to equip the saints for the work of ministry for the building up the body of Christ. The goal is to bring all believers to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, a goal that is further defined as a mature person who attains to the measure of the full stature of Christ—Christ-likeness in character. Since becoming like the Lord Jesus is the measure of maturity, growth in single-minded devotion which so completely characterized His life is certainly a necessary ingredient in spiritual growth and a measure of maturity. Because the Lord Jesus is the epitome of devotion to the Father’s will, it is hard to imagine someone who is truly growing in Christ who is not also growing in the direction of single-minded devotion to God.

When the Lord called men to be His disciples, one of the fundamental qualifications was a ‘single eye,’ a life of total commitment to the Savior. The Lord Jesus invested His life in training men to become disciples who would be fully devoted to Him, to His commission to spread the gospel to a lost world, and build men and women in Christ.

But just who is a disciple? Is being a disciple synonymous with being a believer? Is the term ever used of unbelievers? Are there various kinds or degrees of discipleship?

In the broad sense, the word *disciple* means “a learner, pupil, apprentice, an adherent, a follower.” A study of the word discipleship in John’s gospel suggests there are degrees of discipleship, what J. Dwight Pentecost calls the *curious*, the *convinced*, and the *committed*.¹ To be a disciple in the **broadest** sense is to be a follower or learner of Jesus Christ. But in the **narrower** sense, as used by the Lord in His ministry, to be a true disciple meant to be fully committed in order to follow and learn from Him. It meant a life of devotion to Christ, self-denial, and obedience to His Word.

To this sense of discipleship which He defined as true discipleship (John. 8:31), the Lord attached very exacting conditions because without them the goal of a disciple—becoming like his teacher (Luke. 6:40), transformed into His image (Rom. 12:1-2)—could and would never occur. These, however, are not to be considered conditions of salvation. Rather, they are a summons to deeper levels of faith and commitment. Discipleship then, as illustrated in the life of Peter, denotes a new direction and a journey, not a state or an arrival. As spelled out in the epistles, discipleship is the process of experiential sanctification whereby the believer, in following and growing in the Lord, is transformed into the mature image of Christ by the Spirit of God (2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:12f).

But just what did the Lord mean by “he cannot be My disciple” in Luke 14:26 and 27? Does He mean he won’t allow such a person to serve or follow him? Or does he mean such a person doesn’t have the ability to make the right choices because, unlike salvation which is totally free, discipleship is costly? In this regard, one might compare the purpose of John’s gospel with that of the other gospels. In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) the emphasis is on the costliness of following the Lord as a disciple. In John’s gospel, the emphasis is on the freeness of the gospel by believing in Christ.

Another key question is what is meant by the term commitment? Ultimately, as Luke 14 and Romans 12:1 suggest, it means dying to self and allowing the Lord to take complete charge; it means by faith surrendering the right to run one’s life to the control and will of God. To put it another way, commitment means the dedication of one’s life to the revealed will of God; it means the desire and willingness to choose for the Lord and His values regardless of the cost. In essence then, it is a single-minded devotion which entails loving the Lord with all one’s

¹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Design for Discipleship*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, pp. 14-17.

heart. It means putting Him first and thereby seeking first the kingdom of God, i.e., the reign and rule of God in one's life.

Fundamentally, a single-minded devotion to God is a matter of faith or implicit trust in God. The Lord teaches us in Matthew 6:19-34 that having a sound eye (literally, a "single eye") gives the clarity needed to be free and able to serve God as one's master rather than money and possessions (see 6:22-24). It is a matter of faith in God's loving character and sovereign ability to provide (see 6:26-30). In the Decalogue, the first commandment was, "You shall have no other gods before (besides) me" (Ex. 20:3). The basis for this command was the fact of their redemption out of the land of Egypt, a land of polytheism where people worshipped many gods—the corn god, the fertility god, the storm god, etc. It was not enough to worship one God. They worshipped all the gods in order to have help in all areas of life. Thus, grounding all the commands on the statement, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery," (Ex. 20:2), God was calling the new nation to stop living in the old way and make a fresh start, one based on complete trust and loyalty to the God of Israel.

...It is as if He said: by saving you from Pharaoh and his hosts "by a mighty hand and a stretched out arm," by signs and wonders, by the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea, I gave you a sample of what I can do for you, and showed you clearly enough that anywhere, at any time, against any foe, under any privation whatsoever, I can protect you, provide for you, and give you all that makes up true life. You need no god but Me; therefore you are not to be betrayed into looking for any god but Me, but you are to serve Me, and Me alone.

In other words, in the first commandment God told Israel to serve Him exclusively, not only because they owed it to Him, but also because He was worthy of their entire and exclusive trust. They were to bow to his absolute authority over them on the basis of confidence in His complete adequacy for them. And, clearly, these two things needed to go together; for they could hardly have been whole-hearted in serving him to the exclusion of other gods if they had doubted His all-sufficiency to provide whatever they might need.²

It is this kind of trust and exclusive devotion to which Christ calls us as His disciples. Based on the all sufficient and finished work of Christ, God has done the most for us which guarantees His complete adequacy for whatever He may call us to here in this life. "If He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him freely give us all things" (Rom. 8:32). Ultimately, then, all the commands and principles and promises are summed up in this one great truth, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment" (Matt. 22:37).

Of course, one of the goals of discipleship is to become like one's teacher (Luke 6:40) and to be transformed into the likeness of the Savior (cf. Rom. 12:1-2) who was the supreme example of single-minded devotion to the Father

What, then, does a lack of commitment do to a person's ability to serve the Lord? As Matthew 6:24 and Luke 14:26-27 show us, a lack of commitment disables and leaves one enslaved to wrong values which in turn create wrong loves, wrong priorities, and wrong pursuits. The result is that when faced with difficult, costly choices, the partially-devoted or double-minded believer can never make the right choices whereas a single-minded devotion of commitment gives one the freedom to make the right choices through a new set of heavenly and eternal values, priorities, and pursuits.

Precisely, what does a single-minded disciple look like. He or she is one who is committed to walking through this life as a pilgrim, as a mere temporary resident, as one who is willing to travel light with a light grip on things. And as the Savior leads or guides, he or she is one who is willing to do what the double-minded person refuses to do—give up material wealth and the security it often provides along with possessions, prestige, comfort, and other things the world treasures and pursues. With his treasure in heaven and his eyes on the Savior, the devoted disciple does not labor for treasure on earth, or for a high standard of living, but may, as the Lord may call on him do, live without position or power or possessions or popularity.

Some important questions to ponder:

² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1973, pp. 243-244.

(1) What are some of the motivations for commitment? See 1 Corinthians 6:19; Jeremiah 10:23; Romans 12:1-2; 1 John 2:15-17; Titus 2:11-15.

(2) Is commitment an evidence of maturity and insight to life? If so, how?

(3) Why does the Lord mention the family in two passages (Matt. 10:37 and Luke 14:26) in connection with one's ability to be a devoted disciple?

(4) Where am I in the matter of commitment or devotion to the Lord? What is there in my life that hinders my availability to the Lord, i.e., what kinds of things affect this in my life? This would include things like one's drives and goals, treasures or values, fears, longings, one's level of understanding, unbelief or lack of faith, etc. What about our private time alone seeking to know the Lord more intimately? Following are some key verses that might help us here (Matt. 6:30; 1 Kings 18:21; cf. 1 Pet. 1:13f with 1 John 2:17; Rev. 3:10; Jam. 4:7-10; Jer. 2:13; Phil. 3:9f).

Our capacity to serve the Lord is directly related to our trust and commitment to Him and God's values and priorities. But single-minded devotion is also an evidence of maturity and insight to what is truly meaningful and has eternal ramifications in life. Commitment, then, or total devotion to the Savior is also an evidence of a maturing faith that has come to grips with the reality of eternal treasures (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16-18; Matt. 6:19-21, 30-34; 1 Pet. 1:17-18).

An important questions to reflect on is simply this: "Am I trying to do the impossible in that I am seeking to serve both God and the world?" Jesus said, "No one is able to serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. No one is able to serve God and possessions." James also spoke about the effects of being divided in one's mind. He wrote, "For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord, since he is an individual of two minds, unstable in all his ways" (Jam. 1:7-8). A question, then, that deserves serious reflection is: "Who and what has my allegiance and devotion?"

Mark #6: Biblical Conviction

Introduction

18 Against hope Abraham believed in hope with the result that he became *the father of many nations* according to the pronouncement, “*so will your descendants be.*” 19 Without being weak in faith, he considered his own body as dead (because he was about one hundred years old) and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. 20 He did not waver in unbelief about the promise of God but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God. 21 He was fully convinced that what God promised he was also able to do. 22 So indeed it was credited to Abraham as righteousness (Rom. 4:18-22).

Abraham is called “the father of us all” (Rom. 4:16). From the standpoint of *faith*, he was certainly the epitome of a man of biblical conviction as the book of Genesis and the above passage demonstrates. When all the odds were stacked against him, and even though at times he tried to give God a hand by taking matters into his own hands, he tenaciously held on to the promise of God.

But what exactly do we mean by the term *conviction*? Conviction means “the act or process of convincing,” “the state of being convinced,” or “a fixed or strong belief.” Thus, by *biblical conviction* we mean convictions or beliefs derived from and based on a commitment to Scripture, the Bible. As God’s Holy Word, it is the absolute index for the whole of our lives—faith and practice.

Conviction refers to the state of being convinced and confident that something is true; it means a strong persuasion or belief. In other words, conviction stands opposed to doubt and skepticism. When we think of a man of conviction, we also think in terms of action and direction. We think of a person whose convictions have a definite impact on how he lives, on what he does, says, and where he goes. By a man of biblical convictions we mean a man whose convictions are derived from Scripture and whose convictions affect him scripturally.

Biblical conviction is really the product of three things that characterize the ideal Christian leader or the person of maturity: (a) a *commitment* to Scripture as one’s authority, (b) the *construction* of specific beliefs and convictions based on that authority, and (c) the *courage* to act on those convictions in faith.

Illustrations

Isaiah

In the early chapters of Isaiah we see a nation that was destitute in its leadership. The leaders were viewed as adulterated, polluted, and diluted with the ideas and opinions of the world. As a result, Isaiah calls them “mere lads” and “capricious children” (Isa. 3:4, NASB). They were like immature boys who acted not out of biblical conviction, but out of caprice: from the whims and fancies of their wants and selfishly-motivated opinions. This resulted in expedient and arbitrary decisions where the end justified the means (cf. Isa. 1:21f; 3:1ff).

But what was the root cause of this failure then and now as we observe the deplorable leadership we see in our government, and far too often in the church? In place of the Word as their index for life, they had listened to influences from the East. They were religious, but they had abandoned the Word of the Lord and were a people without biblical convictions (cf. Isa. 1:10f; 2:5f; 5:13 with 20-24; and 8:16-22).

Apostate Leaders

The book of 2 Peter provides us with another illustration of the necessity of biblical convictions based on the absolutes of the Word. What was the basic problem of 2 Peter? It was apostate leadership or false teachers who were leading people astray in both doctrine and in moral behavior because one always follows the other. Unrighteousness is invariably linked to ungodliness and ungodliness is linked to unsound doctrine or a rejection of the truth (cf. 2:1-3, 14f). But remember, the degree of apostasy described in 2 Peter 2 and 3 never occurs overnight; it is a gradual and sometimes almost imperceptible process, at least at first. Such is the subtlety and the danger of failing to have sound biblical convictions. It is one of the reasons immature men are never to be chosen as elders (see 1 Tim. 1:6) and why doctrinal soundness is needed in mature leaders (Tit. 1:9).

If we do not reckon with its early symptoms and protect ourselves by a right position and behavior toward the Word, we gradually become desensitized and we then become more and more open to the deceptions of Satan and the secular and profane world. It's like the illustration of what happens when a frog is placed in a beaker of cold water and then slowly brought to a boil in contrast to what happens if you drop him into water that is already boiling. He will jump out of the boiling pot, but he doesn't even notice if the water is slowly brought to a boil.

This is why 2 Peter 1 (which precedes the section on apostasy) is protective and becomes an important passage on leadership. Second Peter chapter 1 not only deals with the concept of commitment to the Word, its value, and nature as the God-breathed revelation from God, but it does two more things: (a) it naturally exhorts us to mature Christian qualities which are, of course, qualities essential to leadership, and (b) then warns against that constant tendency to regress rather than continue to grow and mature. Like the second law of thermodynamics, things tend to go downhill.

Remembering that a man of biblical convictions is one who is affected scripturally, let's note a spiritual law: **The Law of Spiritual Deterioration.** Pollution of the Word (the mingling of our ideas, the failure to develop biblical convictions based on sound exegesis) leads to polluted thinking. Polluted living then leads to a loss of sound biblical leadership (i.e., men of biblical convictions). This leads to a breakdown in the home which in turn leads to the breakdown of society as is so evident in the early chapters of Isaiah.

Now, what exactly is meant by a commitment to Scripture? May I suggest that this includes at least three things:

(1) Recognition of Scripture as inspired and thus inerrant and the final word. The Bible becomes our index (2 Pet. 1:20-21; 2 Tim 3:16).

(2) Commitment to Scripture as our standard for thinking. Everyone has convictions, but are they biblical convictions? We must use the Word to filter everything that comes into our minds so we can bring every thought captive to the standard of Scripture. If, after careful study, they fit with the truth of Scripture, they are then qualified to be called biblical convictions. This means Scripture always takes priority over our opinions, experiences, and background. When we fail to do this we adulterate or pollute the Word and weaken its impact on our lives. A wrong understanding of Scripture will eventually necessitate wrong behavior. In other words, by the wrong approach, we can negate its authority over us (Mark 7:13; 4:23; Luke 8:18; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 3:14; 1 Tim. 6:20; 4:6; 1:3, 11).

(3) Commitment to Scripture means a commitment to excellence in its study, use, and application. This means being careful students who seek to rightly handle the Word (2 Tim. 2:15). The higher our view of the Bible, the more painstaking and conscientious our commitment and study should be. If the Bible is the Word of God, then away with slovenly, slipshod exegesis and application; away with that tendency to insert our opinions on the text; away with ignoring the text and assuming our ideas are correct without carefully studying the Word until it yields up its spiritual treasures (2 Tim. 2:14-19).

Thus, we have three responsibilities: (1) a **commitment** to Scripture, (2) the **construction** of biblical convictions, and (3) the **courage** to act on those convictions.

Mark #7: Moral Excellence

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith [moral] excellence,¹ to [moral] excellence, knowledge; to knowledge, self-control; to self-control, perseverance; to perseverance, godliness; to godliness, brotherly affection; to brotherly affection, unselfish love. For if these things are really yours and are continually increasing, they will keep you from becoming ineffective and unproductive in your pursuit of knowing our Lord Jesus Christ more intimately (2 Pet 1:5-8, emphasis mine).

Several questions are in order in preparation for this study on moral excellence. First, what is meant by moral excellence, i.e., what does this include? Second, why does man need moral excellence? Further, what is the relationship between moral excellence and being a believer of deep biblical conviction? In other words, how does one affect the other? How does Peter show or develop this in 2 Peter 1?

The Need for Moral Excellence

1 And although you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you formerly lived according to this world's present path, according to the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energizing the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom all of us also formerly lived out our lives in the cravings of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest (Eph. 2:1-3).

17 So I say this, and insist in the Lord, that you no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, being alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their hearts. 19 Because they are callous, they have given themselves over to indecency for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. 20 But you did not learn about Christ like this... (Eph. 4:17-20).

The Bible is written to sinful people, to those who, because of their spiritual death and darkened understanding, are alienated from the life of God, a condition which naturally leads to the practice of all sorts of evil behavior. The early Christians had been idolaters and worshippers of demons, adulterers, liars, and thieves. Constantly, the New Testament called them, as it does all generations of believers, to not be **conformed** to the world, but to be **transformed** by the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:1-2).

Because mankind is born in sin and by nature the child of wrath, his natural tendency is toward moral degeneracy and every evil work, not moral excellency or virtue. In simple terms, the absence of virtue leads to the decay and destruction of society or the law of the jungle. Since the murder of Abel, history is loaded with illustrations as seen not only in murderous tyrants like Stalin and Hitler but in the lying, adulterous, treasonous behavior in our own nation's capital.

The plain truth is that when nations turn away from moral truth and the absolutes of the Bible, it leads to the kind of behavior spoken of by Isaiah the prophet in Isaiah 5:3-23. In these verses the prophet pronounces a series of woes (vss. 8-23) on the degenerate house of Judah. Each woe describes the nature of Judah's sin as the basis for the divine judgment. The list reads like the headlines of today's newspapers and teaches us that the lack of moral virtue in a person's private life always has public consequences.² The comments in Isaiah 5:20-23 describe the pathetic way

¹ The translators note in the NET Bible has "Or 'moral excellence,' 'virtue'; this is the same word used in v. 3 ('the one who has called us by his own glory and *excellence*')." The Greek verb is *arete*, which means "moral excellence or virtue."

² Marvin Olasky has a new book out called, *The American Leadership Tradition: Moral Vision from Washington to Clinton* that deals with this issue. In it the author asserts that private actions have public consequences, and shows this historically in the lives of a number of leaders.

Judah had twisted the moral precepts of right and wrong in her pursuit of self-centered living at the expense of others (5:23). The effect, of course, was moral breakdown that led to injustice and extreme conditions of crime. This condition existed from the leaders to the common man. It touched the whole of Judah's society as it does today in our society.

Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! 21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, And clever in their own sight! 22 Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine, And valiant men in mixing strong drink; 23 Who justify the wicked for a bribe, And take away the rights of the ones who are in the right! (Isaiah 5:20-23).

The Source of Moral Excellence: The Cause of Moral Breakdown

I am particularly struck by the statement in Isaiah 5:21, "...who are wise in their own eyes, and clever in their own sight." The root issue in these chapters of Isaiah was Judah's lack of knowledge (biblical insight) because she had spurned the holy statutes of God's Word. "Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge; And their honorable men are famished, And their multitude is parched with thirst" (Isaiah 5:13).

In view of Isaiah's plea to Judah, "Come, house of Jacob, and let us walk in the light of the Lord" (His truth or His Word), we should be reminded of Hosea's statement to the northern kingdom later on in Hosea 4:6. "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children."

Where, then, is the moral will of God to be found? Naturally, since man cannot lead himself (see Jer. 10:23), it is to be found in the Bible—God's special revelation to man. For an Old Testament illustration, note the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 4:5-8.

5 Look! I have taught you statutes and ordinances just as he told me to do, so that you might carry them out in the midst of the land where you are headed to take possession. 6 So be sure to do them because this will testify of your wise understanding to the people who will learn of all these statutes and say, "Indeed, this great nation has a very wise people." 7 Indeed, what other great nation has a god so near it like the LORD our God whenever we call upon him? 8 And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as pure as this whole law that I am about to share with you today?

Through the Bible and the new life God gives us in Christ, He calls men to holiness, to a life that is contrary to their natural bent as those born in sin and under its domination (see Rom. 6; 8; Tit. 2:11-14; 1 Pet. 2:11-12; 4:1-3). Since the moral will of God is found for us in His Word, there is little wonder that these two, moral excellence and Scripture ("the exceeding great and precious promises") are closely tied together in Peter's argument in 2 Peter 1.

In verses 5-11 Peter gives us a list of Christ-like qualities that we are both to possess and increase in. These are, in essence, marks of spiritual growth and maturity. Only with such growth can we experience maximum production in the Christian life and become effective in leadership. But again, let's not fail to notice that these verses on character are sandwiched between verses that point us to the Word and the need to develop and act on biblical understanding and convictions. As Paul emphatically teaches us in Romans 1:18ff, unrighteousness is the result of ungodliness; but ungodliness is the result of rejecting the knowledge of God.

Moral Excellence as Used in this Study

Moral excellence has to do with excelling in the moral will of God, which, of course, is to touch every area of the Christian's life. But it is important to recognize that by moral excellence we are not simply talking about a list of taboos or overt sins such as adultery, fornication, drunkenness, lying, gossiping, stealing, and cheating. Moral excellence means the pursuit of the moral will of God in every area of life. This includes values, attitudes, priorities, goals or purposes, devotion, and Christ-like character in the home, at the office, at church, as well as in one's hobbies, and entertainment. Moral virtue is something that should characterize the Christian everywhere and in everything.

Peter’s Development of the Process of Moral Excellence

First, with Peter’s emphasis on “the knowledge of God” and “the exceeding great and precious promises,” the Word clearly becomes both the *foundation* and *instrumentation* for the production of the qualities of Christ-like character (vss. 2-4).

Second, Peter then follows this with an *exhortation* that calls upon us to make every effort in the development of these qualities of Christian character listed in verses 5-7.

Third, this is followed by a section we can define as *motivation* and *fruitful realization* i.e. the realization of our salvation in fruitful living and eternal rewards (vss. 8-11).

Fourth, in verses 12-21 we have two more sections dealing with the Word. This is of utmost importance because, as the rest of the book makes clear, we are living in days of intense apostasy which means apathy, self-centeredness, false teaching, and doctrinal and moral error. False doctrine and mere human opinions always lead to moral corruption rather than moral excellence. These verses fall into two sections: (a) *recollection*—the need to recall what they had been taught as a protection against forgetfulness (vss. 12-15) and (b) *justification*—the defense for this emphasis through the fact and nature of inspiration (vss. 16- 21).

In the process of developing verses 5-7, Peter used what we might call the pyramid principle to show how we are to be developing mature qualities of Christ-likeness from a proper position toward and use of the Word as God’s inspired revelation.



(1) This pyramid of qualities sits on the foundation of the Word, the precious and magnificent promises and the new life we have in the Lord. The Lord has provided everything that is needed for life and godliness through His Word and its revelation. Christians need diligence in the personal appropriation of that truth for continued growth and spiritual change.

(2) The first quality is faith, faith in the power of God’s grace and provision. While we must add all diligence to advance in the moral will of God and spiritual change, we are not to do so by the arm of the flesh but by faith in the provision and power of God (cf. 1 Cor. 15:10).

(3) The capstone is love. Love stands at the heart of Christian maturity and is a necessary quality of Christian leadership and servanthood. But this passage teaches us that without the other levels in the structure, we lose our capacity to love and thus also to lead as servants rather than as tyrants.

Each quality is to be produced in the sphere of the preceding quality: each seems to grow out of the soil and climate of the other. But that is not all. The new quality supplements and perfects the preceding until we reach the capstone which is love, the goal and that which is the epitome of Christ-like service. But the point is we cannot have the capstone without the rest of the building blocks of the pyramid. This is not to say that we cannot produce *love* until we have produced all these qualities to maturity, but there is a progression and a mutual dependency in that we

can show love only to the degree that we are developing the other qualities. The point is, each one becomes the productive sphere or the soil out of which the next quality grows.

Of course, the ministry of the Spirit is the inward energizer or the power to produce each of these spiritual qualities as Galatians 5:23 indicates. This passage in 2 Peter, however, shows the process the Spirit uses and how we must be diligent in cooperating with the Spirit's work and plan. In this, we have both the divine side and human side of responsibility.

In the pyramid of virtues, the first one listed is faith. Faith in the promises and principles of Scripture is the first quality needed for true spiritual progress. Contextually, by faith, Peter is talking about biblical convictions and beliefs concerning the many themes and truths of Scripture like the doctrine of God, the person and work of Christ, the Bible, and mankind, etc. This naturally includes the concept of trusting God so that we act on our convictions and beliefs. Why? So that as spiritually growing Christians we can get from point A to B to C and so on because we believe that God is leading us and we are doing what He desires. This first level, which is faith, is directly related to having the courage to act on biblical convictions.

The second quality in the pyramid of virtues is moral excellence. "Moral excellence" is the Greek *arete*,, "moral excellence, virtue." While the word "virtue" can look at virtue in general, its use here as one in a list of virtues seems to stress a moral excellence that stands out in the midst of a pagan society.

Conclusion

The hand of God cannot prosper the life and ministry of those who are not concerned with holiness and Christ-like change. Because of the holiness of God and His commitment to make us like His Son, lives that are not committed to moral excellence must of necessity result in the law of returns, of sowing and reaping. When we continually fail to pursue moral excellence we start down the slippery slope of mediocrity that eventually leads to various levels of carnality. Because the apostle Paul knew this, his prayers often showed this concern. Note this element of pursuing moral excellence in Paul's prayer for the Philippians in Philippians 1:9-11. Here the apostle Paul prayed that they might abound more and more in knowledge and in all (every kind of) discernment. The immediate aim or the intended result of this knowledge and discernment was that they "might test and approve the things that are excellent," i.e., what is best and not merely good or just better. "Test" is the Greek *dokimazo*,, "to put to the test, examine," and then with reference to the result of testing, "to approve, accept as proven valuable."

"Excellent" (NASB, KJV) or "what is best" (NET, NRSV, NIV) translates the Greek *ta diapheronta*, which, in this context, carries the idea of "things that transcend." The verb here is *diaphero*,, "to carry through," then, "to differ, be different, be different to one's advantage." Thus, it came to be used of the things that differ in the sense of being superior, or having greater value and meaning.

Another purpose for which Paul prayed was that they might stand pure and blameless in the day of Christ. Such a spiritual condition occurs, however, only because one experiences the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, i.e., first by *faith* (justification righteousness) and then by *fellowship* with Him (sanctification righteousness). But this too had an aim, "the praise and glory of God."

From the standpoint of our focus here, however, the key point is *testing, approving, and choosing* what is best, that which excels and is superior. The pursuit of moral excellence is not merely a matter of what is good over what is bad, but what excels and is best. It's a matter of priorities and what is genuinely advantageous or most profitable to one's spiritual life, growth, witness, and ministry. Mediocrity might be defined as that which is undeserving of blame but is *unworthy of praise*. The Christian's life is one that is to result in the praise and glory of God.

When Christians fail to pursue moral excellence they eventually reap the results: they will *seek bad counsel and company, make bad choices, and set in motion bad consequences*. To live after the patterns of our old life, as Peter reminds us in 2 Peter 1:9, is to forget: the nature of our Savior, the purpose of His coming, the goals of our salvation, and the reality of eternity and the Bema Seat of Christ. It is to live as earthlings and to seek our satisfaction in that which cannot satisfy and which will pass away (cf. Isa. 55:1-3; 1 Pet. 1:13-18; 2:11; 1 John 2:15-17).

The figures around which Paul builds his arguments in Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 are tremendously instructive here. They are figures designed to challenge us toward the spiritual change to be brought about in the lives of believers by the power of God. The following are some of the analogies used by the apostle:

1. putting off and putting on apparel
2. mortification and vivification
3. divesting and reinvesting
4. dehabituating and rehabituation
5. overcoming and becoming

Each figure or analogy is to be a product of and a response to the Christian's new life in Christ. This means a thorough moral change through a vital relationship with the Savior. Anything else (the absence of moral change) is totally contradictory to the believer's new life in the Savior. It is in essence to mock the Christian's salvation in Christ.

Many times Christians experience unfruitfulness simply because God removes His blessing from their ministry because they have grieved and quenched the Holy Spirit. But this is not the whole story. Such unfruitfulness is also the natural byproduct that immoral behavior will eventually have on one's capacity to serve and lead. Negligence regarding moral excellence renders a believer carnal, capricious, and causes him to act out of self love and impure motives.

The principle is simply that moral weakness incapacitates. It must and will lead to failure in spiritual growth which will naturally negatively impact one's capacity for any kind of effective service or leadership.

What, then, is the *issue*? The issue is, "Am I committed to moral excellence, true spiritual growth and change through my new life in Christ, or am I clinging to my own self-centered strategies to run my life in an attempt to find significance, security, and satisfaction?"

Mark #8: The Heart of a Servant

Introduction

In our quest for the marks of mature spirituality and leadership ability, we must not bypass that quality which so completely characterized the life of Jesus Christ, the quality of unselfish servanthood. Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45) The apostle Paul added to this focus when he wrote, “Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but the interests of others as well” (Phil. 1:4). But then pointing to the Savior as our great example, he quickly added, “You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had.” Paul then followed this exhortation with a strong reminder of the humiliation of Christ (Phil. 2:6ff) who, though being God of very God, emptied himself by taking the form of a slave. There is no question that if we as Christians are going to grow and mature into Christ-like character, we must experience progress in giving of ourselves in ministry to and for others. While we can and should find comfort and encouragement in Christ (Phil. 2:1), when properly grasped, that comfort should propel us into servants of the Savior and one another. Servant living stands opposed to the primary concerns we see today where the focus of our culture and society is more on our own personal happiness and comfort.

The preoccupation with self today is readily seen in slogans like, “be all you can be” or “experience your potential” and in the titles and subtitles of books like *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*; *The Total Woman*; *Joy in Sex*, *More Joy in Sex*, and the list goes on and on. While many of these books may contain biblical truth or genuine help in dealing with certain problems people face as human beings, the message, whether explicit or implicit, suggests the prime goal we should be pursuing is our own comfort and the experience of some form of self-expression rather than growth in the character and quality of the life of the Savior. Simply put, our modern day society, and this includes a great number of Christians, is focused on making satisfaction its goal, indeed, its religion. There is much more concern for self-fulfillment than for pleasing God and truly serving Him and others as seen in the life of Jesus. Typical of today is the enormous number of how-to-books not just for the secular world, but for the Christian community. These are aimed at directing us to more successful relationships, becoming more of a person, realizing one’s potential, experiencing more thrills each day, whipping ourselves into shape, improving our diet, managing our money, and on it goes. Again, while many of these things are important and have their place, it does take the focus off what is truly the heart of Christianity—knowing and loving God, and out of that resource and relationship, living as servants in the power of the Spirit according to the example of Christ.

But what exactly is servanthood? Servanthood is the state, condition, or quality of one who lives as a servant. Further, a servant is first of all one who is under submission to another. For Christians, this means submission to God first, and then submission to one another. Then, as one in submission, a servant is one who seeks to meet the real needs of others or of the person he is serving. To put it another way, servanthood is the condition or state of being a servant to others, of ministry to others rather than the service of self. It means willingly giving of oneself to minister for and to others and to do whatever it takes to accomplish what is best for another.

However, when serving others and their needs, if the underlying motive and goal is some form of self love, like the praise of others for the service rendered, then one’s service is in reality hypocritical. This type of service is really aimed at serving selfish ends—usually in the futile pursuit of personal significance through something like praise, power, or status.

Christ’s plan and that which produces maximum blessing to the world and the church is servanthood. A servant is one who, even when in positions of leadership seeks to lead and influence others through lives given in ministry for the blessing of others and their needs. As the following passages will demonstrate, the Lord Jesus came as a servant with a commitment to serve. Just think, if He had come to be served, our redemption could and would never have taken place. Likewise, our failure to live as servants throws up a huge barrier to effective ministry as representatives of the Lord Jesus.

Components of Servanthood from New Testament Passages

Since servant living was epitomized so completely by the Lord Jesus, we would naturally expect a number of passages to explicitly deal with this issue. While space will not allow an indepth exegesis, it is hoped that the

following highlights drawn from several New Testament passages will draw our attention to a few vital principles that describe the spiritually mature quality of living as servants.

Matthew 20:20-28 (see also Mark 10:35-45)

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling down she asked something from him. 21 He said to her, "What do you want?" She said, "Permit these two sons of mine to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." 22 Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." 23 He told them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right and left is not mine to give. Rather, it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." 24 When the other ten heard this, they were angry with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high position use their authority over them. 26 It must not be this way among you! But whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant. 27 And whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

A consideration of Matthew 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35-45 shows us that there are basically two options open for people. Either we will seek to serve ourselves, a choice that nullifies our capacity to live as disciples, or we will learn to live as servants out of a faith relationship with God through Christ. In Matthew 6, the Lord stated it this way, "No one is able to serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. No one is able to serve God and possessions" (Matt. 6:24). When we serve money, we are really serving ourselves and our own desires for what we think money will purchase like significance, power, pleasure, security, or status. Money is not evil and having it is not evil, but if it becomes our master, it controls our values, priorities, and pursuits rather than God, and that is evil (see 1 Tim. 6:8-10).

Christ shows that His organization or organism, the body of Christ, is to function on the basis of service or servant-like ministry to others. Spiritually mature people who experience His life are those who have first of all developed a servant's heart like that of the Savior. Thus, a true concept of mature Christian leadership means serving one's followers and teaching them by example to be servants of others.

A mother approached the Lord, probably at the request of her sons, and sought a position of status for them. Why? Foolishly thinking that such status would give them happiness and significance, they wanted positions of authority, praise, and power. Our Lord's answer showed that first of all they had been wrongly influenced by the attitudes of the world (vs. 25). Rather than thinking with the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5; 1 Cor. 2:16b) as His disciples should think, they were thinking like an unregenerate world. Thus, if they were to serve as His disciples, their thinking and orientation needed drastic transformation (see Rom. 12:1-8).

Naturally, the model for mature spirituality and leadership and all Christian living is the Lord Jesus. It is instructive to note that in this context of serving, He spoke of Himself as *the Son of Man*. This was a favorite designation of Himself (one used some 90 times) and a Messianic title based on Daniel 7:13-14. As such, it linked Him to the earth and to His mission, but it also stressed His pre-eminence, dignity, and authority (see Luke 6:5; John 6:62). The contrast between who He was, *the Son of Man*, and what He did, *humble Himself*, is stressed by the word "even" as given in Mark 10:45, "for even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve..." This Messianic title draws our attention to His awesome humility as one who, though God of very God and Messiah Himself, came in order to serve and to give his life a ransom. In other words, He came to serve in order to set men free to be the people God had created them to be.

Since in this passage the Lord was correcting the thinking of His disciples, this clearly illustrates how we need to spend time with Him in His Word that we might allow His life and the teaching of Scripture to transform our thinking and thus our sources of trust, aspirations, and actions.

When the other disciples got wind of the request of the two, they became indignant and a certain degree of division occurred among the disciples. This shows how longing and striving for position, power, and praise quickly ruins relationships in the body of Christ and creates disunity and division. Servant living does the opposite.

Principle: the purpose of serving others is to set them free to love and serve God, not to make them our servants or to serve our wants or needs. We are all responsible to serve one another, but never in order to be served or to satisfy our immature cravings.

Matthew 23:11-12

11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Greatness in God's kingdom is never to be found in position or power or in the praise and opinions of men, but in servant-like service to others.

We see again that one of the greatest hindrances to service or servant living is the desire for some form of exaltation—position, praise, prestige, and power. Those who take the secular route so typical of the world and who exalt themselves will eventually be humbled. They will not only eventually lose the very status they seek, but if they are believers, they will also lose rewards in the kingdom.

Following the statement of verses 11-12, the Lord began to pronounce woes on the Pharisees who typically longed for status and praise. These woes illustrate some of the consequences when men fail to live as servants.

Luke 22:24-30

24 A dispute also started among them over which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. 25 So Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called 'benefactors.'" 26 But it must not be like that with you! Instead the one who is greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the one who serves. 27 For who is greater, the one who is seated at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is seated at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

28 "You are the ones who have remained with me in my trials. 29 Thus I grant to you a kingdom, just as my Father granted to me, 30 that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

The setting here is that of the Passover and the institution of the Lord's Supper, both of which spoke of Christ in His person and work as the *suffering servant* who would die for our sin. This scene presents a graphic picture of how preoccupation with self-centered interests (position, praise, and acceptance by others) ruins our capacity to even properly worship and relate to the person and work of the Savior. Because they were seeking their happiness and significance by trying to manage their own affairs they were blinded to what He was seeking to teach them and to what His life meant to them.

Servant living will be rewarded in the future. One of the hindrances to servant living is man's impatience and his desire to be served now! Therefore, one of the keys to effective service is faith and constant orientation with the weight of eternity (2 Cor. 4:15-18). When we seek our reward now through the praise of men as did the Pharisees, we lose the power of God on our lives and ministries and we lose rewards in the future (cf. Matt. 6:1-4). But why do we do that? In unbelief, we turn from resting in God's wisdom to our own foolishness through which we seek to handle life by our own plans or machinations.

John 13:1-5 and 12-17

1 Just before the Passover feast, Jesus knew that his time had come to depart from this world to the Father. He had loved his own who were in the world, and now he loved them to the very end. 2 The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, that he should betray Jesus. 13:3 Jesus, because he knew that the Father had handed things over to him, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, 4 got up from the meal, removed his outer clothes, took a towel and tied it around himself. 5 He poured water into the washbasin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel he had wrapped around himself. . .

12 So when Jesus had washed their feet and put his outer clothing back on, he took his place at the table again and said to them, "Do you understand what I have done for you? 13 You call me

‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and do so correctly, for that is what I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you too ought to wash one another’s feet. 15 For I have given you an example: you should do just as I have done for you. 16 I tell you the solemn truth, the slave is not greater than his master, nor is the one who is sent as a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you understand these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Perhaps no passage illustrates the source and nature of the heart of a servant more than John 13. Here, in the upper room on the night before His crucifixion the Lord Jesus dramatically drove home the issue and nature of what it means to be a servant. Imagine the scene. All had been prepared for this last meal with the disciples with the exception of one thing. According to the custom of the day a servant, with a basin of water and towel in hand, would wash the feet of the guests who had walked down the dirty, dusty roads of Palestine. But who would take the position of this servant and perform the task? I can just see the disciples looking around expecting someone else to do this, but never for a moment considering it himself. Then out of the blue, as a perfect picture and lesson of servanthood, the Lord Jesus rose to the task, laid aside His outer garment, put a towel around his waist, took water in a basin and began washing the feet of the disciples, all of which was a fitting analogy of yielding His privileges and assuming the role of a slave.

First, we should note that the source of Jesus’ actions lay in His knowledge and security of who He was and where He was going (vss. 1-3). Jesus was completely aware of His sovereign authority, His origin, and coming destiny as He submitted and depended by faith in what the Father was doing (cf. vv. 1, 18). Thus, in that confidence, He voluntarily took the place of a slave and washed the feet of His disciples. His thinking and action contrasts sharply with the self-seeking insecurity of the disciples, none of whom were willing to pick up the towel and take the place of a servant (cf. Matt. 20:20-24; Mark 9:33-34; Luke 22:24-30).

Christ’s security, His love, and His confidence in the Father and future allowed the Lord Jesus to assume the position of a servant, an amazing example of condescension (vss. 4-6). This attitude, faith, and action portrayed His entire ministry on earth (cf. Phil. 2:5-8) and provides us with the perfect example of what He wants to do in our lives. But this also demonstrates how servant living is accomplished in us—through faith and understanding of who we are in Christ and by confidence in the eternal glories of the future. After Jesus finished washing the feet of the disciples, He returned to His place and made this very pointed application:

So when Jesus had washed their feet and put his outer clothing back on, he took his place at the table again and said to them, “Do you understand what I have done for you? 13 You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and do so correctly, for that is what I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you too ought to wash one another’s feet. 15 For I have given you an example: you should do just as I have done for you (John 13:12-15).

Having pointed to His actions as an example for them, Christ then drove home an inescapable lesson, here defined as a “solemn truth.” If He, their master and the One they worshipped, assumed the role of a servant to minister to others, then certainly they must likewise take the towel of servanthood as a minister to others rather than seek to elevate themselves. Ironically, and contrary to the thinking of the world, true blessing comes in serving others.

16 I tell you the solemn truth, the slave is not greater than his master, nor is the one who is sent as a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you understand these things, you will be blessed if you do them (John 13:16-17).

Philippians 2:1-8

1 If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort provided by love, any fellowship in the Spirit, any affection or mercy, 2 complete my joy and be of the same mind, by having the same love, being united in spirit, and having one purpose. 3 Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. 4 Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but the interests of others as well. 5 You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had, 6 who though he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave, by looking like

other men, and by sharing in human nature. 8 He humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross!

This classic passage on the humiliation of Christ (verses 5-8) is here set forth as the supreme example for unselfish servant living for Christians. The apostle presents the Lord Jesus as One who, in his supreme superiority, manifests what is the model for all Christians; it points us to the humility needed to live as servants of others. Though existing in the form of God with all the rights and prerogatives of deity, Christ Jesus emptied Himself **by taking on the form of a slave**, by becoming true humanity. Christ veiled His deity and voluntarily laid aside the right to use and manifest His divine prerogatives in submission to the Father. In doing this, He humbled Himself that He might die even the death of the cross.

But the focus we dare not miss is Paul's statement in verse 1 and the implications drawn from this. The main verb of the passage is "complete my joy." Seeing men and women come to Christ in faith gives joy, but as one devoted to seeing believers mature into Christ-like living (see Col. 1:28; Eph. 4:13), nothing could give Paul greater joy (vs. 2) than to see believers live unselfishly serving one another with the mature mind of Christ (vss. 2-5). But before the apostle says "complete my joy," he begins by getting the Philippians to think through what was theirs in Christ by the work of God. Literally, the text begins with four "if" clauses. He wrote, "If there is any encouragement in Christ, if any comfort by love, if any fellowship in the Spirit, if any affection and mercy..." In Greek, these are first class conditional clauses, which, for the sake of argument or for a response from the reader, assumes the statement to be true. It is what can be called the response condition. Paul was not questioning the reality of these blessings in Christ. Rather, he used the first class condition as a kind of rhetorical device to get the reader to think through the issue and respond properly. The point is there is encouragement, comfort by love, and fellowship in the ministry and power of the Spirit, and the result—compassion and mercy that all believers should have for others.¹ But we must never turn such blessings into merely personal comfort. The goal and result must be servant living, living as expressed especially in verses 3-5:

3 Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. 4 Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but the interests of others as well. 5 You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had (Phil. 2:3-5).

The fundamental issue in living as servants, as those committed to meeting the needs of others, is a deep down humility that is willing to pick up the servant's towel regardless of one's status or station in life. No matter what one's station or condition in life, whether king or peasant, slave or free, rich or poor, strong or weak, brilliant or slow of mind, nobleman or common, etc., in Christ God calls all Christians to live as servants serving others with the Lord Jesus as the perfect example of One who, though God of very God, took upon Himself "the form of a servant."

... When Jesus Christ came into the world, it was not to come into a wealthy man's home where all material things might be His. The home was characterized by poverty. He did not come into a royal home so that He might be respected as heir apparent even though He has the right to rule this earth. He was not born in Caesar's home so that in due course He might follow His father to the throne. His station in life was that of a servant. A servant is characterized not so much as a person to be despised, but as someone without rights; a servant submits himself to the will of his master. What Paul emphasizes is that, when Jesus Christ came into the world, He came as One who had no rights of His own. The One who had all the rights that belonged to the eternal Son of God gave up the exercise of these rights; He came into the world as a servant who has no rights but is subject to the authority of another.²

The real test of whether we are truly maturing and learning to become a Christ-like servant is how we act when people treat us like one.

¹ I take the first three "if" clauses to remind us of what we have through the Savior with the fourth pointing to the result this should have in the sense of creating affection and mercy toward others whom we seek to serve.

² J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Living, A Study of Philippians*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1973, pp. 68-69.

Concerns to Consider

In seeking to develop a servant's heart, Christians naturally face the opposing forces of the world, the flesh, and the devil, all of which are directed toward promoting selfish concerns and especially the pursuit of significance. Even when engaged in religious or humanitarian works, selfish pursuits can so easily come to the surface. While there are undoubtedly many reasons for this, two fundamental concerns come to mind that I would like to address.

(1) People too often serve others from their own neurotic need for approval or for significance. The Christian community generally understands they are to live as servants, but our preoccupation with our own significance robs us of the ability to serve. Part of the problem is that in our society today such a selfish pursuit is no longer seen as a neurosis or as a disorder. In fact, it is not only seen as natural, but it is presented as a legitimate need and something everyone should pursue. It is more important today that children feel good about themselves than learn their ABCs. But the problem is that the world is searching for significance in all the wrong places and by all the wrong means. A search for significance as it is promoted by the world naturally produces the opposite of servanthood. It produces extreme selfishness and aberrant behavior.

People today often wear themselves out, overtly demonstrating the Christian model while inwardly they are actually serving in order to feel better about themselves or to gain position, praise, acceptance, etc. Again, such behavior stems from the worldly model that operates by a different world viewpoint. As a result, many people serve in various capacities in the church from a host of false agendas. Significantly, after the exhortation of Romans 12:1-8, which include service to others, the apostle warns, "Let love be without hypocrisy" (12:9).

If we are not extremely careful and constantly check our motives, we can fool ourselves. We can be engaged in all kinds of service while actually serving our own neurotic needs—desires for acceptance or feelings of significance or for control or for praise, position, power, and prestige. We can serve to feel important rather than because we love people and the Lord and because we are resting in who we are in Christ, complete in Him.

(2) We need to identify and work toward serving the real needs of others and not their neurotic wants. We live in a self-centered society that wants comfort and happiness. It is also a society that wants to be served by others. We might compare the many who followed Christ. There were *curious* followers and even *convinced* followers, but some were following from the wrong motives: some followed for political reasons thinking Jesus would remove the yoke of Rome. Others followed for food (John 6:15f). Regardless, the Lord regularly challenged these impure motives.

This false mentality manifests itself in the church in a number of ways. For instance, consider the reason many, if not most churches today, hire a pastor or a pastoral staff. The biblical reason, of course, should be to be equipped for ministry. As Ephesians 4:11ff shows, the leadership of the church has been given the mandate to equip the saints for the work of ministry—servant living. But churches far too often hire pastors to be *their* ministers, not to equip *them* for ministry. They want leaders who will serve them and make their lives comfortable. But this is contrary to the servant principle of Scripture and the biblical goal of leaders which is to help their people develop into true mature Christ-like believers. Leaders and disciples alike must recognize that having the wrong goal (making the flock happy and comfortable) ultimately leads to misery, not true happiness.

"Many of us place top priority not on becoming Christ-like in the middle of our problems but on finding happiness. I want to be happy but the paradoxical truth is that I will never be happy if I am concerned primarily with becoming happy. My overriding goal must be in every circumstance to respond biblically, to put the Lord first, to seek to behave as he would want me to. The wonderful truth is that as we devote all our energies to the task of becoming what Christ wants us to be, He fills us with joy unspeakable and a peace far surpassing what the world offers..." etc.³

Why is servanthood so important to the Christian life and to Christian ministry? Well, just consider the very negative consequences of selfish service as seen in woes pronounced on the Pharisees in Matthew 23:13f. Further, a self-serving kind of lifestyle is not only contradictory to the life, death, and message of the Savior, but it engenders division in the body of Christ. Service that is at self-serving simply cannot hold up under the pressures of the ministry and the large doses of criticism that often go with the territory. Eventually this kind of self-seeking service

³ Lawrence J. Crabb Jr, *Effective Biblical Counseling*, Ministry Resources Library, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1977, p. 20.

will crumble under criticism because it is more concerned about self and one's personal significance than with the needs of others. In fact, if we fail to find our significance in the Savior, we will become obsessed with gaining recognition. This obsession will often lead to burnout—to anger, bitterness, and a heart that is poisoned against ministry.

Conditions that Hinder Servanthood

What are some of the hindrances to developing a servanthood mentality. As you consider the following, think about your own life and natural tendencies.

(1) The desire for status or to feel important is a tremendous barrier to biblical servanthood. This is very evident in the reluctance of the disciples to take the towel and the position of a servant as seen in John 13. But we need to understand this aspiration for status actually stems from a failure to rest in one's significance in the Savior. When Christians fail to rest in who they are in Christ, they will constantly be battling the need for importance or significance from within their own desires and felt needs. Further, this need will be constantly inflamed by the influences of a world system that operates on a totally different basis. We think that happiness will come when we are treated in a certain way, but that's just not the case for there will always be those who do not treat us like we want to be treated.

(2) Human strategies to meet one's own felt needs pose another hindrance to servant living. Everyone faces the problem of meeting their felt needs by their own solutions and defense and escape mechanisms (i.e., the things people do to protect their self image or how they want to people to feel about them). Rather, our need and responsibility is to trust the Lord for our acceptance, ability, production, and strength. Based on biblical values and truth, we must, by faith and an act of our will, firmly reject the goal of seeking to serve our own needs and adopt the goal of becoming servants of others like the Lord.

(3) A poor concept of one's self-worth, along with a faulty source for developing our self-worth, forms another hindrance to effective servanthood. As mentioned, people often seek their self-worth from the opinions of people rather than by the value God places on their lives according to His Word.

(4) Self-centered living or seeking happiness from the world rather than in the Savior and His purpose and call on one's life is another cause for failing to live as servants. This naturally results in a lack of commitment and in wrong priorities and pursuits which will leave little or no time for the Lord or ministry to others and the body of Christ.

Consequences in the Absence of Servanthood

What, then, are some of the consequences of a lack of servanthood in the body of Christ?

(1) The opposite of a servant's heart is self-seeking, which leads to consequences like jealousy, envy, disunity and division. This is most evident in the actions of the disciples (see again Luke 22:24-30). Paul's exhortation and teaching in Philippians 2 is centered around the call for harmony among the Philippians where there was evidently some disharmony (see 1:27; 2:2).

Leonard Bernstein, the celebrated orchestra conductor, was once asked, "What is the hardest instrument to play?" Without a moment's hesitation he replied, "Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists. But to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm, or second French horn, or second flute, now that's a problem! And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony."⁴

(2) Failure to get involved in ministry. As was evident in the disciples' behavior in John 13, the absence of a servant's heart causes people to simply sit back while expecting others to serve them. This is what can be called the "layman mentality," a condition that occurs when congregations hire the minister to minister to them. The attitude is, we are here to be *ministered to* rather than be *equipped for* ministry.

⁴ Ben Patterson, "A Faith Like Mary's," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 87, taken from *Bible Illustrator for Windows*, Parsons Technology, 1990-1998.

(3) Burnout in those who are ministering. This can be caused by exhaustion simple because a few people are attempting to do all the work. Or, as mentioned above, burnout can occur because of the pressure and hurt brought on to a large degree by self-serving motives for acceptance, etc.

(4) The church fails to accomplish what it has been called to do in evangelism and all the aspects of edification because of a lack of ministering people. One of the clear goals of Ephesians 4:12ff in the equipping of the saints for ministry is the involvement of the whole body in ministry according to the gifts and abilities of the saints. In fact, this is a mark of maturity. Speaking of the goal of equipping the saints into mature servants, the apostle Paul said,

14 The purpose of this is to no longer be children, tossed back and forth by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching by the trickery of people who with craftiness carry out their deceitful schemes. 15 But practicing the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head. 16 From him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. **As each one does its part, the body grows in love.** (Eph. 4:14-16, emphasis mine)

(5) The absence of a servant's heart leads to playing power games or spiritual king of the mountain. This naturally leads to bitterness, contention, and division in the body of Christ. Again, let it be stressed that Jesus' style of ministry is the opposite of the world's power-based mentality where certain kinds of accomplishment are viewed as a badge of importance and power. Christian love means putting the other person first, seeking the other person's well being regardless of what it costs us, even if we are called on to play second fiddle.

(6) The absence of a servant's heart is really the absence of humility or pride. As Scripture so plainly declares, the leads to the loss of the power of God on one's ministry. "In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. And all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God *opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble* (1 Pet. 5:5). Pride or the absence of humility quenches the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:13-26).

(7) Inability to lead others in the things of Christ because of one's own self-seeking hypocrisy (Matt. 23:13f).

In view of these consequences, an important question that needs to be asked is simply, "Do I have the heart of a servant?" If I think I do, then, "In what ways is it demonstrated in my life?"

Thoughts on Developing the Heart of a Servant

So just how can I develop the heart of a servant that will lead to genuine growth in selfless, servant living? Though certainly not exhaustive, the following thoughts I trust will be helpful in this regard.

Learning to live as a servant naturally begins by following the Lord Jesus. As believers who are to follow in the steps of our Savior, it is important that we focus on Him because He was and is the epitome of humility, maturity, and leadership. That which most uniquely characterized Him was servanthood. Even now, though seated at the right hand of the Father as the glorified Lord, He continues to minister to us as our Advocate and Intercessor and Head of the body of Christ. This is tremendously significant especially in light of who He was and is. With this in mind, let's review the following truth.

(1) Though being God of very God, He humbled Himself by becoming true humanity and was found in the form of a bond servant (Phil. 2:5-8) and God highly exalted Him (vs. 9). The road to successful leadership is paved with the solid concrete of humble service for others. Even in the Old Testament, which anticipates the glories of Messiah's kingdom, Messiah is seen as a "suffering servant."

(2) If we are really following the Lord, we will be seeking to serve men. If we are not seeking to serve others from pure motives, then we aren't following the Lord, at least not closely. Christ told His disciples, whom He wanted to follow in His steps, "the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve," and in another place He said, "...I am among you as one who serves" (Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27).

(3) In the supreme act of service as our Great High Priest, Christ offered Himself on the cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world and remains seated as our Advocate before God. Knowing and being confident of His identity (John 13:1f), knowing why He was on earth as the servant who must die for our sin,

focusing of the rewards of the future, and acting out of a heart of infinite love, Christ washed the feet of the disciples. This was a symbol of the service He continues to perform for us in the daily cleansing of our sins even though He is the risen and exalted Lord.

Engstrom writes,

His kind of service set an example.... Thus He showed His followers how to serve, and He demanded no less of those who would carry on His work on earth. Jesus teaches all leaders for all time that greatness is not found in rank or position but in *service* (italics his). He makes it clear that true leadership is grounded in love which must issue in service.”⁵

(4) Another truth vital to developing a servant’s heart is facing the reality of our own weakness and need. No one in their own energy has the ability to give themselves sacrificially as a servant according to the example of the Savior. For this we need the transforming ministry and enablement of the Holy Spirit and the renewing direction, grace, and strength that comes from living and growing in the Word. Thus, a Word-filled (Col. 3:16), Spirit-filled (controlled) life (Eph. 5:18) is an absolute essential to the ability to give ourselves as servants.

(5) Two more companion elements to living as servants are *surrender* and *sacrifice* as are found in the exhortation of Romans 12:1-2. The self-serving spirit and mind-set of the world is opposed to the mind of sacrificial servant living. Thus, based on the mercies of God available to believers in Christ, the apostle appeals to Christians to surrender themselves to God as living sacrifices. Essential to that, and in keeping with living a Spirit-controlled and Word-filled life, is the need for daily renewing the mind in the truth of the Word.

1 Therefore I exhort you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God—which is your reasonable service.² Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect (Rom. 12:1).

Such surrender and sacrifice naturally forms the foundation and well spring for servant living, which is clearly God’s will for all Christians. Paul immediately, therefore, points his readers to their responsibilities in Christian ministry (Rom. 12:3-8). The point is that one’s consecration to God and a lifestyle transformed by the renewing of the mind is to be demonstrated in giving of oneself through the exercise of spiritual gifts in the body of Christ. Again, in the realm of surrender and sacrifice, the Lord Jesus is our perfect example. First, being willing to sacrifice His position and privileges, He surrendered Himself to the Father’s will. This also meant he was willing to serve and even suffer to fulfill the Father’s plan of salvation for us. Therefore, as He was willing to sacrifice and surrender that He might serve our needs (become our Redeemer and Advocate), so we are to be willing to serve, surrender, and sacrifice to meet the needs of others as a display of the mind of Christ (Phil 2:3-5). For the Christian, then, this means (a) knowing the Word which identifies the true needs of people and then (b) working in the power of the Spirit to meet those needs according to our gifts, opportunities, and abilities (see Acts 6:1-6; Col. 1:27-2:1). It also means caring about people and getting to know them personally so we can help meet their particular needs as we are given opportunity, as we have ability to do so, and as the Lord provides a way to do so.

(6) Another important element in developing the heart of a servant is learning to rest and find our significance in who we are in Christ. In Him we are complete (Col. 2:10) and blessed with every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3). What could be more significant than being called a child of God, a title that applies to all believers in Christ.

1 (See what sort of love the Father has given to us: that we should be called God’s children—and indeed we are! For this reason the world does not know us: because it did not know him. 2 Dear friends, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. But we know that whenever it is revealed we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is. 3 And everyone who has this hope focused on him purifies himself, just as Jesus is pure) [1 John 3:1-3].

The Christian’s need, then, is to seek his sense of well being and happiness from his identity in Christ and not from people or from position. Otherwise, even if he does render service, it will often be from a self-serving motive like acceptance or praise (see John 13:1; Rom. 12:3; Eph. 1:6; Col. 3:3-4). Man’s obsessive pursuit of significance

⁵ Ted W. Engstrom, *The Making of a Christian Leader*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976, p. 37.

produces thinking and behavior that runs counter to the values and behavior that are consistent with Christ-like servant living. It invariably leads to defensive and protective behavior patterns that put self above others.⁶

(7) Finally, another important element in living as servants is living according to the perspective of eternity, having eternal goals and values. If this was true with the Lord Jesus, and it was, then it must also be so with us (see again John 13:1f; and Heb. 12:1-3). This means learning to live as pilgrims, as those who are living in view of the Judgment Seat (*Bema*) of Christ and His “well done, thou good and faithful servant” (cf. 2 Cor. 4:15-18; 10:10-18; with 1 Cor. 4:1-5).

Principle: Following the example of the Savior, believers are to function as servants who seek to minister to one another in loving and selfless service.

Issue: Am I, in submission to the Lord and to others, seeking to serve, or am I seeking to be served in the pursuit of my wants?

Conclusion

Seeking to promote servant living, the apostle reminds us in Philippians 2:1 that there is encouragement in Christ, a comfort provided by love, fellowship in the Spirit, and affection and mercy. I believe that the first three, encouragement in Christ, a comfort provided by love, and fellowship in the Spirit are what come to us through our walk with the Savior—they are the products of fellowship. The last two, affection and mercy, may refer to the results of Christ in us as it is to be expressed to others in selfless concern. In other words, as the God of peace and the God of all comfort, He wants us to have His peace and He wants to comfort us, but He is more concerned about our character as expressed in servant living than our comfort. His ultimate goal is not to pamper us physically or emotionally, but to *perfect us spiritually*, conforming us into the character of the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus gave Himself redemptively for us to restore us to God and create a people who would live as servants of God in the service of others proclaiming the good news and loving others for Him. Thus, as Christ gave Himself, so God wants us to give ourselves for others.

In his book, *The Quest for Character*, and in a chapter entitled, “The Gift that Lives On,” Swindoll’s words form a fitting conclusion to this study:

In our pocket of society where pampered affluence is rampant, we are often at a loss to know what kind of gifts to buy our friends and loved ones on special occasions. For some people (especially those who “have everything”) the standard type gift won’t cut it. Nothing in the shopping mall catches our fancy.

I have a suggestion. It may not seem that expensive or sound very novel, but believe me, it works every time. It’s one of those gifts that has great value but no price tag. It can’t be lost nor will it ever be forgotten. No problem with size either. It fits all shapes, any age, and every personality. This ideal gift is ... *yourself*. In your quest for character, don’t forget the value of unselfishness.

That’s right, give some of yourself away.

Give an hour of your time to someone who needs you. Give a note of encouragement to someone who is down. Give a hug of affirmation to someone in your family. Give a visit of mercy to someone who is laid aside. Give a meal you prepared to someone who is sick. Give a word of compassion to someone who just lost a mate. Give a deed of kindness to someone who is slow and easily overlooked. Jesus taught: “...to the extent that you did to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).⁷

⁶ The pursuit of significance and the many lustful desires it creates is a tremendous barrier to authentic servant living. For a more in depth study on this issue, I would recommend to outstanding books: *Perilous Pursuits*, by Joseph M. Stowell, Moody Press, Chicago, 1994 (the supra title on the cover is *Our Obsession With Significance*) and *The Search For Significance*, by Robert S. McGee, Rapha Publishing, Houston, 1985. See also, *The Hunger for Significance*, R. C. Sproul, Regal, Ventura, Calif., 1993).

⁷ Charles R. Swindoll, *The Quest For Character*, Multnomah Press, Portland, 1987, pp. 177-178.

Mark #9: Surrender and Self-Sacrifice

Introduction

As mentioned in the last study and as seen in the life of Christ, servanthood is ultimately the outcome of one who, having first surrendered himself to God, is able to give himself sacrificially for God and others. This element of surrender is seen in the single-minded devotion of the Jesus who came to do the will of the One who sent Him and to complete His work (John 4:34). But Christ's single-minded devotion or commitment to the will of the Father was the result of the surrender of His life and will to the Father's agenda. Such surrender meant giving Himself sacrificially for our redemption in keeping with the Father's plan (John 3:16).

Thus, as qualities that characterized the Lord Jesus, *surrender* and *self-sacrifice* form two more vital marks of spiritual maturity. These two qualities, however, are here treated together because they are so related as *cause* and *effect* or *root* and *fruit*. Further, because they are so much a part of the character of Christ and true maturity, they deserve special mention in any list of qualities of spiritual maturity and leadership.

Surrender

The first step (the root) is *surrender*. To surrender means to relinquish possession or control to another, to submit to the power, authority, and control of another. The entire New Testament, as summarized in Philippians 2:6-8, shows us that Christ was willing to surrender His rights and prerogatives as the second person of the Trinity to the will and purpose and plan of the Father. Then, out of that surrender came the willingness to sacrifice for God's plan no matter what the plan called for. Surrender, then, is part of the pathway to maturity and effective Christ-like ministry.

Surrendering to God's agenda in and through us requires a clear view of the agendas we have prescribed for ourselves. Most people's lists of things they consider important would include personal peace, happiness, comfort, prosperity, security, friends, good health, fulfilling experiences, and reaching their full potential.

The above list should make the need for our surrender obvious, for those plans often conflict or ignore God's plan for us. It's true that God may and often does provide for us measures of peace, prosperity, position, fulfillment, and other things on our lists, **but our surrender to God's plan is a statement that we will not live for these things** (emphasis mine). They are not the things that drive us, but are simply side benefits that come through the sovereign pleasure of God.

Let's never forget the great benefit to God's glory and kingdom that has come through the lives of thousands of people who have surrendered to agendas beyond their own. Some have gone to faraway lands as missionaries. Mothers have surrendered careers and opportunities for significance to teach their children God's truth. Fathers have changed careers or turned down promotions that conflicted with God's will for them or their families. Pastors have faithfully served in out-of-the-way places where no one knows their names or asks them to speak at high-profile conferences.¹

Sacrifice

The next step (the fruit) that follows surrendering to the God is *sacrifice*. The aspect of sacrifice is emphasized in Philippians 2:6-8 by the words, "He humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross!" Surrendering to the Father's will, He emptied Himself, became man and was found in the form of a servant whereby the Lord Jesus willingly gave Himself sacrificially that God's will might be fulfilled in and though His life and death. While this involves the mystery of His incarnation and stands far beyond our comprehension, several levels of sacrifice are evident in the Savior's surrender that set the perfect example for us. His sacrifices actually began when He emptied himself of His privileges and the prerogatives that were His as the second person of the Trinity. In becoming man, He veiled and laid aside the voluntary use and glory of His many attributes as God the

¹ Joseph M. Stowell, *Perilous Pursuits*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1994, p. 173.

Son. Then, in this life on earth, He did without wealth, position, status, and even acceptance in that He was rejected by His own (John 1:11). Unlike the foxes that have their dens and the birds their nests, the Son of Man had no place to lay His head (Matt. 8:20). Ultimately, of course, He made the greatest sacrifice of all in that He who knew no sin became sin for us by dying the ugly and horrible death of the cross—a sentence reserved for the worst of criminals.

The bottom line is this: Christ voluntarily emptied Himself of anything and everything that stood in the way of the glory and gain of His Father through Him.

What about us? Although rights, privileges, pleasures, possessions, expectations, and well-formed plans may not be wrong in and of themselves, are we willing to hold them loosely and even let them go—to sacrifice them—if emptying ourselves of them will enable us to fulfill God’s agenda for our lives?...

Surrendering to God’s agenda may mean sacrificing our children—or our goods, reputation, comfort, convenience, and a whole list of other things we hold so tightly in our hands as well as those things we hope and plan for.²

By sacrificing our children, Stowell was referring to the willingness of parents to give up their children in the sense of seeing them go into some form of full-time service like foreign missions or even some other type of career ministry, something many parents would not consider “solid, stable, and a real job.”

I can well remember when I made the decision to attend Dallas Theological Seminary. I had been raised on a small cattle ranch in East Texas and had a degree in animal husbandry from Texas A&M University. Through my experience on the ranch and my studies at A&M, I was fairly well prepared to manage a cattle ranch. After graduation, I was offered an excellent job working for a large feed company in our area while managing a large ranch. But God had also been at work in my heart and I had become convinced that God’s will for my life was to prepare for the pastorate (shepherding sheep rather than herding cattle) through attending seminary.

My father thought I had lost my mind! He claimed I would be wasting my life, my education at Texas A&M, and did his best to dissuade me. He was almost ashamed of the fact I would be going to seminary rather than taking a job in the market place. Ironically, I was also offered a position with a pharmaceutical company in the Pacific Northwest, and this would have been okay in my dad’s eyes because this job was with a well-know company and came with an excellent compensation package. I would not have been using my training in cattle and pasture management, but that didn’t seem to matter. Though his attitude changed before I finished seminary and my dad became very supportive, at first, before God had worked in his heart, my dad was simply not willing to see his son go into full-time ministry. To him this was a sacrifice he was not readily willing to make.

Conclusion and Application

In your own words, what are some of the principles and imperatives the following passages teach about self-sacrifice as one of the marks of spiritual maturity needed in the Christian life? See Matthew 6:19ff; 10:37-38; 19:29; 16:24; Luke 9:23; 1 Cor. 9:15-23; Rom. 12:1ff; 14:1-15:3; 1 Cor. 8:13; 2 Cor. 4:7-18.

Based on scriptural principles, what are some of the guiding factors and motivations or reasons for the necessity of self-sacrifice in the Christian’s life?

The following are offered as a few principles and challenges drawn from the above listed passages:

(1) The “therefore” in Romans 12:1 shows the call to surrender ourselves as living sacrifices is predicated on the reality of the “mercies of God” described in chapters 1-11. These first eleven chapters of Romans instruct us in God’s plan for sinful man through the saving life and death of Jesus Christ. In other words, in view of all that God has done and is doing for us in Christ, it is illogical for the Christian to do anything else but give his life back in devoted surrender and sacrifice to God.

(2) What a person does with his life depends on the clarity of his vision as to what is truly valuable and lasting. As Jesus made so indelibly clear in the metaphors of Matthew 6:19-24, a man’s heart (his aspiration, desires, pursuits) depends on his treasure, and what he treasures depends on his perspective or insight to life according to biblical and eternal values versus worldly and temporal values. Thus, holding tightly to God’s kingdom values

² Stowell, p. 176.

determine priorities which in turn will determine one's objectives and pursuits—what one is willing to surrender to and sacrifice for. Therefore, one who holds tightly to God's kingdom values (because of time, testimony, ability, or influence) may often have to say no to many things, even many good things, because they will get in the way of those goals that are based on biblical values and priorities. This is the issue of pursuing what is excellent or best over against what is simply good (see Phil. 1:9f).

One of the obvious qualities of spiritual maturity and leadership so completely possessed by our Lord was His willingness to make sacrifices in accordance with His values, priorities, and objectives as One who was totally surrendered to the will and plan of the Father. This always included surrendering to the Father's will first, and then the blessing and well-being of others, but neither of these can exist without sacrifices, without counting the costs.

(3) Self-sacrifice means putting the Lord first above self and even family (see Matt. 10:37; 19:29). Without this, no one is free to follow Him and properly influence others for Christ. Sacrifice means “taking up one's cross” regardless of the cost (Matt. 10:38; 16:24; Luke 9:23). Taking up one's cross, according to the culture of the day, was an act of submission, a willingness to pay the price and do whatever God asks. Historically and culturally, the analogy of “taking up one's cross” meant to cease rebelling against the King's rule and submit to His rule over one's life.³ In practical terms for the Christian, it means dying to one's own desires and will in total submission to God to be, go, and do whatever He calls one to do.

One of my wife's sisters and her husband served for many years in South Africa as missionaries. They then served their mission board here in the states for the past eleven or twelve years. They are now in their fifties, have two married daughters, and are about to be grandparents, yet, they believe God has led them to go to a foreign ministry where Christians are often persecuted, where the weather is hot and humid, and the living conditions anything but ideal by U.S. standards. Because of their faith and surrender to the Savior, they are willing to sacrifice their comforts in the States and seeing their precious little grandchildren grow up. This is a decision that has been extremely painful, but a sacrifice they are willing to make for the Savior and for the lost.

Their sacrifice and that of many others like them reminds me of something a missionary society in South Africa once wrote to David Livingstone, “Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to send other men to join you.” Livingstone replied, “If you have men who will come ONLY if they know there is a good road, I don't want them.” Livingstone knew that such men would not last when the going really got tough. They simply could not make the needed sacrifices.

Reflecting on your own life, what are some of the things the Lord may be calling on you to sacrifice or give up in order to fulfill His will and purpose or to minister to someone in need? Though the apostle had liberty in Christ to eat meat or to receive financial compensation for his labor in the gospel, he was willing to sacrifice those rights for the glory of God and the spiritual well being of other. Following the declaration of his willingness to so sacrifice (1 Cor. 8:13-9:18), Paul made this statement,

19 For since I am free from all I can make myself a slave to all, in order to gain even more. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew to gain the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) to gain those under the law. 21 To those free from the law I became like one free from the law (though I am not free from God's law but under the law of Christ) to gain those free from the law. 22 To the weak I became weak in order to gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that by all means I may save some. 23 I do all these things because of the gospel, so that I can be a participant in it (1 Cor. 9:19-22).

Though we have great liberty in Christ and all things are lawful, having been freed from the bondage of the Law (see 1 Cor. 8:9; 10:23), all things are not profitable or beneficial for the building up of others or even for one's own spiritual growth. Thus, seeking to glorify God, the biblical position of sacrificial living is seen in the following statement by Paul:

³ See Michael P. Green, “The Meaning of Cross Bearing,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 140, April 83, p. 117f. On page 120, Green summarizes the meaning of cross bearing, “It is this writer's position that the phrase “take up his cross” is a figure of speech derived from the Roman custom requiring a man convicted of rebellion against Rome's sovereign rule to carry the cross-beam (*patibulum*) to his place of execution. Thus the proper starting point is the historical basis for the phrase. This starting point, as will be shown, leads to an interpretation that cross-bearing means to submit to the authority or rule one formerly rebelled against, or to obey God's will.”

23 “Everything is lawful,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is lawful,” but not everything builds others up. 24 Do not seek your own good, but the good of the other person (1 Cor. 10:23-24).

For a moment, think about the statement, “Others may, but spiritually mature people who want to have an impact for Christ often cannot afford to.” Though something may not in itself be wrong, it becomes wrong for a believer if it gets in the way of his or her ability to serve and accomplish the will of God. It was not wrong for Paul to receive funds from those to whom he carried the gospel, but in order to show that his motives were pure, he willingly sacrificed that right lest receiving compensation for his work might hinder the impact of his testimony.

Paying the price through dying to self or self-sacrifice means the power or liberty to make right choices in submission as a servant to God and others.

The issue is, am I willing to deny myself or pay the price so that I am free to follow the Lord and become the person God has saved me and called me to be? Whether one is willing to accept it or not, there is another kind of price tag for those who, for whatever reason, are unwilling to give of themselves for others. No one ever said it better than C. S. Lewis:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.... The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love... is Hell.⁴

⁴ *Bible Illustrator for Windows*, Parsons Technology, 1990-1998.

Mark #10: Self-Control

Introduction

In a department store a young husband was minding the baby while his wife was making a purchase. The infant was wailing, but the father seemed quite controlled and unperturbed as he quietly said, “Easy now, Albert, control your temper.” A woman passing by remarked, “Sir, I must congratulate you! You seem to know just how to speak to a baby.” “Baby nothing!” came the reply. “MY name is Albert!”

The mention of the term *self-control* undoubtedly brings to mind different images for people depending on their particular circumstances. Many probably think of combating dominating habits that can range from the simple to the more complex and debilitating. It may be as simple as a poor diet or a tendency to overeat at Thanksgiving, or to talking too much. It may also be something far more serious like chain smoking, drunkenness, drug abuse, sexual sins (pornography and adultery), a quick temper, a pattern of exaggerating or lying, etc. Others may think of dealing with an abusive spouse, parent, or employer or of dealing with their own tendencies toward losing control and becoming abusive. Others need self-control because they are lazy or have poor work habits while others are workaholics and need self-control to back off and learn to relax.

Regardless, self-control is very much an important part of maturity. One of the basic characteristics of infancy is a lack of self-control. Not only do babies need diapers, they must be carried because they lack the necessary control and muscle coordination to sit up much less walk or run. If a babies are healthy and normal, in time they will develop more and more self-control—a sure sign of growth and maturity.

The importance of self-control can be seen in the news media which graphically portray how the lack of self-control, because of man’s various inner cravings, impact our society for evil. Plainly, when men and nations turn away from God and seek significance, security, and satisfaction through the desires of the flesh, it leads to a blatant absence of self-control. This will then manifests itself in hundreds of ways with devastating results on individuals, families, on certain groups in a society (the fatherless, the widow, and the poor [see Isa. 1:21-23]), and on society as a whole.

In the early chapters of Isaiah, the prophet pronounces judgment on the nation of Israel because, having turned away from the Lord and His Word, the nation was completely lacking in self-control—a condition that also affected the leadership. Thus, Isaiah speaks of the results of this among the leaders—an effect that naturally spills over into the rest of society.

And I will make mere lads their princes
And capricious children will rule over them,
And the people will be oppressed,
Each one by another, and each one by his neighbor;
The youth will storm against the elder,
And the inferior against the honorable (Isaiah 3:4-5)

Isaiah sternly warned them that the objects of their trust, their leaders who were traditionally respected because of their maturity and discretion (self-control), i.e., “the old,” “the honorable,” would be replaced by those who were totally inadequate and incapable of leading the nation. Why? Because they were immature, unwise; indeed, they would be like mere lads, capricious children. The word “capricious” refers to one who acts according to impulse or whim. It’s a perfect word for one who lacks self-restraint or wise discretion. How pertinent to our society today! The headlines during the present administration, because of Bill Clinton’s capricious behavior or lack of control in the matter of his sex life, provide a sad commentary on the way the absence of self-control negatively affects a society. With what has now come to light, the same can be said of other presidents like John F. Kennedy.

The first mention of the term self-control in the New Testament provides another illustration of what happens in society when there is a lack of self-control. The text reads,

24 Some days later, when Felix arrived with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. 25 While Paul was discussing righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened and said, “Go away for now, and when I have an opportunity, I will send for you” (Acts 24:25).

Drucilla, the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I and sister of Agrippa II, would have been close to 20 years old at the time. She had married the king of a small region in Syria but divorced him at the age of 16 to marry Felix. This was not only her second marriage, but it was third marriage for Felix (Josephus, *Antiquities* 19.354; 20.141-44). Thus, the topic of *self-control* was entirely appropriate in view of the personal history of both Felix and Drucilla and was probably the reason for his anxiety. In addition, his administration was marked by injustices that contrasted with the righteousness and justice of God. His unrighteousness and lack of self-control not only made him a poor example to those whom he governed, but affected his ability to govern justly.

As has been so blatantly seen in our own government and in the White House, what a person is in private will eventually have a negative impact on his public life and service. For this reason and because of the issue of duplicity or spiritual hypocrisy, self-control is one of the qualifications called for in church leaders (see 1 Tim. 3:2). The principle is simply that he who would lead or govern or properly influence others for good, must first be the master of himself. As Peter reminds us, “For whatever a person succumbs to (i.e., is controlled by), to that he is enslaved” (2 Pet. 2:19).

Samson, a man raised up by the Lord as a deliverer and judge over rebellious Israel, is another case in point. Samson strangled a lion; yet he could not strangle his own love. He burst the fetters of his foes; but not the cords of his own lusts. He burned the crops of others, and lost the fruit of his own virtue when burning with the flame kindled by a single woman.¹

Since the absence of self-control can have such devastating results, it is naturally needed in every area of life and for all people. Unfortunately, the desire for self-control may have many motivations. It may stem from man’s self-centered or worldly objectives rather than from inner controls brought about by a deep relationship with God and biblical beliefs, motives, values, methods and means, and objectives. When and where such belief structures are absent, the absence of self-control in other areas will be just around the corner.

In our society where so much emphasis is placed on one’s physical appearance, many exercise extreme self-control to maintain a beautiful appearance, but exercise little self-control when it comes to moral issues such as sexual fidelity or honesty in business. For self-control to branch out into every compartment of one’s life, one needs the spiritual dynamics of a deep relationship with the living God as seen in such passages as 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12. Just a casual reading of this passage dramatically demonstrates how faith in Christ, biblical instruction, and the reality of God’s activity, including His discipline on those who disobey, is to transform all avenues of a Christian’s life. This is contrasted with lustful passions of an unbelieving world that does not know God.

1 Finally then, brothers and sisters, we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received instruction from us about how you must live and please God (as you are in fact living) that you do so more and more. 2 For you know what commands we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is God’s will: for you to become holy, for you to keep away from sexual immorality, 4 for each of you to know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, 5 not in lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God. 6 In this matter no one should violate the rights of his brother or take advantage of him, because the Lord is the avenger in all these cases, as we also told you earlier and warned you solemnly. 7 For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. 8 Consequently the one who rejects this is not rejecting human authority but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

9 Now on the topic of brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another. 10 And indeed you are practicing it toward all the brothers and sisters in all of Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more, 11 and to aspire to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, as we commanded you. 12 In this way you will live a decent life before outsiders and not be in need (1 Thess. 4:1-12).

It should be noted that our true spiritual condition is to be measured first and foremost by the inner person, **the heart**, and not by the external person, **the habits**. Why? Because habits or overt behavior are the product of the condition of the heart.

¹ Gary Inrig, *Hearts of Iron, Feet of Clay*. Taken from *Bible Illustrator*, Parsons Technology.

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand. 15 There is nothing outside of a person that is able to make him unclean by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that makes him unclean.”

17 Now when Jesus had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. 18 He said to them, “Are you so foolish? Don’t you see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot make him unclean? 19 For it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and then goes out into the sewer.” (This means all foods are clean.) 20 He said, “What comes out of a person makes him unclean. 21 For from within, out of the human heart, comes evil ideas, immorality, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, evil, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, and folly. 23 All these evils come from within and make a person unclean” (Mark 7:14-23).

Definition and Explanation

Fundamentally, self-control is the ability or power to rule or regulate one’s personal life so that we are neither driven nor dominated, as the apostle John puts it, by the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, or the pride of life (1 John 2:16; see also Gal. 5:19-21). These three, passion, pleasure, and pride, are those forces in the heart of man that energize his behavior patterns. It is to these inner forces that Satan and a fallen world appeal in order to promote a way of life that seeks to exist apart from God. The essence of such self-regulation is the ability to delay or refuse an impulse in the service of biblical truth, values, beliefs, and objectives.

Self-control means to be in control of one’s attitudes or thought processes, desires or passions, and patterns or habits so they do not dictate one’s behavior.

Speaking scripturally, self-control is a matter of the control of the self-life from within by spiritual means, i.e., by God’s weapons of spiritual warfare as described in the Word of God (2 Cor. 10:3-5; Eph. 6:10-18; Col. 2:20-23).

Key Terms for Self-control in the New Testament

Just as we have a number of synonyms in English for self-control like temperate, sober, self-restraint, self-discipline, reign over, or self-mastery, so too there are several terms used in the New Testament to express self-control as a whole or a particular aspect of it. In 1 Timothy 3:2-3 several forms of self-restraint or discipline are mentioned. “The overseer then must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, **3:3** not a drunkard, not violent, but gentle, not contentious, free from the love of money.” Of the twelve qualities mentioned, all but two deal with a specific application of some form of self-control. The focus here will be on the more general terms.

The Enkrateia Group

The first word group comes from the Greek noun *kratos*, “strength, power, might,” plus the preposition *en*, “in, on, at, with” or when in composition with other words, it may suggest, “possession of the quality of the word with which it is attached. In this case, “self-mastery, control.” This word group consist of the noun *enkrateia*, “self-control, mastery of one’s appetites and passions,” the adjective, *enkrates*, “self-controlled, disciplined,” and the verb *enkrateuomai*, “to control oneself, be disciplined, abstain from something.” These words are used in Acts 24:25; 1 Corinthians 7:9; 9:24-27; Galatians 5:23; 2 Peter 1:6; and Titus 1:8.

H. Baltensweiler, makes an interesting comment regarding this word group.

Discipline is a concept that plays a significant part in the philosophical ethics of classical Greece and also in Hellenism. It is striking that the word-groups discussed here are relatively rarely attested in the New Testament. The life of man in the Bible is determined not so much by self-control in the sense of an autonomous ethic as by commandments of God.²

As mentioned previously, in Scripture, *self-control* is to be the product of one’s faith relationship with God and not a matter of self-righteous self-denial or asceticism. This is most obvious in Galatians 5:23 where it is seen as one part of the fruit (singular) of the Spirit.

² H. Baltensweiler, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, Zondervan, Colin Brown, General Editor Grand Rapids, English Edition, 1975, p. 494.

The So,,phronismos Group

The second word group are all derivatives of the Greek term *sophos*, “wisdom, wise.” They consist of (1) the verb *so,,phroneo*, “be of sound mind, be reasonable, sensible, keep one’s head,” and from this, “be self-controlled” (Tit. 2:6; 1 Pet. 4:7),³ (2) the nouns *so,,phronismos*, “good judgment, the teaching of morality, moderation, self-discipline” (1 Tim. 1:7) and *so,,phrosune,,* “mental soundness, reasonableness, good judgment, moderation, self-control” (1 Tim. 2:9, 15), (3) the adverb *so,,phrono,,s*, “soberly, moderately, showing self-control” (Tit. 2:12), and (4) the adjective *so,,phro,,n*, “prudent, thoughtful, self-controlled” (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8; 2:2, 5). As should be evident, all these words contain the idea of self-control through discretion or mental soundness.

The Ne,,pho,, Group

A third important word group is *ne,,pho,,* and *ne,,phalios*. The verb *ne,,pho,,* basically means “be sober.” In the New Testament, however, it is only used figuratively in the sense of “be free from every form of mental and spiritual drunkenness.” In 1 Peter 1:13, Peter wrote, “Therefore, get your minds ready for action, by being fully sober, and set your hope completely...” The verb means, “free from excess, passion, rashness, confusion, i.e., *be well-balanced, self-controlled, be self-possessed under all circumstances* (2 Tim. 4:5; 1 Pet. 4:7; 5:8). Rather than allowing outside circumstances to influence their inner lives, believers should be controlled and directed by the inward spiritual dynamics of their new life in Christ for both now and in the future. The noun form is *ne,,phalios*, “sober, clear headed, temperate, self-controlled” (1 Tim. 3:2, 11; Tit. 2:2).

Terms Relating to the Ideas of Rule and Mastery

In view of both the inward (the cravings of the flesh) and external stimuli (the worldly appeals and temptations from without), it is easy for people to develop life-dominating patterns that literally rule or have mastery over their lives. In the New Testament, two more significant and related terms come into play. These are *basileuo,,* “to reign, have control over, rule” and *kurieuo,,* “to be master over, rule over.” These word are used in Romans 6:12-14 where, based on the Christian’s identification with Christ in His death and resurrection by the baptizing work of the Spirit, the apostle Paul exhorts believers have rule over the appetites of the flesh.

12 Therefore do not let sin reign (*basileuo,,*) in your mortal body so that you obey its desires, 13 and do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who are alive from the dead and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. 14 For sin will have no mastery over (*kurieuo,,*) you, because you are not under law but under grace (Rom. 12:2-14).

Other Terms of Significance

While the above terms deal specifically with the concepts of control, restraint, rule, and self-mastery, there are many other terms that should perhaps be mentioned because they are related to self-control in some manner, often as cause and effect or root and fruit. These include terms like *abstain* (1 Pet. 2:11), *obey* or *obedience* (Rom. 6:16; 2 Cor. 10:5), *submit* or *be subject* (1 Pet. 2:13; 3:1), *keep* or *maintain good conduct* (1 Pet. 2:12), *lay aside* and *put on* (Eph. 4:22f). In essence, any command for obedience to God or conduct that is in keeping with biblical Christianity or godliness is really a call for inward controls by the grace and provision of God found for us in Christ.

For instance, when insulted or treated in an unfair or evil manner, the natural and sinful impulse is to react in some form of retaliation—insult for insult, evil for evil. But God calls upon us to control such impulses by turning the situations over to Him through the application of biblical truth and faith. The following passage from 1 Peter illustrates this for us in two passages:

18 Slaves, be subject to your masters with all reverence, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the perverse. 19 For this finds God’s favor, if because of conscience toward God someone endures hardships in suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if you sin and are mistreated and endure it? But if you do good and suffer and so endure, this finds favor with God.21 For to this

³ See the use of *so,,phroneo,,* in Mark 5:15. Here it is used of a man who, being formerly controlled by demons, was running around naked, violent, and completely out of control, but, by the power of the Savior, he came to be in his right mind, was sitting down, clothed—completely under control.

you were called, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example for you to follow in his steps. 22 He *committed no sin nor was deceit found in his mouth*. 23 When he was maligned, he did not answer back; when he suffered, he threatened no retaliation, but committed himself to God who judges justly. 24 He *himself bore our sins* in his body on the tree, that we may leave sin behind and live for righteousness. *By his wounds you were healed*. 25 For you were *going astray like sheep* but now you have turned back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls (1 Peter 2:18-25).

8 Finally, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, affectionate, compassionate, and humble. 9 Do not return evil for evil or insult for insult, but instead bless others because you were called to inherit a blessing. 10 FOR THE ONE WHO WANTS TO LOVE LIFE AND SEE GOOD DAYS MUST KEEP HIS TONGUE FROM EVIL AND HIS LIPS FROM UTTERING DECEIT. 11 AND HE MUST TURN AWAY FROM EVIL AND DO GOOD; HE MUST SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT. 12 FOR THE EYES OF THE LORD ARE UPON THE RIGHTEOUS AND HIS EARS ARE OPEN TO THEIR PRAYER. BUT THE LORD'S FACE IS AGAINST THOSE WHO DO EVIL (1 Peter 3:8-12).

The essence of self-control, then, is the growing manifestation of the holy qualities and character of the Lord Jesus as Christians seek to exchange their lives, which were formerly dominated by the cravings of the old life, with the new and glorious life of Christ. The means for this is a Word-filled and Spirit-filled⁴ life (Col. 3:17; Eph. 5:18).

The Forces Within and the Issue of Control

Below the surface of our lives are certain forces at work, which, if not controlled, can suddenly erupt causing various degrees of damage, depending on the nature and build-up of the pressure. Similarly, earthquakes occur when a build-up of pressure between sections of rocks within the earth's crust is suddenly released, causing minor or severe vibrations on the surface of the land. The point at which layers of rock shift and reposition in relation to one another is called the focus; this is the energetic center of the earthquake. Directly above the focus, a second point called the epicenter marks the corresponding point of highest-intensity shock on the surface. Shock waves propagate like ripples from the focus and epicenter, decreasing in intensity as they travel outward.⁵ Unfortunately, though scientists sometimes can discern the presence of problems and predict the probability of earthquakes, there is nothing they can do to prevent the shifting of the plates of the earth.

The Bible not only points to the presence of inner pressures at work below the surface, but emphatically predicts the problem of constant eruptions in the heart of man. This is spoken of as "doing the will of the flesh and of the mind" according to the cravings of the flesh, a condition that is the result of being dead in sin and by nature, the children of wrath (Eph. 2:1-3). This struggle is spoken of as a continuous struggle in the heart of man. It is an on-going problem that results in misery, defeat and domination (see Rom. 6:12-14; 7:13f; Gal. 5:16; 1 John 2:16).

Unlike earthquakes over which we have no control, people (especially Christians) can have control over the pressures that exist below the surface of their lives. If no control was available, then we might excuse a lack of self-control with the often-heard excuse, "That's just the way I am." Such an excuse implies we are not truly responsible for our actions.

The cause of this underlying struggle is spoken of by a number of New Testament terms as outlined below.

The Problem of Indwelling Sin

The term *sin* is sometimes used by the apostle Paul as a power or force or energy within the heart of man that seeks to *rule* or *control* (see Romans 6 and 7).

⁴ The essential nature of the term "filled" (the Greek *pleoō*, "to fill, be filled") as used in the contrast with drunkenness in Ephesians 5:18 is really that of control, influence, and direction. Rather than being controlled and under the influence of wine which leads to sinful behavior, the believer is to be controlled by the Spirit. According to careful Greek syntax, the Spirit is the agent of the filling, not the content with which one is filled. For a discussion of this grammatical point, see *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, Daniel B. Wallace, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1996, pp. 375f.

⁵ "Earthquake and Shock Waves," *Microsoft® Encarta® 97 Encyclopedia*. © 1993-1996 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved

The Problem of Lusts or Intense Desires of the Flesh

Another term used by Paul is *the lusts or intense desires of the flesh*. In this case, flesh refers to that sinful propensity in all of us to attempt to handle life (find happiness, significance, security, etc.) by our own resources apart from God. In Ephesians 2:1-3 and again in 4:16-19, Paul gives us a graphic picture of the unregenerate condition of man under the domination of the flesh. Being dead in sin and without God, man is ruled by the desires or cravings of the flesh.

1 And although you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you formerly lived according to this world's present path, according to the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energizing the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom all of us also formerly lived out our lives in the cravings of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest... (Eph. 2:1-3).

17 So I say this, and insist in the Lord, that you no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, being alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their hearts. 19 Because they are callous, they have given themselves over to indecency for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness (Eph. 4:17-19).

The Problem of Worldly Desires

In Titus 2:12, Paul spoke of these inner forces as “worldly desires.” “Desires” is *epithumia*, “desire, passionate longing.” Though sometimes translated “lusts,” this word in itself is neutral. Desire or passionate longing is not in itself evil. It is the context that determines the nature of the desire. Thus, the apostle qualifies it here with the adjective “worldly.” “Worldly” is *kosmikos*, which carries the idea of “pertaining to or deriving its standards, values, and motivations from the *kosmos*, the world system. This is a reference to the organized system in the world that operates under the deception and power of Satan and stands opposed to God and His kingdom, values, and purposes. The significance of this can be seen if we compare *kosmikos* with *pneumatikos*, a derivative of *pneuma*, spirit. *Pneumatikos* means “activated or controlled by the Spirit.” It speaks of a life patterned or controlled or directed by God's Spirit rather than by the flesh (*sarkikos*) or by the world (*kosmikos*).

The Distortion of Passion, Pleasure, Pride

In 1 John 2:16, the apostle John described and divided these internal forces into three powerful energies of the inner man or the heart: “the lusts of the flesh,” *passion, intense desire*, “the lusts of the eyes,” *pleasure*, and “the boastful pride (arrogance) of life,” *pride*. But again, the problem is not with the presence of passion, pleasure, or even pride which are all God-given, but with their misuse and function within the human heart. The issue is one of management and the objectives involved in their use. This is even true with pride (see Jer. 23:24; Rom. 5:11 [rejoice or boast, take pride in verbally]; 2 Cor. 12:5-7).

The Primary Issue In Self-Control

Sometimes the secular and religious world recognize the need of some form of self-restraint to bring the appetites of the flesh under control. This often takes the form of human practices like asceticism (extreme forms of self-denial believing the ascetic life releases the soul from bondage to the flesh) or legalism (keeping a set of human taboos or do's and don'ts and observing certain ritualistic practices in the vain belief that such is an evidence one has his appetites under control). In essence, no matter what the form (asceticism or legalism or religionism) they all involve the flesh trying to overcome the flesh.

I remember reading about a monk who, while attempting to mortify himself from fleshly indulgences would lie prostrate on the floor for hours on end all the while proudly entertaining the thought of how good and above average he was because of his self-denial. The Lord Jesus Himself warned the religious Pharisees in Mark 7:15: “There is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man.”

Thus, the apostle Paul, recognizing such practices are futile to man's problem and faithless in the completed work and provision of God in Christ, wrote:

20 If you have died with Christ to the elemental spirits of the world, why as though you lived in the world do you submit to them? 21 “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” 22 These are all destined to perish with use, founded as they are on human commands and teachings. 23 They have the appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship and false humility, by an unsparing treatment of the body, but they are thoroughly useless when it comes to restraining the indulgences of the flesh (Col. 2:20-23).

The issue in self-control from a biblical standpoint is never a matter of (1) denying the legitimacy of passion, pleasure, or pride, or (2) despising these God-given energies, or (3) seeking to obliterate them by some form of self denial. Rather, the issue is their spiritual management, control, and direction by the truth of Scripture, by spiritual union with Christ, and by the enablement of the Spirit. In pointing to the fundamental issue of the way man distorts these energies within, Augustine wrote:

Sin comes when we take a perfectly natural desire or longing or ambition and try desperately to fulfill it without God. Not only is it sin, it is a perverse distortion of the image of the Creator in us. All these good things, and all our security are rightly found only and completely in Him.⁶

This is why covetousness or greed, extreme desire for something, is identified as a form of “idolatry” in Scripture (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). Greed or covetousness treats the thing coveted (possession, position, praise, pleasure, etc.) as though it has the capacity to do what only God can do.

But even when exercising some degree of self-restraint, Scripture teaches us that the unbelieving world and the carnal Christian live under the domination of the cravings of the flesh (Eph. 2:1-3; 4:16-20). The reason is simply because at the root of the restraint other cravings will be operative as seen in the illustration of the proud monk. Search hard and honestly and one will always find certain selfish or self-centered reasons for the controls that are exercised. An actress or an athlete may exercise extreme self-control or discipline, but the objective is usually for some form of personal glory or prize that is coveted (see 1 Cor. 9:24-25). In other words, some form of worldly craving is really at the core of such self-discipline. Of course, Christians are also not exempt from exercising self-control from the same kinds of selfish motivations. If we were, we would never find admonitions that warn us against worldly behavior like those in Titus 2:11-12 or Ephesians 4:17-21.

Regardless, self-control or its absence is never merely the product of chance or of conditions beyond one’s control for the believer in Christ. Rather, it is the product of certain spiritual dynamics at work through one’s thinking processes involving belief structures, biblical insight, values, priorities, and objectives. Of the terms used in the New Testament for self-control, one such word group (σοφρονη, σοφρονη, σοφρονη, etc.) suggests this very idea. Σοφρονη, for instance, means “prudence, discretion, thoughtful,” and then “self-controlled.” Σοφρονη, means (1) “reasonableness, rationality, mental soundness,” or (2) “good judgment, moderation, self-control.” This word group in the New Testament teaches us that self-control is brought about through good judgment, sound thinking or the thinking processes. Though the motives and sources of control should be different for believers, such a dynamic process can be observed in anyone—an athlete, actor, student, or a professional of any kind—who competes or strives for earthly rewards or objectives. Speaking of the sacrifices he was willing to make and the self-restraint he was willing to undergo for the sake of the gospel, the apostle Paul likened his behavior to the dynamic processes that motivated athletes who performed in the stadium:

23 I do all these things because of the gospel, so that I can be a participant in it. 24 Do you not know that all the runners in a stadium compete, but only one receives the prize? So run to win. 25 Each competitor must exercise self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. 26 So I do not run uncertainly or box like one who hits only air. 27 Instead I subdue my body and make it my slave, so that after preaching to others I myself will not be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:23-27).

Ultimately, then, the issue is the self-management of the motivations that direct and control these inward dynamic processes. This leads to a consideration of a key problem that is important in the issue of biblical self-control that is in keeping with the power and kingdom of God.

⁶ As quoted in *Perilous Pursuits*, Joseph M. Stowell, Moody Press, 1994, p. 47.

The Problem of the Pursuit of Significance

In the fourth mark of maturity, the concept of developing a biblical self-image was discussed. A biblical self-image is derived not from the values others or we ourselves place on us. Rather it is derived from the values and estimation that God places on us not only as His creation—created in the image of God—but especially as Christians who have become new creatures and the children of God in Christ through regeneration by the Spirit. Especially in the writings of the epistles, there is a great emphasis placed on the awesome contrast between what we were and have become as regenerated children of God. The following passages should help us focus on the point:

A New Life Individually

10 And although you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you formerly lived according to this world's present path, according to the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energizing the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom all of us also formerly lived out our lives in the cravings of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest...

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, 5 even though we were dead in transgressions, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you are saved!— 6 and he raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 to demonstrate in the coming ages the surpassing wealth of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 it is not of works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared beforehand so we may do them (Eph. 2:1-10).

A New Life Corporately

11 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh—who are called “uncircumcision” by the so-called “circumcision” that is performed in the body by hands—12 that you were at that time without the Messiah, alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who used to be far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace, the one who turned both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility, in his flesh, 15 when he nullified the law of commandments in decrees. The purpose of this was to create in himself the two into one new man, thus making peace, 16 and to reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 so that through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer foreigners and non-citizens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household, 20 because you have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:11-22).

A New Inheritance and Kingdom

12 giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light. 13 He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:12-14).

From Enmity to Amnesty

21 And you were at one time strangers and enemies in your minds as expressed through your evil deeds, 22 but now he has reconciled you by his physical body through death to present you holy, without blemish, and blameless before him—23 if indeed you remain firm in the faith, without shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard. This gospel has also been preached in all creation under heaven, and I, Paul, have become its servant (Colossians 1:21-23).

From Condemnation to Justification and Glorification

1 Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of God's glory. 3 Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance; 4 and endurance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

6 For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 (For rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person perhaps someone might possibly dare to die.) 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then because we have now been declared righteous by his blood, we will be saved through him from God's wrath. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, how much more, since we have been reconciled, will we be saved by his life? 11 Not only this, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received this reconciliation (Rom. 5:1-11).

Children of God with a Living Hope

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he gave us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 that is, into an inheritance imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. It is reserved in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are protected through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 This brings you great joy, although you may have to suffer for a short time in various trials (1 Pet. 1:3-6).

See what sort of love the Father has given to us: that we should be called God's children—and indeed we are! (1 John 3:1).

It is from this marvelous change and translation by the grace of God, not by any merit of our own, that we are to derive our self-image and from which we are to gain our sense of significance, value, and self-worth as the children of the living God. As His children, as those who are kept by the very power of God, we have an eternal, imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance. Believing that man is not only the creation of God, but understanding man's unique place in the creative work of God, the Westminster Shorter Catechism rightly concludes that "man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

Twice in Psalm 8, once at the beginning (vs. 1) and again at the end (vs. 9), the psalmist gives two emphatic exclamations on the glory and majesty of God. Verse 1, "O LORD, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth, You have set your glory above the heavens." Then in verse 9 he again exclaims, "O LORD, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth!" With this focus on the majesty of God, he then goes on, in verse 2, to exclaim a vital truth—that this majestic and sovereign Lord has chosen to use mankind, even children and the weak, to confound the strong and His adversaries. This is quickly followed by an exclamation pondering the thought that God has entrusted His glorious creation to the dominion of man (vss. 3-8). The wonder is that the God of creation chose to give weak man, created lower than the angels, such dominion, responsibility, and honor over His creation. Man has great significance and purpose, but only because of the design of the Creator. Thus the Psalmist exclaimed:

3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? 5 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. 6 You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: 7 all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas (Psalm 8:3-8)

Man has significance and purpose, but that significance is found in the purpose of his creation, which is to bring glory to God and serve Him. With this fact and truth in mind, why are we so consumed with glorifying ourselves and seeking enjoyment apart from the Creator? The answer is found in the problem of the fall and the disruption this caused in man's relationship with God and in the reign of Satan as the god of this age who seeks to distort all the purposes of God. Though the fall of Genesis 3 spoiled and delayed man's capacity to carry out God's purpose as intended, that purpose is recovered through the God-man Savior, the Lord Jesus (see Heb. 2:5-18; Rev. 4:1-5:10). It

is with this distortion that we find both the cause for man's obsession with his own significance and the reason he often finds life so disappointing, disruptive, and ultimately full of regret and futility. Fortunately, for the believer, this can be changed through the redemptive reconciliation and restoration in Christ.

Writing about man's obsession with significance and the problems this causes, Stowell, in his excellent and thought-provoking book, *Perilous Pursuits, Our Obsession With Significance*, writes: "We are built for significance. Our problem is not that we search for it, but that we search for it in all the wrong places..."⁷

True significance is never secured through our efforts or by our status or recognition or from the applause of men or by the attention and affirmation of others. Instead, true significance is founded and secured for us through the finished work of Christ on the cross. Even with this being true, we somehow feel compelled to magnify ourselves or seek to be magnified by others in search of significance through the various methods or human strategies man attempts to use. These include people's incessant scramble up the proverbial ladder for position, power, praise, applause, recognition, possessions, etc. Ironically, like broken cisterns that hold no water (Jer. 2:13), such things never satisfy our cravings for significance no matter how much we have of the things we seek? Because the source is wrong and contrary to our intended purpose by God who created us, the craving for more will always exist whether it's power or praise or money.

None of us is exempt from this significance pursuit, to the point where the pursuit often become a significance obsession. Our problem is that we look for significance in all the wrong places. We pursue prosperity, power, position, belonging, identity, and affirmation in hopes of finally securing a sense of value and worth.

To make matters worse, this pursuit is complicated by three basic drives: pleasure, pride, and passion....⁸

In other words, and this is the point with regard to self-control, man's obsession with significance forms a tremendous obstacle to self-control and the joyous life and rest God wants us to have in Christ. Actually, the pursuit of significance, like a match in a dry forest, fuels passion, pleasure, and pride. In our quest for significance, our fundamental and God-given desires are fanned into a blazing flame or action. Believing that a BMW, a mansion with a view, or one's name in lights will give status or prominence in the community, we desire more and more, and bigger and better. Because we were created for significance, we are all inherently driven by a compelling need to believe that we are significant to some degree. As R. C Sproul says, "We are driven to believe that in some way we are important. This inner drive is as intense as our need for water and oxygen."⁹

...Just as obsession with food leads to gluttony and an obsession with safety leads to anxiety and even neuroses, an obsession with our significance leads to a life of selfishness.

In psychologist Abraham Maslow's classic study of fundamental human needs, only food and safety rank as more compelling drives than significance. These intrinsic needs manage and manipulate who we are and what we do. Just as hunger drives us to find and consume food to survive, and just as we instinctively defend ourselves when we feel threatened, so we are driven as well to discover, establish, maintain, protect, and enhance our sense of significance.

Feeling significant comes as we believe we have worth, value, and dignity. Significance is knowing that our existence has made a difference after all. It doesn't have to be a great difference, just a difference. Significance is what makes a pat on the back so important. It's why affirmation is so vital. We believe we count when someone says we count. Having value and dignity are important, but depending on how we seek them, we can be deluded and consumed by the search.

The search is risky because we live in a world full of other significance seekers who either carelessly or purposely are willing to damage our sense of worth to establish theirs. These people are often fierce competitors who get their significance through the exercise of power and control,

⁷ Joseph M. Stowell, *Perilous Pursuits, Our Obsession With Significance*, Moody, Chicago, 1994, p. 13.

⁸ Stowell, p. 15.

⁹ Quoted by Stowell, p. 16, from *The Hunger for Significance*, Regal, Ventura, 1993, p. 21.

who attempt to build the illusion that they are so significant that others will submit to their pleasure and agenda.

These significance seekers attempt to overpower us personally, relationally, sexually, socially, and athletically, and in the process they may very well destroy our sense of worth. Complicating the scene are those of us who find our sense of significance in the attention of these power brokers and as a result become easy prey. *There is not a realm of life that isn't damaged, sometimes fatally and irretrievably, by the significance seekers of the world in which we live.*¹⁰

So again, we can see the sad effect of this pursuit on one's ability to experience self-control. Stowell continues,

...Our compulsion for significance makes us vulnerable to a legion of verbal sins, including gossip, slander, boasting, lying, immoral chatter, and other unkind blows by our tongues. In all this our character, our personhood, is eroded. The significance addiction leaves us vulnerable to a host of other personal failures that complicate life and debilitate us spiritually and socially. It may surprise you to learn that many people have affairs not because they are drooling with uncontrolled passion, but because for the first time in their lives someone has come along and made them feel significant during a time when they especially needed it.

We are quick to violate basic principles of stewardship and burden ourselves with debt to accumulate things that enhance our significance on the social scene. And to advance our significance in the marketplace we may violate our integrity as we exchange conscience and commitment to Christ for a significant title on our business card.

Significance seekers are unable to serve others unless there is an advantage to be gained, unable to sacrifice to advance a cause that is not their own, unwilling to suffer if necessary for another's sake, and unable to surrender to any agenda—corporate, family, or church—that impedes the progress of their pursuit of significance...¹¹

One of the key passages on self-control warns us about the ever present problem of what Paul refers to as “worldly desires,” desires inspired by a satanically-manipulated society. Speaking of “the grace of God that has appeared bringing salvation in Christ, he wrote: “It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age...” (Titus 2:12). Thus, avoiding society's version of the pursuit of significance is not easy in a world system that is truly obsessed and driven by the pursuit of significance.

The constant refrain we hear is that those who are perceived as significant have arrived and are models of the ultimate pursuit of life. In our culture, significance is measured less by the contributions we make to society than by power, performance, position, and prosperity.

Look at the world of college and professional sports. The message is clear: winners are the only ones who count. There is little applause for finishing second. Character doesn't win pennants...

Even more debilitating, our society cares little about the integrity or character of significant people or how they became significant. The point is to attain and maintain your significance. The process is irrelevant. Television talk shows specialize in staging and interviewing America's “significant” ones...¹²

Obviously, such an obsessive pursuit creates a huge obstacle to authentic and biblical Christian living in which self-control is a vital part of Christ-like maturity. In the process and through the avenue of hypocrisy, such a pursuit distorts the very core of Christian living in that it turns it inward rather than outward in honest service for others. Remember Paul words, “let love be without hypocrisy.” We can be involved in all kinds of Christian ministry, but for selfish reasons for our own significance. Such an obsession with our own significance or importance negatively affects the body of Christ. Christians end up using their ministry in some way as a platform to gain some significance, even if just a little.

¹⁰ Stowell, p. 17.

¹¹ Stowell, p. 19.

¹² Stowell, p. 21.

There are pastors who use the church as a platform to launch a personal significance campaign. They do battle with deacons, elders, and charter members who also want to use the church to enhance their power and position. The division and disruption that come as a result of these battles stain the reputation of Christ in the community....

There are also those who proclaim that you can satisfy your longing for significance not in Christ and Him alone, but by coercing Him through “faith” to make you happy, healthy, and prosperous. There are televangelists who have preyed on the uninformed by appealing to their need for significance, making these people feel significant if they send money, which in turn enhances the significance of the charlatan preacher.

Still others dishonored the name of Christ by allowing their significance in His work to delude them into believing that they were above obedience when it came to money, women, and power. They have publicly taken the name of Christ through the trough of disgrace.¹³

Such behavior by the body of Christ is totally contrary and contradictory to authentic Christian living. True significance which gives Christ’s kind of peace and joy in the ups and downs of life is derived from an unshakable, day-by-day relationship with the Savior and one’s life in Him through resting in one’s perfect and complete position in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:3f; Col. 2:10 with 1 Cor. 4:1f). The apostle Paul is a wonderful illustration of this confidence as one who found his significance, security, and satisfaction through the Savior.

To Christians who were comparing one leader to another and criticizing the apostle, Paul found his significance not in *their* assessment of his life and ministry but in his *relationship* with the Lord and Jesus’ faithfulness to reward His saints.

1 People should think about us this way—as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Now what is sought in stewards is that one be found faithful. 3 So for me, it is a minor matter that I am judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not acquitted because of this. The one who judges me is the Lord. 5 So then, do not judge anything before the time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the motives of hearts. Then each will receive recognition from God (1 Corinthians 4:1-5).

Again, in the face of another time of opposition and criticism, we see an illustration of his spiritual maturity and stability:

1 For you yourselves know, brothers and sisters, about our coming to you: it has not proven to be purposeless. 2 But although we suffered earlier and were mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of much opposition. 3 For the appeal we make does not come from error or impurity or with deceit, 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we declare it, not to please people but God, who examines our hearts. 5 For we never appeared with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is our witness— 6 nor to seek glory from people, either from you or from others, 7 although we could have imposed our weight as apostles of Christ. But we were little children among you—like a nursing mother caring for her own children (1 Thess. 2:1-7).

Thus, Paul was a picture of mature self control because he had learned that the secret of contentment was never in circumstances whether good or bad, whether in times of need or abundance, or whether praised by people or reproach by them.

10 I have great joy in the Lord because now at last you have again expressed your concern for me (now I know you were concerned before but had no opportunity to do anything). 11 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content in any circumstance. 12 I have experienced times of need and times of abundance. In any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of contentment, whether I go satisfied or hungry, have plenty or nothing. 13 I am able to do all things through the one who strengthens me. 14 Nevertheless, you did well to share with me in my trouble (Phil. 4:10-13).

¹³ Stowell, p. 23.

Biblical Motivations for Self-control

The Instructive Nature of Salvation by God's Grace

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. 12 It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 as we wait for the happy fulfillment of our hope in the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. 14 He gave himself for us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his, who are eager to do good (Titus 2:11-14).

When its full implications are recognized and grasped through spiritual growth, the message of God's grace in Christ should lead Christians in a two-fold way. First, it should have a negative result in that it motivates Christians to say reject godless ways and worldly desires (see Heb. 11:24-26). Second, it should have a positive result in that it motivates Christians to live godly lives in the present age while living in the light of the imminent return of the Lord. All the specific instructions of Titus 2:1-10 fit into these two negative and positive categories.

The Believer's Living Hope as Regenerated Children of God

Therefore, get your minds ready for action, by being fully sober, and set your hope completely on the grace that will be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Pet. 1:13).

With the "therefore"¹⁴ in verse 13, Peter based the exhortations in the following verses on the context of the previous doxology (vss. 3-9) and on the ministry of the Old Testament prophets along with the interest of angels (vss. 10-12). Typically, in the New Testament, "therefore" follows a doctrinal foundation and introduces various responsibilities that flow out of the previous truth. Again and again in the epistles we see the importance of doctrine which forms the *basis*, the *means*, the *standard*, and the *motivation* for Christian conduct.

In essence, verses 3-12 are about the certainty and character of the Christian's future hope which Peter describes as an eternal inheritance that is everything our earthly inheritances are not. Peter describes this as "a living hope" wrought through the new birth and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Furthermore, this salvation was the object of concentrated study by the Old Testament prophets and the object of intense interest by the angels. Thus, being children of a Holy and righteous God and the recipients of such an awesome salvation forms strong biblical motivation for godly living which naturally includes self-control or living soberly in an intoxicated world. Since Peter directly relates this to the coming of the Savior or His revelation, this includes the motivations of the Judgment Seat of Christ (the Bema, the place of rewards or their loss [1 Cor. 3:12-14; 2 Cor. 5:9-10]) and the nature of the Christian's rewards as imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (cf. 1 Pet. 1:3-4 with Matt. 6:19f). Included here is the majestic glory of the millennial and eternal future.

Therefore, Peter combines the reality of our future hope and the fact of our present relationship and calling as children of God as a powerful incentive for transformed living. This naturally includes sober self-control through relating one's life by faith to the salvation that is ours in Christ (For another passage stressing the impact on sonship to behavior, see Ephesians 5:1f).

The believers' living hope based on their new birth should lead to a lifestyle of holiness. Those chosen for new birth are also called to be holy. Peter exhorted his readers to prepare to meet the challenge of obedience by adopting a new mind-set. The price paid for a believer's redemption calls for reverence and obedience. Obedience involves purifying oneself and practicing holy living, while offering spiritual sacrifices as a royal priest.¹⁵

The spiritual dynamics involved with self-control (the energetic working of biblical values, beliefs, and faith) is nowhere more evident than in this wonderful passage in 1 Peter, especially in the exhortations of verses 13. Verse 13 contains three responsibilities for Christians and second on the list is self-control or sober-minded living. In many translations, these are each translated as imperatives and of equal importance, but this somewhat misses the point of the Greek text. There is actually only one imperative, "hope completely." The other two are participles which,

¹⁴ "Therefore" is *diō*, the usual inferential conjunction for passing from a statement to its inference.

¹⁵ Ron Blue, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, Editors, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1983, 1985, Logos Library System, 2.1, electronic media.

though they may pick up the mood of the one imperative, they also function to point the reader to those responsibilities that support and prepare for a complete, undivided hope that is so vital to transformed and fruitful living. The following translation may help to illustrate the point of the Greek text,

1. having girded up the loins (prepared your minds for action),
2. staying sober, self-controlled,
3. completely hope for the grace to be brought to you...

As one thinks about the call for self-control or sobriety, it is important to recognize that the primary objective and responsibility is “set your hope completely.” But, the two participles do point us to definite responsibilities. These are not just divine suggestions. However, we should not lose sight of the fact they are in some way supportive or preparatory to the primary command. In other words, girding up or preparing the mind and being self-controlled are preparatory and foundational to one’s ability to fix his or her hope completely on the eternal verities of our salvation in Christ.

(1) “Get your minds ready for action,” (NET) or “Prepare your minds for action” (NIV) (vs. 13a). Literally, the text says, “having girded up,” or “gird up the loins of your mind.” Girding up the loins is a figure of speech drawn from the Middle Eastern practice of gathering up long robes around the waist to prepare for work or action like taking a long journey or doing battle or working in the field. Peter may have in mind

...Christ’s own words (see Luke 12:35); an image taken from the way in which the Israelites ate the Passover with the loose outer robe girded up about the waist with a girdle, as ready for a journey. Workmen, pilgrims, runners, wrestlers, and warriors (all of whom are types of the Christians), so gird themselves up, both to shorten the garment so as not to impede motion, and to gird up the body itself so as to be braced for action. The believer is to have his mind (mental powers) collected and always ready for Christ’s coming.¹⁶

“Get ready for action” translates the aorist participle, *anazo,samenoι*, as an attendant circumstance participle¹⁷ that gets it imperatival mood from the main verb, the aorist imperative, *elpisate*, “hope.” But again, by the use of the participle, Peter is showing what is needed as a vital preparation for maintaining a complete hope, “getting the mind ready for action.” Like the Hebrews who girded up their loins to prepare for their journey out of Egypt and into the land (see Ex. 12:11), so we must be mentally and spiritually prepared to live as sojourners and aliens while on earth (see vv. 18ff; 2:9-12). There is an element of sequence here or preparation both in the figure used by Peter (girding the loins) and in the grammatical structure he employed.¹⁸

With life’s many variegated and often painful trials and temptations, maintaining an undivided hope in anticipation for the return of the Lord requires a conscious act of the will that involves biblical understanding. “Christians in conflict need a tough-minded holiness that is ready for action.”¹⁹ Practically speaking, this would

¹⁶ Robert Jamieson; A.R Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, Logos Library System, 2.1, 1998, electronic media,.

¹⁷ The attendant circumstance participle is used to communicate an action that, in some sense, is coordinate with the finite verb. In this respect it is not dependent, for it is translated like a verb. Yet it is still dependent *semantically*, because it cannot exist without the main verb. It is translated as a finite verb connected to the main verb by *and*. The participle then, in effect, “piggy-backs” on the mood of the main verb. This usage is relatively common, but widely misunderstood (Wallace, Daniel B, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics - Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 640).

¹⁸ Discussing the semantics of this kind of participle, Wallace says: “Two things should be noted about the semantics of this participle. First, the attendant circumstance participle has something of an *ingressive* force to it. That is, it is often used to introduce a new action or a shift in the narrative. This contrasts with the adverbial participles and becomes a key for identifying this usage.

Second, the relative semantic weight in such constructions is that *a greater emphasis is placed on the action of the main verb than on the participle*. That is, the participle is something of a prerequisite before the action of the main very can occur.” (Wallace, pp. 642-43).

¹⁹ Ron Blue, electronic media.

necessitate whatever is needed in a Christian's life to be prepared like, restoration to fellowship through honest to God confession of sin, prayer, and daily renewal in the Word.

(2) "Be self-controlled" (NIV) or "by being fully sober" (NET) (see 1 Pet. 4:7; 5:8; 1 Thess. 5:6, 8). As discussed previously, this word (the present participle *ne„phontes* from the verb *ne„pho„*, "be sober,") is used only figuratively in the New Testament. It means to be free from every form of mental and spiritual intoxication or excess, rashness, or confusion. While God has given us all things to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17), Christians must carefully guard against being intoxicated by outside circumstances and the allurements of the world as though they have the capacity to give what only God can give. By contrast, Christians should be controlled from within by the Spirit and the principles of a Word-filled life which overflow with the kind of behavior seen in Ephesians 5:18f and Colossians 3:16.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and exhorting one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, all with grace in your hearts to God (Col. 3:16).

If preparing the mind for action enables one to be ready to act as a sojourner, then maintaining a state of sober self-control is the mental condition that enables one to act wisely and with a clear vision for what is truly important. And there are other motivations for sober, self-controlled living. Later Peter will exhort his readers to be sober or self-controlled with a view to effective prayer (4:7) and for the purpose of standing against the activity of the devil who is constantly on the prowl (5:8).

Regardless of how verse 13 is taken grammatically, we can again see how the spiritual dynamics of one's life (the interplay of one's beliefs, values, and vision for life) play a vital role in the issue of self-control or sober, Christ-oriented living.

(3) "Set your hope fully" (NIV) or "set your hope completely" (NET). With this imperative, we come to the primary emphasis and responsibility of Peter's exhortations. By way of word order and thus emphasis, the Greek text has, "completely hope..." "Completely" is the adverb *teleio„s*, "fully, perfectly, completely, altogether, unreservedly." It is a call for an undivided, single-minded hope, a confident expectation that lives daily in view of the return of the Lord and the eternal realities promised in Scripture that accompany salvation. Though Peter has already spoken of the Savior's return and the accompanying ultimate stage of salvation (vss. 5, 7, 9), he now speaks of it literally as "the grace that is being brought to you." First, he speaks of this ultimate salvation by the wonderful expression, "the grace." Peter could have spoken of this as the salvation or inheritance or future glory, but by the term, "the grace" he not only speaks of all that God has done for us, but reminds us that no aspect of our salvation, past, present, or future is ever earned. It is the gift of God, freely given and this applies even to the rewards that are given for faithfulness. Why? Because is it only God's grace that enables us to serve faithfully. Second, "brought" is a present adjectival participle which describes our future salvation as so certain that it is viewed as already on the way.

The impact of keeping our hope fixed undividedly and unreservedly on our behavior is beautifully illustrated in the life and death of Jim Elliot. Jim, who gave his life to take the gospel to the Aucas in the Amazon jungle, put it succinctly and perfectly when he said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Here was a man who brought the energies of his inner man—his passion, pleasure, and pride under control because of his confidence in the power of the gospel and the future glories that were more real to him than the present sufferings of life (see 2 Cor. 4:7-18).

The Devastating Consequences of a Lack of Self-control

Another motivation for self-control that must never be ignored involves the law of the harvest. Simply put, we reap according to what we sow. There are always consequences to our behavior. To ignore this truth is to be deceived or extremely foolish. Paul states the principle succinctly:

7 Do not be deceived. God will not be made a fool. For a person will reap what he sows, 8 because the person who sows to his own flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit. 9 So we must not grow weary in doing good, for in due time we will reap, if we do not give up (Gal. 6:7-9).

There is a great subtlety here. Remember that the term *subtle* refers to that which is so slight as to be difficult to detect or recognize. As such, this subtlety in relation to the consequences to sin can be very deceiving for those who

do not live soberly or sensibly in the light of the principles and promises of Scripture. The subtle deception of the consequences of sin is seen in the preacher's statement in Ecclesiastes 8:

11 Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil. 12 Although a sinner does evil a hundred *times* and may lengthen his *life*, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly (Eccl. 8:11-12).

If a man defies the law of gravity by jumping from the San Francisco Bridge, he will immediately experience the result with a plunge to his death. The deceptive subtlety is in the fact that the consequences of sinful behavior patterns are not as immediately obvious as they are when we defy the law of gravity. When one breaks spiritual laws, there are definite consequences that go into effect though the results are often not so immediately obvious.

Those who do not control their appetites, as in the use of wine, often end up wasting their lives and resources. The apostle Paul warns us about this in Ephesians 5:18, "And do not get drunk with wine, which is debauchery, but be filled (controlled) by the Spirit. "Debauchery," is a translation of the Greek term *aso„tia*. *Aso„tia* refers to one who cannot save or deliver himself (absence of control) and thus ends up squandering his life's resources (physical, spiritual, emotional, financial, and social). The prodigal son in Luke 15:11f is the classic biblical illustration.

What does the term "random" bring to mind? The word means, "having no specific pattern, purpose, or objective."²⁰ "At random" means to be without a governing design, method, or purpose." This is exactly the way much of the world lives. From a biblical perspective, people's lives are random, out of control, lacking in God's design and purpose to guide and bring control and meaning to life.

In his commentary on 1 Peter 1:13, my good friend, Bob Deffinbaugh has a comment that illustrates this random mentality of our society:

Perhaps you have seen "The Dead Poet's Society," a movie my wife and I saw some time ago. As I recall, a translated Latin phrase, "Seize the moment!" became the philosophy of a group of college students. "Seize the moment!" aptly characterizes the spirit of our age; it also betrays the absence of the most vital element of hope. Sadly, our "now generation" has become the "hopeless generation."²¹

If the inner forces or energies that operate within us, even the God-given desires, are not harnessed and brought under control via God's designs and values, they will invariably do serious damage and leave us at best empty and at their worst, devastated and in despair. British statesman Edmund Burke argued,

...men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their own appetites. Society cannot exist meaningfully unless a controlling power upon man's appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there is without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.²²

Regarding the consequences of a lack of self-control, we have the sober warnings of Scripture:

7 For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. 8 And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. 9 But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and **many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction**. 10 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang. (1 Tim. 6:7-10 emphasis mine)

²⁰ *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from INSO Corporation. All rights reserved.

²¹ Robert B. Deffinbaugh, *The Glory of Suffering: A Study of 1 Peter*, The Biblical Studies Press, www.Bible.org.

²² Imprimis, Vol. 20, #9.

For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another (Titus 3:3).

The Means and Basis for Self-control

For the Christian, self-control and the life of good works that self-control should lead to is an outworking of the Christian's redemptive restoration and reunion with God through his new relationship with Christ. However, though this new life in Christ equips believers for transformed living, it requires a restructuring and new management of the life based on the faith application of certain vital spiritual truths that will be briefly listed below.²³

Restructuring of the life means a transition from "gratifying the cravings of one's sinful nature" to living out the believer's new spiritual resources and hope as a new spiritual creation in Christ. "So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, new things have come!" (2 Cor. 5:17). Motivated by the matchless grace of God in Christ, believers are to "reject godless ways and worldly desires to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Tit. 2:12). The three key resources for change and inner control of the life are:

1. The life-changing nature of the believer's union in Christ: saved from sin—its penalty and power or reign (Rom. 6 and Col. 2)
2. The enabling ministry of the indwelling Spirit (Gal. 5; Eph. 3:16f; 5:18f)
3. The transforming ministry of the Word (Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:21f; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:1ff; Jam. 1:19f; Ps. 119).

Conclusion

Final Thoughts From Key Scriptures Relevant to Self-control

- **Acts 24:24-25:** There is an obvious connection between faith, righteousness, and self-control in a person's life. Faith in Christ should bring self-control and a change in one's character.
- **1 Corinthians 9:24-27:** Verse 24 The context is that of rewards for running the race of life. Verse 25a The emphasis—in order to receive rewards, we must exercise self-control in all things or we will be hindered in our ability to run the race and win the rewards. Verses 25b-26 An important ingredient of self-control is remaining goal oriented. This means we need values and priorities which determine our goals and aid in self-control. Verse 27a Self-control requires discipline so that our bodies and all their members are our servants. The body makes a bad master, but a good slave. Verse 27b Points to the problem of hypocrisy and the potential of disqualification or loss of rewards.
- **1 Timothy 3:2:** This verse shows self-control is crucial to our ability to minister and lead others in the things of Christ.
- **2 Timothy 1:7:** Discipline here contains the ideas of self-control via mental balance or sound mind thinking. This verse emphasizes that self-control is God given. It comes from Him through the grace provision of our salvation in Christ.
- **2 Timothy 3:3:** A lack of self-control is one of the characteristics of the last days. It is a sure sign of moral and spiritual break down in society.
- **Titus 1:8:** Self-control is again listed among the spiritual qualifications for leadership in the church.
- **Titus 2:2:** Older men, men of maturity should be characterized by self-control.
- **1 Corinthians 6:12:** Self-control is not just a matter whether something is right or wrong as in the typical doubtful things or questionable issues; rather it a matter of whether or not something masters or controls one's life? If so, it is always wrong.

²³ Since it is beyond the scope of this study to go into detail here, the reader may see this author's in-depth study on "The Transformed Life" in Part Two of *The ABCs for Christian Growth, Laying the Foundation* on our web site at <http://www.bible.org/docs/splife/abc/toc.htm>.

- **2 Peter 1:6:** Self-control is listed among the virtues we are to add to our lives through the power of God.
- **2 Peter 2:19:** This verse draws our attention to a fundamental truth—we become the slaves of whatever we do not control. When this happens, we can no longer be the complete servants of Christ.

We can see from this brief summary why self-control or staying spiritually sober is so important. Simply put, without self-control, we become the slaves of all our enemies (the world, the flesh, and the devil) and become incapacitated, unable to serve God and one another or even our own best interests. We end up not only serving ourselves, but we become slaves to our appetites. “By what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved” (2 Pet. 2:19).

As a part of the context for 2 Peter 2:19, compare 2 Peter 2:14 with 1 Timothy 4:7. If we are not training ourselves in the life of godliness and self-control, we will become trained and skilled in greed and covetousness, which is idolatry, the worship of the flesh and its appetites.

Self-control and the Issue of Faith in Eternal and Heavenly Treasure

As one reflects on the Lord’s teaching in Matthew 6:19f, we are brought to one of the great issues in sober, self-controlled living. The Lord was seeking to show the great need and value of turning our focus from earthly to heavenly affections because of the very temporal and inadequate nature of the things on which the world so totally focuses (compare 1 Timothy 6:17-19). Only when our affections and objectives are focused on the Savior and the eternal realities of His kingdom through faith will we have the capacity for self-control.

Our new life in Christ by grace through faith is designed to produce good works for which we were recreated in Christ (Eph. 2:8-10). But as the Savior warned in Mark 4:19 in the parable of the soil, the sower, and the seed, “the cares of life, the deceit of wealth and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it produces nothing.” Whatever draws our desires and affections away from Christ and His kingdom will of necessity become our master and control our lives. Sober Christian living is not random nor does it live for the moment as does the world, rather it lives with an undivided hope because it recognizes this world is passing away and everything in it. The self-control seen in the life of Moses because of his eternal hope illustrates this beautifully:

By faith, when he grew up, Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to be ill-treated with the people of God than to enjoy sin’s fleeting pleasure. He regarded abuse suffered for Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for his eyes were fixed on the reward (Hebrews 11:24-26).

As Peter has reminded us, we must gird up the loins of our minds, keep sober, and completely hope on the grace to be brought to us when our Lord returns to be revealed in all His glory.

Mark #11: The Pursuit of Excellence

Introduction

In keeping with the biblical goal of spiritual growth and greater levels of maturity, we often find in Scripture the call to abound or excel in Christian character, especially in the various ways we can express love to one another. Spiritual maturity is a quest for character for which there will be little progress without the pursuit of excellence. Without pursuing excellence, life will remain bland, very vanilla, lukewarm at best (see Rev. 3:15-16). The quest for excellence fuels our fire and keeps us from just drifting downstream gathering debris. This focus and need becomes quickly evident from the following verses.

Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do *it* with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going (Eccl. 9:10).

And this I pray, that your love may abound (i.e., excel) still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; 10 having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which *comes* through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9-10, NET)

But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, and in all eagerness and in the love from us that is in you—make sure that you excel in this act of kindness too. (2 Cor. 8:7, NET)

And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound (excel) in love for one another and for all, just as we do for you, 13 so that your hearts are strengthened in holiness to be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (1 Thess. 3:12).

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more. (1 Thess. 4:1, NASB)

for indeed you do practice it (love) toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more (1 Thess. 4:10, NASB)

So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31, NET)

Jesus said to him, ***‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’*** 38 This is the first and greatest commandment (Matt. 23:37-38).

From these verses, it should be clear that God wants His people to abound or excel in both what they are (inward character) and in what they do (behavior or good deeds). It would seem obvious that there is simply no way one can love God with all his heart (Matt. 23:37) without seeking to do his or her best to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Since that is so, the pursuit of excellence is both a goal and a mark of spiritual maturity. However, for this to be true, the pursuit of excellence must be motivated by the right values, priorities, and motives. If we go astray here, the pursuit of excellence can quickly become a mark of immaturity and just another result of man’s obsession with his own significance, which, as mentioned previously, is a perilous pursuit.

It is known that Admiral Hyman G. Rickover’s interviews were legendary and one of the reasons is he always wanted to cut through the glib and rehearsed answers to get a look at the person underneath. He especially wanted to know how candidates would act under stress. On occasion he had them sit in a chair with the front legs sawed off an inch or two shorter than the back, to keep them off-balance. In his autobiography *Why Not the Best?*, President Jimmy Carter tells about his Rickover interview.

The admiral asked how he had stood in his class at the Naval Academy. “I swelled my chest with pride and answered, ‘Sir, I stood 59th in a class of 820!’ I sat back to wait for the congratulations. Instead came the question: ‘Did you do your best?’ I started to say, ‘Yes, sir,’ but I remembered who this was. I gulped and admitted, ‘No, sir, I didn’t always do my best.’ He looked at me for a

long time, and then asked one final question, which I have never been able to forget—or to answer. He said, ‘Why not?’¹

Because of who Christians are in Christ, because of our eternal hope, and because of the enabling grace of God available to all believers in Christ, seeking to do our best and choosing what is best is part of God’s will and an evidence of genuine spiritual growth and maturity. However, there is one distinction that needs to be stressed up front. As Edwin Bliss once said, “The pursuit of excellence is gratifying and healthy. The pursuit of perfection is frustrating, neurotic, and a terrible waste of time.”² As finite human beings, none of us ever arrive, as they say, and there will always be room for growth and improvement (see Phil. 3:12-14). While this reality should never promote negligence or apathy or slothfulness, and while we should seek to grow, mature, and do our best, understanding this reality should help us all relax and rejoice in the Lord.

Definitions and Explanations

Pursuing Excellence is not to be a Quest for Superiority

In the first definition in *The American Heritage Dictionary*, **excellence** is defined as “The state, quality, or condition of excelling; superiority.”³ The word *excel* is defined as, “to do or be better than; surpass; to show superiority, surpass others.” Then under the word *excel*, the following terms are listed and explained as synonyms for excel.

The words *excel*, *surpass*, *exceed*, *transcend*, *outdo*, *outstrip* all suggest the concept of going beyond a limit or standard. To *excel* is to be preeminent (*excels at figure skating*) or to be or perform at a level higher than that of another or others (*excelled her father as a lawyer*). To *surpass* another is to be superior in performance, quality, or degree: *is surpassed by few as a debater; happiness that surpassed description*. *Exceed* can refer to being superior, as in quality (*an invention that exceeds all others in ingenuity*), to being greater than another, as in degree or quantity (*a salary exceeding 50 thousand dollars a year*), and to going beyond a proper limit (*exceed one’s authority; exceed a speed limit*). *Transcend* often implies the attainment of a level so high that comparison is hardly possible: *Great art transcends mere rules of composition*. To *outdo* is to excel in doing or performing: *didn’t want to be outdone in generosity*. *Outstrip* is often interchangeable with *outdo* but strongly suggests leaving another behind, as in a contest: *It is a case of the student outstripping the teacher*.⁴

Competition or being better than others is a prominent part of the above definitions. But when we think of the pursuit of excellence from a biblical standpoint, is that what is meant? No! As the above terms and their explanations suggest, those who approach or look at life from the viewpoint of the world typically think in terms of competition, of outstripping others, but such is usually done for one’s own glory or significance or for the praise or applause of men.

Brian Harbour picks up on this issue in *Rising Above the Crowd*: “Success means being the best. Excellence means being your best. Success, to many, means being better than everyone else. Excellence means being better tomorrow than you were yesterday. Success means exceeding the achievements of other people. Excellence means matching your practice with your potential.”⁵

Gene Stallings tells of an incident when he was defensive backfield coach of the Dallas Cowboys. Two All-Pro players, Charlie Waters and Cliff Harris, were sitting in front of their lockers after playing a tough game against the

¹ Taken from *Reader’s Digest*, October 1993, p. 104.

² *Eating Problems for Breakfast* by Tim Hansel, Word Publishing, 1988, p. 39.

³ *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* copyright ©1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from INSO Corporation. All rights reserved.

⁴ *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, electronic version.

⁵ *Leading the Way* by Paul Borthwick, Navpress, 1989, p. 64.

Washington Redskins. They were still in their uniforms, and their heads were bowed in exhaustion. Waters said to Harris, “By the way Cliff, what was the final score?”⁶

As these men illustrate, excellence isn’t determined by comparing our score or performance to someone else’s. The pursuit of excellence comes from doing our best with what we have to God’s glory and with a view to growing and improving, but not with a view to the score or who is watching from man’s standpoint.

So then, biblically speaking, the *pursuit of excellence* refers to pursuing and doing the best we can with the gifts and abilities God gives, giving our best to the glory of God. But ideally, it is done without the spirit of competition or seeking to excel simply to be better than others. Excellence includes doing common, everyday things, but in very uncommon ways regardless of whether people are watching. The reality is that God sees our work and rewards us accordingly (cf. 1 Cor. 15:58).

Pursuing Excellence Should Not be Limited by the Nature of the Task

The emphasis of the exhortation in 1 Corinthians 10:31 is that we are to do whatever we do, whether it is viewed as important by society or very menial and insignificant, whether one is the president of a large company or one who cleans the offices at night, all is to be done to the glory of God. Regardless what we do, it deserves our best for in the long run, it reflects on the honor and glory of our God and will ultimately be rewarded by Him (1 Cor. 15:58).

The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.⁷

So then, dear brothers and sisters, be firm. Do not be moved! Always be outstanding (*perisseuo*,, “abounding, doing over and above, excelling) in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58).

Pursuing Excellence Is a Matter of Choosing the Best

The pursuit of excellence is never a matter of simply choosing between what is good or bad, but of choosing what is best or superior because it will better enable us to accomplish what God has designed us to be and do (cf. Phil. 1:9 with Eph. 2:10).

In keeping with the fact that all believers are to abound or excel in the expression of Christian love, the apostle prayed that the Philippians may have greater knowledge and every kind of discernment. But in order to excel in love and wisely express it, they needed to be able “to approve the things that are excellent” (NASB) or choose what is best (my translation). The term “approve” or “choose” is the Greek *dokimazo*,, which carries two ideas. First, it means “to put to the test, examine,” and then as a result of the examination or testing, “to approve, make the right choice.” Through the values and priorities that come from the knowledge of God’s Word, we are to examine and test, and then choose accordingly.

What is to be chosen is explained by the words “the things that are excellent” (NASB) or “what is best” (NET). The Greek word here is a present neuter participle from *diaphero*,, which means in this context, “the things differing, but in accordance with what is best,” i.e., the best or what is excellent.

The pursuit of excellence from a biblical world view is always connected with the issue of God’s *values* and *priorities*. This means the pursuit of excellence must include the elimination of some things even though they may be good and legitimate. The principle is are they the best and will they get in the way or hinder the main objectives of a Christian’s life based on biblical principles and values? If so, they need to be eliminated. We see this truth in Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 10:23, “All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify” (see also 1 Cor. 6:12). Just because they are legitimate does not mean they should be chosen or pursued.

⁶ *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching, From Leadership Journal*, edited by Craig Brian Larson, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1993, p. 73.

⁷ John Gardner, source unknown.

Film-maker Walt Disney was ruthless in cutting anything that got in the way of a story's pacing. Ward Kimball, one of the animators for *Snow White*, recalls working 240 days on a 4-1/2 minute sequence in which the dwarfs made soup for Snow White and almost destroyed the kitchen in the process. Disney thought it funny, but he decided the scene stopped the flow of the picture, so out it went. When the film of our lives is shown, will it be as great as it might be? A lot will depend on the multitude of 'good' things we decided to eliminate to make way for the great things God wants to do through us.⁸

Pursuing Excellence is an All-Inclusive Pursuit

Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do *it* with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going (Eccl. 9:10).

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

Both of these passages point us to the all-inclusive nature of the pursuit of excellence. The words, "whatever your hand finds to do" and "whatever you do" point to the importance of doing our very best in everything we do. The preacher of Ecclesiastes teaches us that apart from faith in God and living one's life for Him, life is empty and futile. But this does not mean that men should therefore have a supine attitude by which one simply drifts along since nothing really matters because it does. Life is full of opportunities and there is work to be done. This means that the strength and abilities we have are to be used to take advantage of the opportunities God gives us as they lie in the scope of our gifts, strength, His leading, and our responsibilities.

Besides encouraging his readers to enjoy life as God enabled them, Solomon also encouraged them to work diligently. The idiom **whatever your hand finds to do** means "whatever you are able to do" (cf. 1 Sam. 10:7).⁹

If it is a task worth doing, it is a task worth doing right and diligently.

Perhaps it might be worthwhile to make a list of as many areas as we can think of where the pursuit of excellence should touch and change our lives. Be specific! Are there any areas or tasks that I have not really taken seriously and I need to work on? Scripture says, "whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). This would mean our occupation, ministries, family, hobbies, recreation, etc.

Pursuing Excellence Is a Matter of a Whole-Hearted Endeavor

Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, **do it with all your might**; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going (Eccl. 9:10).

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! "And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (Deut. 6:4-5).

Jesus said to him, '**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.**' This is the first and greatest commandment (Matt. 23:37-38).

These three passages also point us to the importance of whole-hearted endeavor in whatever we do as Christians. But even more basic than that, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Matthew 23:37 teach us that pursuing excellence is a matter of the heart, of the inner person and proceeds from a inner faith/relationship with God. Scripture clearly teaches the real issues of life are spiritual and are really matters of the heart, the inner man. Maybe it's for this reason the word "heart" is found 802 times in the NASB, 830 in the KJV, 837 in the NKJV and 570 in the NIV. Heart is one of the most commonly used words of the Bible and most of these occurrences are used metaphorically of the inner person. When so used, they refer to either the mind, the emotions, the will, to the sinful nature, or *inclusively* to the total inner person. Thus, the term *heart* speaks of the inner person and the spiritual life as the seat and center of all that proceeds from a person's life. Like the physical pump, the spiritual heart is central and vital to who we are and how we live.

⁸ Craig Brian Larson, p. 186.

⁹ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, Editors, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1983,1985, electronic media.

Both Solomon and the Lord Jesus teach us that the issues of life proceed from the heart (Pr. 4:23; Matt. 6:21; 12:34; 15:18). What we do in word and deed is first of all a product of what we are on the inside from the standpoint of what we truly believe and how we think. This is easily illustrated by the Lord Jesus in His teaching in the sermon on the mount. There He spoke strongly against the mere external and performance-oriented hypocrisy of the religious Pharisees. Importantly, in Matthew 5:17-48, no less than six times, He contrasted the external teaching of the Pharisees with His own teaching which stressed the inner life. Note the following statements:

“You have heard ... but I say to you ...” (vss. 21-22)

“You have heard ... but I say to you ...” (vss. 27-28)

“It was said ... but I say to you ...” (vss. 31-32)

“You have heard ... but I say to you ...” (vss. 33-34)

“You have heard ... but I say to you ...” (vss. 38-38)

“You have heard ... but I say to you ...” (vss. 43-44)

What was the Lord seeking to communicate? He was reminding the people of the moral precepts they had been taught by their religious leaders for years, precepts which often had their source in the Old Testament Scriptures. But then, with the words, “but I say to you,” He addressed those same issues again as being first and foremost *matters of the heart*. This and only this is authentic Christianity and reveals an intimate walk with God by faith. Anything else is **nothing more than religious hypocrisy** and will fail to pursue excellence, at least from the right motives.

Because of the central place and importance of the heart in all we do, which naturally includes the pursuit of excellence, it would be well to think a moment about some issues concerning the heart as it applies to doing our best for the glory of the Lord.¹⁰ By itself, the heart is not a safe haven. It needs guarding or protection from invasion by the world system around us and from the sinful nature that dwells within us. In Proverbs 4:23, Solomon wrote, “More than any act of guarding, guard your heart, for from it are the sources of life” (NET). The heart needs special care because the heart, which includes the mind, the emotions, and will, is the place where we deposit the knowledge of God or biblical wisdom; it is the place of our values (Matt. 6:21) and priorities and where vital choices are made. Thus, it becomes the wellspring, the source of whatever affects life and character (see Mt 12:35; 15:19).

Swindoll has a good word here:

Relentlessly, we struggle for survival, knowing that any one of those strikes can hit the target and spread poison that can immobilize and paralyze, rendering us ineffective. And what exactly is that target? The heart. That’s what the Bible calls it. Our inner person. Down deep, where hope is born, where decisions are made, where commitment is strengthened, where truth is stored, mainly where *character* (the stuff that gives us depth and makes us wise) is formed. . .

The quest for character requires that certain things be kept *in* the heart as well as kept *from* the heart. An unguarded heart spells disaster. A well-guarded heart means survival. If you hope to survive the jungle, overcoming each treacherous attack, you’ll have to guard your heart.¹¹

Indeed, the heart needs guarding. We need to place a sentinel over the heart because it is the storehouse for the treasures that lead to the formation of Christ-like character. But these treasure can be stolen by the variegated deceptions and temptations of Satan who seeks to seduce us to pursue the lust patterns of destruction like power, prestige, pleasure, possessions, fortune and fame and always at the expense of the pursuit of excellence and godly character.

In keeping with the idea of excelling, the pursuit of excellence naturally works against a half-hearted, drift along or go-with-the-flow kind of mentality. As Ecclesiastes 9:10 shows, to do our best requires doing it with all our might.

¹⁰ For more on this concept, see the study on our web site called *Guarding the Heart* which deals with a number of practical and helpful issues here like the *needs* of the heart (it needs guarding, giving, preparing, purifying, prostrating, biblical desires, and longings, and other essential needs) and the **problems** of the heart (an unbelieving heart, a fearful heart, an agitated heart, a depressed heart, etc).

¹¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *The Quest for Character*, Multnomah Press, Portland, 1987, pp. 19-20.

In keeping with the rest of Scripture, this means “with all the ability and strength that God gives us.” And, as Matthew 23:37 and Deuteronomy 6:5 teach us, pursuing excellence is a matter of giving the whole heart. But this does not mean there is no place for leisure or rest and relaxation.

A certain amount of rest and relaxation is essential to our physical, emotional, and mental well-being. It is not only okay to relax, but it is essential as long as it is kept in the scheme of its purpose and not used as an excuse for laziness and irresponsibility. The goal is to enhance our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. Strangely, however, in our workaholic society many people, and this include a lot of Christians, get their sense of identity and significance from work and a busy schedule. They often give their all, but for selfish reasons—the pursuit of position, praise, or significance. Some Christians even promote the idea that you really aren’t living for the Lord unless you are “overcommitted, hassled, grim-faced, tight-lipped believers... plowing through responsibilities like an overloaded freight train under a full head of steam...”¹² Some would view such behavior as a sign of pursuing excellence when in reality, it can become a hindrance because of the debilitating impact on one’s physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing.

Swindoll writes:

Strangely, the one thing we need is often the last thing we consider. We’ve been programmed to think that fatigue is next to godliness. That the more exhausted we are (and look!), the more committed we are to spiritual things and the more we earn God’s smile of approval. We bury all thoughts of enjoying...for those who are genuinely dedicated Christians are those who work, work, work. And preferably, with great intensity. As a result, we have become a generation of people who worship our work... who work at our play... and who play at our worship.

Hold it! Who wrote that rule? Why have we bought that philosophy? Whatever possessed someone to make such a statement? How did we ever get caught in that maddening undertow?

I challenge you to support it from the Scriptures...

According to Mark 6:30-34, Jesus purposely sought relief from the hurried pace of ministering to others and advised his apostles to do the same.¹³

The pursuit of excellence will mean hard work and diligence which may take on various forms—research, study, time, sweat, planning, brainstorming for ideas, etc. It may well mean swimming against the stream and sometimes navigating the rocky and swift rapids of life. It will often be exhausting and bring us up against that which is really beyond us. Thus, in keeping with our own shortcomings and weaknesses, the pursuit of excellence in the execution of our daily routine or special projects is something that must be pursued by God’s strength. Such a mentality can be seen in the attitude and actions of the apostle Paul. As one totally committed to God’s purpose for his life, Paul gave his all to be all God wanted him to be in seeking to bring men to maturity in Christ, but he did so by God’s enablement rather than by his own strength.

25 I became a servant of the church according to the stewardship of the grace of God—given to me for you—in order to complete the word of God, 26 that is, the mystery that has been kept hidden from ages and generations, but has now been revealed to his saints. 27 God wanted to make known to them the glorious riches of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 We proclaim him by instructing and teaching all men with all wisdom so that we may present every man mature in Christ. 29 Toward this goal I also labor, struggling according to his power that powerfully works in me (Col. 1:25-29)..

Motives for the Pursuit of Excellence

The Glory of God

So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything **for the glory of God** (1 Cor. 10:31).

¹² Charles R. Swindoll, *Strengthening Your Grip, Essentials in an Aimless World*, Word, Waco, 1982, p. 161.

¹³ Swindoll, *Strengthening Your Grip*, pp. 161-162.

In thinking about biblical motives for the pursuit of excellence we are brought face-to-face with the issue of the chief purpose for the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 10:31, Paul reminds us that whatever we do (in keeping with our purpose) is to glorify God. This naturally includes pursuing excellence. The Westminster Shorter Catechism echoes this point with the words “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” For the Christian who is concerned about his motives, this is the appropriate starting place. This comment by the apostle Paul and the statement from the Shorter Catechism brings us to the heart of the matter and it is doubtful if the issue can be more accurately and succinctly expressed. Christians must constantly be reminded that nothing less than *the glory of God* should be the motive for whatever they do and how they do it. To glorify God means to bring honor and greater respect to God’s name among men and even the angelic world who watch the behavior of the church (see Eph. 3:10). Every other consideration must be brought into subjection to this supreme objective.

The Principle of Redeeming the Time, Using our Opportunities

Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do *it* with all your might; **for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going** (Eccl. 9:10).

Ecclesiastes 9:10b, “for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going” brings us to the climax of Solomon’s point in this verse. It may be that Jesus Christ was paraphrasing verse 10 when he said, “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work” (John 9:4). Solomon was not saying anything sub-Christian here. Scripture knows nothing of a purgatory where one can pick up or gain what was neglected in this life. The New Testament agrees that it is deeds done in the body that count.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be paid back according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or evil (2 Cor. 5:10).

The reason for the preacher’s advice in Ecclesiastes is that once death comes we can no longer buy up or use all opportunities for work and service. After death a person will have no further opportunities for work; there will be neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. We must not think this passage is suggesting soul sleep; see comments on our web page regarding “soul sleep.”

Eternal Rewards

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding (excelling) in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not *in vain* in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58).

Whatever you are doing, work at it with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not for people, 24 because you know that you will receive your inheritance from the Lord as the reward. Serve the Lord Christ (Col. 3:23).

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be paid back according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or evil (2 Cor. 5:10).

Another awesome reason for the pursuit of excellence is that our toil in the Lord is never in vain if done in His strength or by the enabling ministry of the Spirit of God. All Christians will one day stand before the Judgment (Bema) Seat of Christ to receive back for what they have done while alive in this life.

11 For no one can lay any foundation other than what is being laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, 13 each builder’s work will be plainly seen, for the Day will make it clear, because it will be revealed by fire. And the fire will test what kind of work each has done. 14 If what someone has built survives, he will receive a reward. 15 If someone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Cor. 3:11-15).

The consequences of the dishonor to the Lord, failure to be a blessing to others, failing to use our opportunities, and the possibility of the loss of rewards form excellent motivations for the pursuit of excellence.

The Role of Attitude in the Pursuit of Excellence

How does one develop the pursuit of excellence? What are some of the things involved by way of the means for pursuing our best?

From the standpoint of that which affects the way we work, there is probably nothing more important than one's attitude! Our choice of attitude impacts every decision we make on a day-to-day, moment-by-moment basis. Our attitude can either fire our hopes and the pursuit of the things that are important or it can extinguish our hopes and pursuits. The value of one's attitude on what we pursue—our values, priorities, objectives, and how we pursue them is very evident in the book of Philippians where one of the themes is that of joy or rejoicing in the Lord no matter what the conditions or circumstances of life.

While chained daily to a Roman soldier in his own apartment, Paul wrote the following which is literally satiated with a positive attitude that clearly fueled his hopes against all odds.

12 I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that my situation has actually turned out to advance the gospel. 13 The results of this are that the whole imperial guard and everyone else knows that I am in prison for the sake of Christ, 14 and that most of the brothers, having confidence in the Lord because of my imprisonment, now more than ever dare to speak the word without fear.

15 Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. 16 The latter do so from love because they know that I am placed here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, because they think they can cause trouble for me in my imprisonment. 18 What is the result? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is being proclaimed, and in this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, 19 for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the support of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. 20 My confident hope is that I will in no way be ashamed but that with complete boldness, even now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 Now if I am to go on living in the body, this will mean productive work for me; yet I don't know what I prefer (Phil. 1:12-22).

Then, in Philippians, as an encouragement to "working together harmoniously for the faith of the gospel" (1:27) Paul wrote:

If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose (Phil. 2:1-2).

Note what the apostle is doing. There is encouragement which comes from our being in Christ, consolation or comfort which comes from God's love for us, the love of Christians for one another, and there is a marvelous fellowship of the Spirit. This leads to affection and compassion in the hearts of God's people. So Paul encourages the Philippians to allow the above realities to impact their attitudes in their relationship with one another—to have the same mind, maintain the same love, be united in spirit, and intent on one purpose.

Then, in a context dealing with two women who had served with him in the gospel, but were having difficulties in their relationship with one another, Paul wrote:

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice! 5 Let your steady determination be seen by all. The Lord is near! 6 Do not be anxious about anything. Instead, tell your requests to God in your every prayer and petition—with thanksgiving. 7 And the peace of God that surpasses understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is worthy of respect, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if something is excellent or praiseworthy, think about these things. 9 And what you learned and received and heard and saw in me, do these things. And the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4:4-9).

Finally, in thanking the Macedonians for their support, we are given these words that display the power of maintaining or choosing the right attitude by faith in what we have in Christ:

11 Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. 12 I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. 13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me (Phil. 4:11-13).

Conclusion

There is a colorful illustration in the life of the great violinist, Paganini, which shows the value and power of attitude on the pursuit of excellence.

The colorful, nineteenth-century showman and gifted violinist Nicolo Paganini was standing before a packed house, playing through a difficult piece of music. A full orchestra surrounded him with magnificent support. Suddenly one string on his violin snapped and hung gloriously down from his instrument. Beads of perspiration popped out on his forehead. He frowned but continued to play, improvising beautifully.

To the conductor's surprise, a second string broke. And shortly thereafter, a third. Now there were three limp strings dangling from Paganini's violin as the master performer completed the difficult composition on the one remaining string. The audience jumped to its feet and in good Italian fashion, filled the hall with shouts and screams, "Bravo! Bravo!" As the applause died down, the violinist asked the people to sit back down. Even though they knew there was no way they could expect an encore, they quietly sank back into their seats.

He held the violin high for everyone to see. He nodded at the conductor to begin the encore and then he turned back to the crowd, and with a twinkle in his eye, he smiled and shouted, 'Paganini...and one string!' After that he placed the single-stringed Stradivarius beneath his chin and played the final piece on one string as the audience (and the conductor) shook their heads in silent amazement. 'Paganini...and one string!'¹⁴

¹⁴ Charles R. Swindoll, *Strengthening Your Grip*, Word Books, Waco, 1982, pp. 205-206.

Mark #12: Endurance or Perseverance and Patience

Introduction

As the Psalmist declares, the world in which we live beautifully reflects the glory of God (Ps. 19:1-6); indeed, it is not only a mighty revelation of His divine power (Rom. 1:20), but of the daily grace and mercy of God's beneficial providence (Acts 14:17; Job 5:9-10; Ps. 65;). Life is filled with a variety of wonderful varied blessings that God has given us to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17). But it is also true, if we realistic look at the other side of the coin, life is also much like a jungle; it is a sinful and fallen world that operates under the dominating, sinister, and deceptive policies of one whom the Bible describes as "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and "the God of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4). Because of Satan's deceitful activities and because of the devastating effects of the fall of man as recorded in Genesis 3, which includes a creation that groans under the curse enacted because of the fall (Rom. 8:19-22), we live in a cruel world that is often extremely hostile. The history of mankind and the daily news is a marked testimony to that fact.

In this world, man lives in rebellion against God and with a great deal of hostility against his fellow man, especially for those who stand in allegiance to the Lord Jesus (cf. John 15:18-23). Truly, it's a jungle out there! The daily headlines bear testimony to this reality. We hear of disasters and catastrophes. There are killer earthquakes, deadly hurricanes and tornadoes, and floods in some parts of the world while long-term droughts destroy other areas. In addition, we have witnessed moral degeneracy and breakdown on every level in our society. In this country alone—once a truly Christian nation led by men of great faith and courage—we have seen tremendous moral breakdown as evidenced by so many heart-breaking events. Most recently, we have witnessed a rash of school shootings with children killing teachers and students. In addition, we have witnessed church bombings, parental and spouse abuse, and even parents murdering their own children. Our streets are full of crime—drugs, murder, theft, rape, fraud, and on and on the list goes.

Equally disturbing is the gross indecency we have witnessed in our nation's capitol at the highest level of leadership, but even more troublesome is the fact this behavior by the President didn't seem to bother very many Americans. It seems they were more concerned about financial prosperity or maintaining their comfortable lifestyle and didn't want to rock the boat. But this short overview of what we are facing in our fallen world does not even touch on the many problems we are each susceptible to like diseases that strike and destroy lives and families. Finally, in addition to all of the above, there has been a growing attack on the Christian community and often by our own government through the courts. Christian bashing and intimidation is regular fare by a very liberal media and the Hollywood crowd, a group that has become more and more degenerate with each passing year.

Because of such conditions, which are on the rise (2 Tim. 3:12-13), the Christian life is sometimes characterized in the Bible as *a race* to be run (1 Cor. 9:24; Heb. 12:1; 2 Tim. 4:7) and a *struggle* or an *athletic contest* to be fought (1 Thess. 2:2; 1 Tim. 4:9; 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 10:32). Other prominent terms used of the Christian's life in the world are *labor* or *toil* or *work* (1 Cor. 3:8; 15:58; 2 Cor. 11:27; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8) and *testing* or *trials* (Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:6; 4:12). Obviously, no one can continue to run in the race, stand firm in the struggles of life, labor effectively, or handle the trials of life without endurance or perseverance, and patience.

As mentioned throughout this series, the goal of spiritual maturity is Christ-likeness, attaining the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13) or being transformed into His image from glory to glory (cf. Rom. 8:28-29; 2 Cor. 3:18). Thus, in contrast to the ever fading glory on the face of Moses, Paul could write:

And we all, with unveiled faces reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, which is from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

As with all the marks of spiritual maturity, the Lord Jesus is our perfect example in the mature qualities of endurance or perseverance, and patience. Thus, to encourage his readers to endure the trials of life, the author of Hebrews first pointed to the heroes of faith described in chapter 11 as a great cloud of witnesses who endured trials by faith in the promises and purposes of God. By the history of their lives, these Old Testament saints bear a constant testimony to us (Heb. 12:1). However, standing as the pinnacle or the supreme illustration of one who endured the

cross and the many hostilities of sinners, he pointed his readers to the Lord Jesus. He stands as the Pioneer and Perfecter of *our* faith or literally and simply “the faith.” He is the ultimate illustration of living the faith way of life. What is it that Christ did? He **endured**. Thus, in this great and moving passage, the author points us the Cross and the many hostilities the Savior **endured** as the catalyst and the example that should fortify Christians to endurance as they face the difficulties involved in living out their faith in a hostile and difficult world.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, we must get rid of every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with endurance the race set out for us, 12:2 keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set out for him he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and *has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne* of God. 12:3 Think of him who endured such opposition against himself by sinners, so that you may not grow weary in your souls and give up (Heb. 12:1-3).

I have read that the following words were spelled out in lights at the 18th Olympics at Tokyo, in 1964.

“The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part; just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is ... to have fought well.”

I am reminded of some of Paul’s last words to encourage Timothy to persevere or endure:

But you, be sober in all things, **endure hardship**, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. 6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 **I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith**; 8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Tim. 4:5-8 , emphasis mine)

The Meaning of Endurance or Perseverance and Patience

The Basic Idea and Meaning in the English Language

The *American Heritage* dictionary defines *perseverance* as “steady persistence in adhering to a course of action, a belief, or a purpose; steadfastness.” It defines *endurance* as “the act, quality, or power of withstanding hardship or stress,” but in the second definition it defines *endurance* as “the state or act of persevering.”¹ While they are synonyms and each word carries in it the idea of “continuance,” *perseverance* lays stress on a given course of action in the face of difficulty or opposition. *Endurance* perhaps more strongly adds the idea of continuing under resistance or the adversities of life, to carry on in spite of hardships as “endure an Arctic winter.” *Patience* refers to the quality of enduring pain, hardship, provocation, or annoyance with calmness. In addition, *patience* can include the calm willingness to tolerate delay. In the New Testament, however, the Greek word usually translated *patience* is more often associated with *patience with people* and the *endurance* or *perseverance* with *conditions, circumstances, and purposes*. With this in mind, let’s now turn to an overview of the key Greek words and some of the New Testament passages involved with this quality of Christ-likeness.

The Meaning of the Greek Words for Endurance and Patience in the New Testament

As with the English terms, all the words dealt with under this heading refer to man’s endurance or perseverance and patience when faced with the various difficulties of life, whether one’s behavior is that of passive resistance or active and courageous resistance with patience.

1. Hupomone,, (the noun) and Hupomeno,, (the verb).

Most translations translate these words either by “endurance” or “perseverance,” depending on the context. Often, when continuance on a course is in view like bearing fruit or doing good works, “perseverance” is used. On the other hand, when continuance against difficult conditions are in view, “endurance” is used but this varies with the different translations. These words are a derivative of two words which means, “under” and another which means “to

¹ *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from INSO Corporation.

remain, abide.” Fundamentally, they connote the idea of remaining under pressure in the sense of endure, hold up under. Given the issues discussed earlier, the fallen condition of our world and its hostility to those who want to live godly and follow the Lord, these words are naturally used with relative frequency in the New Testament. The noun *hupomone*, is used 32 times and the verb *hopomeno*, 17 times. Because of these many uses, the time and the nature of this study will only allow a focus on some of the key uses.

2. Kartereo,,

Kartereo, is found only once in the New Testament, Hebrews 11:27, but the meaning of this word and its use here is significant to a study on endurance. *Kartereo* (from *kratos*, “strength”) means “to be strong, to be steadfast, to endure.” Speaking of Moses, the author of Hebrews wrote, “By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he *endured*, as seeing Him who is unseen.” Hebrews 11:27 shows that the reason for Moses’ fearlessness and endurance was that in faith *he kept the one who is invisible continually before his eyes*. As in Hebrews 12:1, a vital element that strengthens the heart for endurance is keeping one’s eyes on the Lord or staying focused on Him as the victorious Savior. While He is physically invisible to us, He is nevertheless revealed to us in the written Word. It is there, in the Word, that we can keep our eyes on the Savior.

3. Makrothumeo,, and Makrothumia

Makrothumeo, (the verb, used 10 times in the New Testament) and *makrothumia* (the noun, used 14 times) are derived from a compound of (*makros*) “long” and (*thumos*), “temper, passion” thus, “long-tempered.” In secular Greek the meaning was perseverance rather than patience, but in the New Testament, these words took on a new flavor and significance. In biblical Greek they “denote particularly a divine forbearance which the recipients should themselves emulate in facing their problems. The Letter of Aristeas may have the new meaning. ‘By showing clemency (*makrothumia*),’ said the envoy to the king, ‘you will turn your people from evil’ (p. 188).²

In the New Testament the verb is used *actively* meaning “to persevere, endure” (Heb. 6:15) or *passively*, “be patient, long-suffering” (Jam. 5:7-8). Thus, these words may describe either *perseverance under trials* (see Heb. 6:12 for this use with the noun) or the attitude of *self-restraint* that refuses to get even for a wrong that has been done but *patiently endures rather than retaliate*. Thus, these words characteristically represent long-suffering patience toward persons rather than things.³

4. Anecho,,

Anecho,, “to endure, bear with, put up with,” is found only in the middle voice in the New Testament, i.e., *anechomai*. As such, it means “to bear with either *someone* (Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:3) or *something* as a difficult pressure or affliction (2 Thess. 1:4).

5. Anexikakos

This word, which occurs only in 2 Timothy 2:24, means “to bear evil without resentment, to be patient.” It is derived from the future form (*anexomai*) of the verb just described, *anecho*,, “to endure” plus the noun *kakos*, “evil.” Thus, it means “to patiently endure evil.” This noun “...implied in the LXX the quality of patiently affirming a belief in face of mockery” (Wis 2:19).

Important Lessons on Endurance and Patience from the New Testament

Endurance of Christ (2 Thess. 3:5)

We have an interesting statement in 2 Thessalonians 3:5 regarding *endurance* as a Christ-like quality that God wants to develop in our lives as a part of our spiritual growth. “Now may the Lord direct your hearts toward the love

² Nigel Turner, *Christian Words*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1981, p. 316.

³ Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, James Clarke & Co., London, 1961 edition, p. 185.

of God and the endurance of Christ.” There are three possible ways to take this passage grammatically and actually all three may apply, but it is the third one that is probably best and important to our study.

In this prayer, Paul prayed that either (1) they might wait patiently for the coming Savior as translated by the KJV, “into the patient waiting for Christ” (objective genitive), or (2) that they might have the kind of endurance that Christ gives, an endurance that comes from relationship with Him (subjective genitive), or (3) that they might experience the kind of endurance that belongs to Christ or that was demonstrated in His sufferings on earth and that He is demonstrating even now as He waits for His enemies to be made a footstool for His feet (Heb. 12:2; 10:13, either a possessive or attributive genitive). All three are true biblically and perhaps all are intended. This would then be what is sometimes called a plenary construction where the author intends more than one idea to be understood. Number three, however, was probably Paul’s intention. While a too rigid exegesis is to be avoided, it may, perhaps, be permissible to paraphrase: “the Lord teach and enable you to love as God loves, and to be patient as Christ is patient.”⁴ Thus again, maturity in Christ-likeness is the objective.

Similarly, Luke 8:11 and James 1:2-4 relate endurance to the issue of spiritual growth and maturity. In Luke 8:11 Jesus said, “But as for the seed that landed on the good soil, these are the ones who, after hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with steadfast endurance (hupomone,,). Because of the hostile pressures mentioned in the previous soils (vss. 12-14), bearing fruit takes time and requires growth which here describes a *steadfast endurance*, just as it does for the farmer.

The relationship of suffering, endurance, and hope in the growth and maturity of Christians is also seen in Romans 5:3-4: “Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance; and endurance, character; and character, hope.”

Endurance of Trials and Tribulations

Naturally, our words for “endurance,” hupomone,, and hupomeno,, are often used in connection with *trials* or *tribulation*, but never in the sense of mere resignation or a ‘grin and bear it’ attitude. Other biblical qualities or purposes are always associated with their use somewhere in the context. (a) They are often used in connection with God’s use of trials as tools for our growth and maturity. “Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance (hupomone,,); and endurance (hupomone,,), character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3-4). “My brothers and sisters, consider it nothing but joy when you fall into all sorts of trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect effect, so that you will be perfect and complete, not deficient in anything” (Jam. 1:2-4 see also Heb. 12:7). (b) Hupomone,, or endurance under affliction is also a means of establishing the reality of Christ in a Christian’s life or of attesting to the character of one’s walk with the Savior (cf. 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Cor. 6:4; Jam. 1:12).

Endurance of Hope

Our words for endurance, hupomone,, and hupomeno,, are often used in connection with *hope*. In the New Testament, *hope* may look at the *activity*, hoping, or at the *object* or *content* of one’s hope, the things hoped for. It is the Christian’s hope, his confident expectation in what God is doing as a sovereign God and will do, that is one of the means to his endurance under affliction or trial. As will be stressed later, endurance is related to heavenly treasures, rewards, and the eternal future, especially to the return of the Lord and the glories that will follow. In 1 Thessalonians, which has such a strong emphasis on the return of the Lord (it is referred to in every chapter), Paul praises the Thessalonians for their “endurance of hope.” As translated by the NIV, this means “their *endurance* inspired by hope,” their hope in the return of the Savior (cf. 1 Thess. 1:3 with verse 10). In keeping with this focus on the return of Christ and the blessings it will bring, James reminds us that those who endure trials will receive the crown of life (Jam. 1:12).

Endurance and Patience of Joy

Endurance (hupomone,, and hupomeno) and patience (makrothumia and makrothumeo,,) are both used in connection with *joy* because the believer’s endurance under trials or patience with others should never be a matter of a grim resignation to a situation or a person who might try our patience. You know, the ‘grin and bear it’ routine

⁴ C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles To the Thessalonians With Notes Exegetical and Expository*, Pickering & Inglis LTD, London, First Edition 1914, Revised Edition 1929, Reprinted 1959, p. 285.

where underneath the grin is a sigh of impatience. Rather, because both are to be motivated by hope in the Person, purposes, promises, and principles of God as found in His Word, biblical endurance and patience is to be encapsulated with joy (see Rom. 5:2-5; 12:12; Col. 1:11-12; Heb. 12:2).

...through whom we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and **we rejoice in the hope** of God's glory. 3 Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance; 4 and endurance, character; and character, hope (Romans 5:2-4).

Rejoice in hope, endure in suffering, persist in prayer (Rom. 12:12).

Steadfast hope, the confident expectation of what God is and will do, gives the capacity to endure with joy. Again, the Lord Jesus is our example and the perfect illustration of one whose endurance was connected with joy and the purposes and promises of God.

...and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who **for the joy set before Him** endured the cross,... (Heb. 12:1b-2a, NASB)

As a fruit of being filled with the knowledge of God in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, Paul also links endurance and patience to a joyful spirit of thanksgiving.

...bearing fruit in every good deed, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for the display of all **patience and steadfastness** (endurance), **with joy giving thanks** to the Father who has qualified you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light (Col. 1:11-12).

While it is debatable whether "with joy" should be connected with "steadfastness (endurance) and patience" (KJV, ASV, RSV, NEB) or with "giving thanks" (NIV, NET, NASB), the element of joy as a quality important to endurance and patience is evident in this passage. If the first construction, "steadfastness with joy," is correct, *joy* is seen as the necessary element that is needed with endurance and patience. If "with thanksgiving" is correct, the passage is stressing that endurance and patience should be accompanied by "joyfully," not begrudgingly, giving thanks to the Father. Paul quickly goes on to describe the kind of things for which we should be thankful. "Who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:12-14). Our ability to endure and be patient is directly related to responding to our new life in Christ rather than on the transitory trials of life.

Colossians 1:11 is part of Paul's prayer in verses 9-14 where he prays for the fruitful growth of the Colossians. He prays first that the Colossians might be filled with the knowledge of God's will. The goal of such knowledge is for a worthy walk, one that is consistent with who the believer is in Christ (verses 9-10). This is then followed in verses 11-14 with what should be the results, the fruit of such knowledge in all spiritual wisdom and understanding: (1) *bearing* fruit in every good work, (2) *growing* continually in the knowledge of God, (3) *being* strengthened with all power...for the display of all **patience and endurance**, and (4) with joy *giving* thanks to the Father.... Two important principles might be noted here. First, patience and endurance are the result of growth, of maturing in God's truth as a believer learns **who** he is in Christ, complete and blessed with every spiritual blessing (Col. 2:10; Eph. 1:3), **why** he is here as an ambassador of Christ, and **where** he is going as one who is only a sojourner on his way to eternal glories and rewards. Second, patience or longsuffering and endurance always require the habitual influx of God's strength because nothing less than God's supernatural strength is needed to transform impatient sinners into persevering and patient saints. Finally, as already stressed, *patience* and *endurance* need that marvelous, life-changing attitude of joy or it becomes mere resignation. "The endurance and longsuffering of some saints is a kind of sour resignation to God's will, their patience sticking out all over them. In reality, exultation, not resignation, is the fitting companion of these virtues (cf. Phil 1:29)."⁵

⁵ S. Lewis Johnson, "Spiritual Knowledge and Walking Worthy of the Lord," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 118 No. 472, Oct, 1961, pp. 334f.

Endurance and the Images of Expended Effort

As we study the New Testament, we also find that our words for endurance (*hupomone*, and *hupomeno*) are used in connection with the images of the Christian life as a race to be run, as an object to pursue, and a battle to be fought (see Heb. 12:1; 1 Tim. 6:11-12). Without endurance by staying focused on the Lord Jesus, we could never run the race God has laid out for us here on this earth. Therefore, endurance is a quality that needs to be pursued with great endeavor.

But you, as a person dedicated to God, keep away from all that. Instead **pursue** righteousness, godliness, faithfulness, love, **endurance**, and gentleness. Compete well for the faith (fight the good fight) and lay hold of that eternal life you were called for and made your good confession for in the presence of many witnesses (1 Tim. 6:11-12).

Endurance and the Patience of Love

Significantly, both of our main word groups for *endurance* (*hupomone*, and *hupomeno*,) and *patience* (*makrothumia* and *makrothumeo*,) are used in connection with Christian love (1 Cor. 13:4, 7; 2 Tim. 2:10). Love remains steadfast or endures in the face of unpleasant circumstances and difficult people. Love is patient (1 Cor. 13:4) and endures all things (1 Cor. 13:7). Love (*agape*,), which is the product of the filling of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23), gives the capacity to remain steadfast for the sake of others. Thus, Paul could say, “So I endure all things for the sake of those chosen by God, that they too may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus and its eternal glory” (2 Tim. 2:10). First Corinthians 13—the great chapter on Christian *agape*, or love—gives us a description of the nature of love in verses 4-7 with its Christ-like qualities. These qualities, though certainly the product of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23),⁶ also give us a description of Christ Himself. For the church at Corinth, which was so full of division and party strife, these qualities of verses 4-7 provided a solution to their many problems as well as in the church today. Interestingly, the very first quality stated is “love is patient” (*makrothumei*, a gnomic present tense of a general and timeless truth). In other words, love never retaliates or seeks to get even. Where that occurs, love will be absent. Love keeps the lid on over the long haul.

Endurance and Patience as Distinguishing Qualities of Character

In 2 Corinthians 6:4-6, both *endurance* (*hupomone*,) and *patience* (*makrothumia*) are listed among many qualities that demonstrated or clearly established Paul and his associates as mature “servants of God,” as those completely devoted to the Lord and His service and calling. “Patience” and “endurance” are qualities that mark a believer out as a mature and devoted servant of Christ.

Endurance and Patience, a Worthy Walk, and Christian Unity

In Christ, all the basic human distinctions that consistently hinder loving relationships and unity are removed in spite of the many differences that exist, differences that so often cause impatience. This is one of the themes in both Ephesians (see Eph. 2:11-22) and Colossians. Speaking of our new relationship with one another in Christ, Paul wrote:

Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all (Col. 3:11).

Norman L. Geisler has an excellent summary on this issue in the New Testament edition of *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*

In Christ distinctions are removed. These include national distinctions (**Greek or Jew**; Jews called all those outside their nation Greeks; cf. Gal. 3:28); religious distinctions (**circumcised or uncircumcised**); cultural distinctions (anyone foreign to Greek culture was a **barbarian**, and a **Scythian** was a wild, savage nomad); and economic or social distinctions (**slave or free**). If a Greek, an uncircumcised person, a barbarian, a Scythian, or a slave became a believer, he was a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), a “new self” (Col. 3:10), just like a Jew or free person who became a

⁶ Note also that *makrothumia*, “patience,” is listed as one of the qualities of the fruit of the Spirit.

Christian. For **Christ is all, and is in all**. That is, normal human distinctions are overruled and transfigured by one's union in Christ.

All barriers are destroyed in Christ, and all believers are truly “created equal.” So it is to be expected that each believer—regardless of his nationality, former religion, culture, or economic standing—should do away with his former sinful practices and should live in accord with his “new self.”⁷

This new life in Christ requires a very different lifestyle, one that is consistent with who the Christian is in Christ. It's a lifestyle that dramatically changes our attitudes and behavior toward other Christians. Thus, Paul wrote:

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ... (Eph. 4:1).

The “therefore” of verse 1 takes the readers back to what Paul wrote in chapters 1-3 as the basis for their need to walk worthily of the Lord. Naturally, we could never walk in a manner worthy of our Lord's grace and mercy. The word “worthy” (*axio,s*) means “of equal weight” and is simply calling believers to a walk that should be in balance with who they now are in Christ where all human distinctions have been removed. The point is that the Christian's walk with Christ impacts both his inner personal life in belief and attitudes and his responsibility to other believers in the body of Christ.

Thus, to walk in a manner that balances with our new life in Christ, however, requires certain Christ-like qualities that include *patience* and *forbearing with* others as vital qualities to a worthy walk in unity with other believers.

...with all humility and gentleness, **with patience, bearing with** one another in love, 3 making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:2-3).

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and **patience**, 13 **bearing with** one another and forgiving one another... (Col. 3:12-13).

When you think of the host of differences in people who are brought together in the body of Christ—social, religious, economic, racial, national, and age, not to mention the many personality differences—treating others with patience, putting up with them in love is a crucial ingredient for living and serving the Lord Jesus in unity, with harmony and effectiveness. My grandmother used to quote what a Quaker farmer would occasionally say to his wife to express how we need patience with others. He would say to his wife, “Everyone is very strange except thee and me, and thou art a little.”

The nature of *patience* (*makrothumia*) as requiring forbearance toward others is brought out strongly by the words that immediately follow in both Ephesians 4:2 and Colossians 3:12-13. This demonstrates how *patience* should always express itself “in loving forbearance with one another.” To bear with another (*anechomai*, “to bear with, put up with, endure”) is to put up with his or her faults, differences, and peculiarities (at least as it seems to us). We are to do so because we know we have our own, because we do not want to harm the unity of the body, because people are created in God's image, and because we know God uses these very differences just as the differences of the members of our body are vital to our function (1 Cor. 12).

Endurance and Patience in the Communication and Reception of God's Truth

Two other passages using two different Greek words point to another important situation that requires the quality of *patience*, that of communicating the message of the gospel to others. Communicating God's truth very often meets not only with resistance but hostility. This is true with non-Christians in evangelism or when seeking to teach and train Christians in the truth of the Word. When Paul preached in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-10), some of the Jews and God-fearing Greeks were persuaded, but many of the Jews became jealous with the final result Paul had to move on to Berea. Then, when he preached the resurrection to the philosophers in Athens, some began to scoff

⁷ John F Walvoord, and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1983, 1985, electronic media.

though others wanted to hear more (Acts 17:16-34). Satan, the god of this age, is against the truth and does everything in his power to blind the minds of men to God's truth (2 Cor. 4:4f).

Unfortunately, such resistance and hostility may also come from Christians. The church at Corinth not only questioned Paul's apostolic authority but they were critical of Paul's person and ministry claiming, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but his physical presence is weak and his speech is of no account." If you have sought to witness of the Savior or teach others the Word, you too may have run into resistance. It is an occasional experience for us with our teaching ministry on the Internet. Thus, witnessing, teaching, preaching, etc., requires a great deal of patience.

The first passage and the one using makrothumia is 2 Timothy 4:2. In view of the reality of the coming of the Lord and His judgment, Paul wrote, "preach the message (the Word), be persistent (or ready) whether it is convenient or inconvenient, reprove, rebuke, exhort **with complete patience** and teaching" (NET emphasis mine). This is immediately followed by the reason and need for complete patience.

For there will be a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching. Instead following their own desires, they will accumulate teachers for themselves, because they have a craven curiosity to hear new things. 4 And they will turn away from hearing the truth, but on the other hand they will turn aside to myths. 5 You, however, be self-controlled in all things, suffer hardship, do an evangelist's work, fulfill your ministry (2 Tim. 4:3-5).

First, in view of the fact we often face resistance, Paul did not just call for complete patience, but complete patience and instruction. The word "complete" really modifies both nouns. The reality of resistance should not send us into the closet or keep us from being willing to either witness or teach or enter into dialog. Instead, such conditions require even more instruction and dialog where possible, but always accompanied by patience. As mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:2 in connection with the command "to preach the word," Paul also literally said, "stand by," which means here, "be ready." Readiness involves **spiritual** (controlled and led by the Spirit), **academic** (know what we believe and why), and **emotional** readiness (operating out of love with patience). Again, we need to know what we believe and why and to be ready to give a verbal defense for our faith or beliefs according to the evidence of the historical facts of the New Testament and the clear teaching of the Word (see 1 Pet. 3:13-16, especially vs. 15) but vital to one's effectiveness is the spirit in which the communication of the Word is given. The goal is not winning an argument, but winning a soul.

The other passage calling for patience in a witnessing, teaching situation is 2 Timothy 2:24. Here Paul used a very different word, the Greek **anexikakos**, "bearing evil without resentment, patient." This noun "... implied in the LXX the quality of patiently affirming a belief in face of mockery (Wis 2:19). It is linked with **epieikeia** (reasonableness, gentleness). The picture is that of a relentless teacher who firmly overlooks the painful consequences of his affirmations."⁸ Again, the context of 2 Timothy 2:24 is one of meeting resistance from those who oppose the truth and have been duped by Satan's trap and here, **anexikakos** is linked with **praute,s**, "gentleness, courtesy, humility, considerateness."⁹

But keep away from youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faithfulness, love, and peace, in company with others who call on the Lord from a pure heart. 23 But reject foolish and ignorant controversies, because you know they breed fights. 24 And the Lord's slave must not be a fighter but kind toward all, an apt teacher, patient (**anexikakos**), 25 correcting opponents with gentleness (**praute,s**). Perhaps God will grant them repentance and then knowledge of the truth 26 and they will come to their senses and escape the devil's trap where they are held captive by him to do his will (2 Tim. 2:22-26).

As this passage illustrates, coming to repentance and the knowledge of the truth is the work of God and not our skill or methodology. While our responsibility is to present the truth in dependence on the ministry of the Spirit, we also see from this passage that our attitude does play an important role and can be a tool God uses or a hindrance Satan uses in communicating the truth.

⁸ Turner, p. 321.

⁹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Translated by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, 1979 electronic media.

The words for enduring or bearing with something or someone are not just used of the responsibility of the messenger, but also of those receiving the message. Often the messenger must exhort his listeners to sound doctrine or to some form of spiritual action that will require submission, obedience, and spiritual change, so the listeners need to bear with the message, endure it in a positive way. So, the author of Hebrews wrote, “Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, **bear with** (*anechomai*) my message of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you briefly” (Heb. 13:22). But sometimes because of the spiritual hardness and indifference that occurs in the hearts of people, they reach a point where they will **not bear with** sound doctrine. So Paul wrote, “For there will be a time when people **will not tolerate** (*anechomai*) sound teaching. Instead following their own desires, they will accumulate teachers for themselves, because they have a craven curiosity to hear new things” (2 Tim. 4:3).

Another interesting passage is 2 Corinthians 11:4. Here Paul used a form of sarcastic irony. “For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus different from the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit than the one you received, or a different gospel than the one you accepted, you put up (*anechomai*) with it well enough.”

Here the apostle expressed the incongruity between what might have been expected and what actually occurred because of the way the Corinthians had so easily put up with the false teaching. They listened too willingly to these teachers or error (cf. 2 Cor. 11:19). The point being is that Christians need biblical discernment and should not bear with or put up with any kind of false teaching or teachers.

Endurance, Patience, and the Coming of the Lord

Finally, the words for endurance and patience are often used in a prophetic or eschatological sense in relation to (1) the coming of the Lord, (2) inheriting the promises of God, and (3) eternal rewards. In such passages we are shown how our eternal hope and the sure promises of God are very much the foundation and the means of *patience* with people or *perseverance* under difficult conditions. Hebrews 6:12 illustrates this when it says, “so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and perseverance (*makrothumia*) inherit the promises.” Then, as an illustration, the author pointed to Abraham and wrote, “And so by persevering (*makrothumeo*), Abraham inherited the promise” (Heb. 6:15). Moses was willing to leave the treasures of Egypt, “choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.” It was the invisible, but very real future reward that gave Moses the capacity to endure ill-treatment with the people of God.

One passage that strongly stresses this prophetic or eschatological element and the way it should impact our ability to endure and show *patience* is James 5:1-11. In this passage, James used *makrothumia*, “patience” and *makrothumeo*, “be patient,” but in verse 11 he also used two other words discussed previously, *hupomeno*,, “endure” and *hupomone*,, “endurance.”

Before looking at these verses, we should remember that James’ readers were severely afflicted with materialism or the spirit of worldliness (see Jam. 4:1-5). Rather than on the return of the Lord and eternal weight of glory, they were occupied with the details of this life and its comforts. As an evidence of this, they had played favorites with the wealthy (cf. 4:1-4; 2:1f) and were boasting about their profit making schemes to go into this city or that one regardless of God’s will (4:13-17). What the readers needed, therefore, was a strong reminder regarding how transient and impotent human wealth is in the long haul. As the Lord does in Matthew 6:19f, James focuses his readers on the differences between earthly and heavenly treasures.

I agree with Jim Elliff, who has observed that the people who piously care so little about eternal rewards are often killing themselves trying to accumulate a great “reward” now. They profess to be content with a “little shack in heaven,” but want a much bigger one on earth! The Bible teaches that there is nothing wrong with ambition, just as long as we focus it on heaven rather than earth.¹⁰

Thus, in 5:1-6, like a prophet of old, James addresses the wealthy of the world who have shown little or no interest in heavenly treasures or spiritual things. Here James looks outward to the world as a whole and its future doom though his purpose is to awaken his readers to the temporary nature and ultimate doom of all human wealth. These verses remind us of the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 which contrasts the state of the rich man and Lazarus after death. The rich man had much throughout his lifetime by way of the world’s wealth and blessing,

¹⁰ Erwin W. Lutzer, *Triumph and Tears at the Judgment Seat of Christ, Your Eternal Reward*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1998, p. 25.

but had shown no interest in spiritual things while the opposite was true of Lazarus. After death however Lazarus was in the blessed place of Abraham's bosom and the rich man was in a place of torment.

When was the last time you saw a hearse pulling a U-Haul? We brought nothing into this world, materially speaking, and we will take nothing with us of what we accumulate (see 1 Tim. 6:6-7). We can lay up treasures in heaven that are imperishable, undefiled, and will not fade away (1 Pet. 1:4). Thus, to stir his Christian readers into reality, James first declares the fact of coming judgment (v. 1) and then lists the crimes against which this judgment will be meted out (vv. 2-6). Those crimes are: the hoarding of wealth (vss. 2-3); the failure to pay wages as promised (vs. 4); luxurious living and self-indulgence (vs. 5), and the murder of innocent people (vs. 6). Naturally, all of these illustrate the mentality and behavior of those who are living as mere "earth dwellers," which is a biblical description of those with no concern for heavenly treasure and the reality of eternity (see Rev. 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8; Isa. 24:17f).

Having called attention to these eschatological facts, James then calls his readers to have patience in verses 7-12. First, he gives the *essence* of patience needed in the life of Christians along with an illustration of the farmer (vss. 7-9). Then with verses 10-11, he gives *examples* of patience and concludes with what could be considered as an *evidence* of patience (vs. 12). As Ron Blue has so ably put it,

From the rich, James turned to the restless. For these he again used the friendly address, "brothers." The tone turns from stark condemnation to sensitive consolation. James excoriated the rich but encouraged the receptive. He appealed to his brethren to be patient. He defined the essence of patience, gave some examples of patience, and indicated an evidence of patience.¹¹

The Essence of Patience (5:7-9).

5:7 "So be patient, brothers and sisters." With the words "brothers and sisters" (literally, "brethren") and "so" (literally, "therefore"), James makes a direct inference from the preceding prophetic focus to the Christian community. "Be patient" is an aorist imperative of the verb *makrothumeo*, which, in this context, carries with it a note of solemn urgency. They were evidently complaining against one another (vs.9) and making unnecessary oaths, perhaps because of their distress (vs.12). "Until the coming of the Lord" pointed the readers and us to the ultimate motivation. The coming (*parousia*) of the Lord refers not to the judgment mentioned in verses 1-6, but to His manifestation or appearance to the body of Christ in the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:13ff). This includes the Judgment Seat of Christ, the place where every Christian will be examined thoroughly, fairly, and impartially according to the quality of their works (1 Cor. 3:12f; 2 Cor. 5:10-11; Rom. 14:10). This examination will result in either rewards or their loss and these rewards will determine our lot, responsibilities, and privileges for all eternity. This will naturally be followed the glories and other blessings of eternity on which Christians are to set their hope (see 1 Pet. 1:13ff). The plain truth is that *the persons we are today will determine the rewards we will receive in eternity*.

To illustrate the principle, James turned his reader's attention to the farmer with the words, "consider (literally, "behold") the farmer who waits (*ekdechomai*, "to wait, expect") for the precious fruit of the ground being patient about it." "Being patient" is an adverbial participle of *makrothumeo*, which points us to the means or manner of his waiting. This is immediately followed by the words, "until it (the buried seed) receives the early and latter rains." Two things enabled the farmer to wait patiently: the confident expectation of the rains which would cause the planted seeds to sprout, grow, and come to harvest, and the valuable fruit at the time of harvest. This illustrates the very essence of patience—the anticipation of the rewards of one's labor.

5:8 You also be patient and strengthen your hearts, for the Lord's coming is near. With these words James made the first application to the believer's life here on earth. Like the farmer who waits for the early and latter rain, so the Christian waits expectantly for the Lord knowing He is not only coming to reward our service, but is near. Also, like the farmer who waits for the precious fruit, so the Christian believes in the eternal value of the fruit of his labor on earth. The Lord's sure return (*parousia*) should stimulate every believer to patience and strength of heart. His coming has drawn near in that it is imminent and is the next great prophetic event in the life of the church.

5:9 Do not grumble against one another, brothers and sisters,... With these words, the application becomes more specific. A lack of patience and failing to live in the light of the coming of the Lord often leads to grumbling

¹¹ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, Editors, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1983,1985, electronic media..

against others. These Christians were subject to murmuring against those, especially the wealthy, who were oppressing them or treating them unfairly. Life is not fair and we are all subject to mistreatment by others (by Christians and non-Christians alike) whether done consciously or unconsciously. The temptation is to groan or complain against those we think are responsible. “Grumble” is *stenazo*, “to groan, sigh.” *Stenazo*, may speak of inner distress more than open complaint or grumbling though both may be involved.

What is forbidden is not the loud and bitter denunciation of others but the unexpressed feeling of bitterness or the smothered resentment that may express itself in a groan or a sigh. James uses the Greek *me* with the present imperative to prohibit the continuation of this hateful practice. To continue it would result in judgment....¹²

James quickly adds, “**so that you may not be judged. See, the judge stands before the gates!**” To continue on their present path of grumbling or sighing against others was a failure to rest in God’s final judgment when He will make all things right. For Christians this is the Judgment Seat of Christ that occurs after the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:13ff) and not the Great White Throne Judgment which occurs at the end of the millennium and is only for unbelievers (Rev. 20:11-15).

Grumbling against others whether expressed inwardly or openly is one means by which people often seek to take matters into their own hands and where, in a sense, they act as judges themselves. To grumble is to fail to live in the certainty of the return of the Lord and to fail to recognize the extreme shortness of this life as James has previously pointed out, “What is your life like? For you are a puff of smoke that appears for a short time and then vanishes.”

Thus, living patiently in view of the Lord’s coming has a double focus here. One anticipates eternal blessing and rewards and the other seeks to avoid the loss of rewards. Behind this focus is the whole subject of the Judgment Seat (the *Bema*) of Christ. This is a subject that is rather extensive in the New Testament, but unfortunately, very little teaching is devoted to it in spite of the many passages that deal with rewards or their loss in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus spoke of rewards some 16 plus times in the Gospels (cf. Matt. 5:12, 46; 6:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 16, 19-21; 18; 10:41, 42; 16:27; 18; 25, 26, 29) and Paul spoke of this truth over and over again. One illustration is his word to slaves in Colossians 3:22-25.

3:22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in every respect; not only when they are watching—like those who are strictly people-pleasers—but with a sincere heart, fearing the Lord. **3:23** Whatever you are doing, work at it with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not for people, **3:24** because you know that you will receive your inheritance from the Lord as the reward (literally, “the reward of your inheritance”). Serve the Lord Christ. **3:25** For the one who does wrong **will be repaid for his wrong**, and there are no exceptions (i.e., no partiality with the Lord).

Slaves were to serve their masters and all Christians are to do their work as a service to the Lord. Being devoted to Christ and doing our work as an obedience to Him will result in rewards at the *Bema seat of Christ*. The principle is that slaves (and so workers today) could accept unjust treatment because of the assurance Christ would reward them in the future with heavenly treasures if they served as an obedience to Him without grumbling, etc. But the opposite is also a fact of life. If one does wrong (retaliates, does his work half-heartedly, murmurs, etc.), he will be repaid for the wrong done (loss of rewards).

Living with patience and endurance rather than grumbling is truly connected with how well we live in view of the return of the Lord Jesus, the Judge of the *Bema*. When soloist George Beverley Shea was asked what he would like to be when Christ returned, he said, “On pitch!”¹³ If He finds us grumbling under our breath, we certainly won’t be on pitch. The Lord Jesus has taught us that wise servants live watchfully for their master’s arrival. He says.

“Get dressed for service and keep your lamps burning; 36 be like men waiting for their master to come back from the wedding celebration, so that when he comes and knocks they can open the door for him immediately. 37 Blessed are those slaves whom their master finds alert when he comes! I tell you the truth, he will dress himself for serving and have them take their place at the

¹² Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

¹³ Lutzer, *Your Eternal Reward*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1998, p. 98.

table, and he will come and serve them! 38 Even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night and finds them alert, blessed are those slaves (Luke 12:35-38).

Examples of Patience (5:10-11)

Having used the farmer to show the essence of patience, James then turned to the authoritative Old Testament, to God's Word, to give two key examples of those who experienced affliction, but who did so with patience and endurance—the prophets and Job.

5:10 As an example of suffering and patience, brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name.

James calls attention to the prophets as those who spoke in the Lord's name. This addition points them out as servants of the Lord who faithfully proclaimed His Word regardless of the various circumstances of affliction they received. How could they do it? Because they did so with patience knowing that in the long run, the Lord would make things right.

Although James refers to “the prophets” as a group, Jeremiah certainly stands out as one who endured mistreatment with patience. He was put in the stocks (Jer 20:2) thrown into prison (32:2), and lowered into a miry dungeon (38:6); yet he persisted in his ministry without bitterness or recrimination. Such men constitute a model (*hypodeigma*) for believers who are oppressed and mistreated.¹⁴

5:11 Behold, we count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful. (NASB)

James then turned to Job, another well-known and respected Old Testament example of one who endured great suffering. Only now, rather than use *patience*, the *makrothumia* family of words concerning Job, James switched to the use of *hupomene*, and *hupomone*. Job is one who persevered with great endurance, but he grew demanding over time—he was impatient with God! Nevertheless, the Lord honored Job's perseverance with multiplied blessings at the end of his suffering (cf. Job 42:12) and this is the point—God blessed Job for his endurance. Thus, James summed it all up with the words, “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” Our patience and endurance will not be forgotten because of the very nature of God as compassionate and merciful.

The Evidence of Patience (5:12)

5:12 And above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath. But let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no, so that you may not fall into judgment.

It is when people are under stress that they are often inclined to human strategies to deal with their problems. Evidently, with James' audience, one such solution was the use language that is inappropriate like swearing an oath. “For those who truly demonstrate the persistence and patience prescribed for believers, there is no need to invoke an oath, whether **by heaven or by earth**, that their word is certain.”¹⁵

May we not lose sight of is the important place the sure and imminent coming of the Lord and the realities that accompany and follow it must play in maintaining both endurance and patience. For more on this whole emphasis, see the author's study on the Doctrine of the Judgments and Rewards on our web site. Also, a tremendously helpful book on this is Erwin Lutzer's book, *Triumph and Tears at the Judgment Seat of Christ: Your Eternal Reward*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1998. This book is a must!

Conclusion

My wife and I were recently faced with an experience that illustrates some of the issues in endurance and patience. In June of this year (1999), my beautiful and faithful wife of forty years was diagnosed with extreme osteoporosis which, as it turned out, was caused multiple myeloma (cancer of the plasma cells and bone marrow). My wife's oncologist prescribed a very powerful drug administered by IV to help rebuild bone but this made her very sick and caused extreme pain. As a result, her primary physician referred her to a bone specialist to see if there

¹⁴ Gaebelien, electronic media.

¹⁵ Walvoord and Zuck, electronic media.

was another medication that she could tolerate better. We arrived at 3 p.m. for her appointment and within a few minutes were taken to an exam room to wait for the doctor. My wife was having a great deal of pain in her spine and hip when we arrived so we naturally hoped the doctor would be on time. At 4:15, we still had not seen the doctor. This was testing my wife's ability to endure the pain, but also our patience with the doctor. As we waited, I began to think some negative thoughts like, "Why can't he run his office more efficiently? Is he one of those doctors who crowds in too many patients and then spends only a few minutes with them?" But because of his reputation and my wife's need, we endured and sought to be patient by God's grace.

Finally, the doctor came in. As it turned out, he had been delayed because of an emergency and was caring for someone in great need. We were so thankful that our wait had been well worth it! The doctor was caring, concerned, careful, and extremely thorough in his evaluation of my wife's records. In addition, he demonstrated that he was on the cutting edge of many issues that concerned her problems. In essence, her consultation with this doctor was more than worth the long wait. Knowing this beforehand would certainly have made it easier to endure patiently.

Our experience reminds us of two truths. First, we need to endure life's pressures and be patient with others because, as with this doctor, we don't know what is going on behind the scenes. Remember, though Job endured, he became somewhat demanding and impatient with what God was doing, but there were things going on behind the scenes—the conflict with Satan—about which Job was totally in the dark. Interestingly, when God did deal with Job's impatience, He still never told Job about the issues of chapters 1 and 2. Job just needed to learn to rest in the sovereign God of the universe. Second, our capacity for patience strongly depends on our confidence in God's person and eternal purposes. Though the doctor was not, he could have been a great disappointment, but the Lord Jesus, the great physician and sovereign all-wise Lord, can never let us down. So, as James told his readers, we are to strengthen our hearts because the Lord's coming is near (Jam. 5:8). When He comes, he will wipe away every tear, right every wrong, and reward every faithfulness.

Endurance and patience give us the capacity to plod on with joyous, hopeful, and loving determination in spite of disappointments, rejection, persecution, and other pressures that might otherwise cause us to throw in the towel. These two qualities give us the willingness and capacity to continue on because of a hope fixed on God's person as one who is compassionate and merciful, and on God's purposes and eternal rewards.

The apostle Paul, as with all the apostles, suffered tremendous hardships for the sake of Christ and their calling in the ministry of the gospel. He was deserted, maligned, imprisoned, beaten, stoned: you name it, he suffered it! Yet Paul never gave up. He was what one might call a plodder (see 2 Tim. 1:15-16; 4:10; and cf. 2 Cor. 10:10 with 11:6, 23-28). This demonstrated the staying power of great maturity throughout his life right up to his death.

Howard Hendricks, a well-known conference speaker, teacher at Dallas Seminary, and leader of men, once looked out over a audience of young Campus Crusade for Christ trainees and commented, "Gentlemen, I'm not impressed." His point, as he went on to explain, was that he would only be impressed if they were still committed to ministry and the service of the Savior forty years later. The race God has called us to is tough. One hundred yard dashers won't make it. This truth is classically illustrated for us in the life of Paul. In 2 Timothy 4:7 toward the close of Paul's life, Paul could make three statements that we should all pray that we will be able to make. But Paul made these statements and they were true of him because he saw his life as a drink offering, a sacrifice poured out for the Savior and because he lived with a view to heavenly treasures. I believe it was this underlying commitment and mental attitude that gave him his staying power.

He wrote: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." In each of these verbs, the apostle used the perfect tense which may emphasize the results (intensive perfect) from the standpoint of the author or the completion of action or a process (consummative perfect). In view of the statement that follows both concepts are in view though the emphasis is on the fact of the completion of his work on earth. But with its completion, in view of the Lord's sure return and reward, Paul quickly added, "in the future there is laid up for me (i.e., as an abiding result), the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day."

By the use of the term *fought* with the perfect tense, there is a sense of finality with victory. The battle was over and now he faced the rewards of eternity. This also reminds us, however, that life and especially our ministries involve us in a life-and-death struggle. God never said it would be easy and we should never expect it to be so. Discipleship is costly. The tendency is to give in, to throw in the towel, but to have fought the good fight is to have continued to fight courageously and bravely regardless of the opponents.

To this element of finality there is the added emphasis of completion with the word “I have finished the course.” The word “finished,” the Greek, *teleo*,, means “to finish, complete, arrive at the goal.” Again, this word plus the perfect tense lays strong emphasis on the idea of completion and the fact that this life is temporary, but it does have eternal ramifications. With the words “the course” (literally “the race”), the apostle pictures God’s plan for his life as a race to be run. It pointed to the ministry God ordained for Paul with all the hurdles and obstacles that were a part of the course laid out for him. And it is no different for any of us. This is brought out in Hebrews 12:1-2, but we must keep our eyes on the Savior and on the finish line.

Paul was a plodder. He never gave up because of the hurdles; he persevered. He was a man driven by eternal values and biblical objectives.

“I have kept the faith.” The word “kept” is the Greek, *tereo*,, which means “to protect, guard,” but in this context it means, “to remain faithful to” something. That something is “the faith,” the body of revealed truth, the Word. Paul kept the faith in three senses: He kept the Word near his heart—it was his source of comfort and strength; he was obedient to it; and he passed it on to others. He remained faithful and true to the faith, i.e., to the challenges and responsibilities that living and preaching the faith brought upon his life as a servant of God and of men.

But we might think about why the apostle made these statements? He was writing to Timothy to encourage him to patiently endure, to keep him joyfully plodding on in the race God had laid out for this young man. This encouragement to endure or persevere is an element found throughout this pastoral book, a book that calls for maturity and leadership.

Well, just how does Paul seek to promote this endurance? Throughout 2 Timothy Paul used one means after another to teach and encourage perseverance or endurance. He challenged, commanded, instructed, reminded, warned, and illustrated the need of endurance both negatively and positively. But why so much on endurance? Because, as just mentioned, a lot of people and even churches are great starters; they are good in the hundred-yard dash, but they are no good in the endurance events. Life and the ministry is an endurance event, indeed, it’s a marathon if not a decathlon!

Mark #13: Having Courage and Being an Encourager

Introduction

The Prussian king Frederick the Great was widely known as an agnostic. By contrast, General Von Zealand, one of his most trusted officers, was a devout Christian. Thus it was that during a festive gathering the king began making crude jokes about Christ until everyone was rocking with laughter—all but Von Zealand, that is. Finally, he arose and addressed the king:

“Sire, you know I have not feared death. I have fought and won 38 battles for you. I am an old man; I shall soon have to go into the presence of One greater than you, the mighty God who saved me from my sin, the Lord Jesus Christ whom you are blaspheming. I salute you, sire, as an old man who loves his Savior, on the edge of eternity.”

The place went silent, and with a trembling voice the king replied, “General Von Zealand—I beg your pardon! I beg your pardon!”

And with that the party quietly ended.¹

It took courage for General Von Zealand to stand and proclaim his allegiance to the Savior in circumstances like that, but of course, here was a man who was no stranger to courage. One of the required character qualities in any leader is courage. “Courage of the highest order is demanded of a spiritual leader—always moral courage and frequently physical courage as well.” But courage is not only a necessary quality in a leader, it is a quality needed in every Christian’s life if he or she is going to be able to boldly follow and persist in the will of God. Ultimately it becomes a mark of maturity where it is consistently evident. Oftentimes pursuing the will of God calls on the Christian to take a stand that may put him or her at risk, at least emotionally if not physically or financially or socially or politically.

In the New Testament, Joseph of Arimathea provides a good illustration of one who gained courage as he grew in his knowledge of the Savior:

Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. (Mark 15:43, NASB)

According to Matthew 27:57, Joseph was a wealthy and reputable member of the Council, a non-Jewish designation used by Mark for the Jewish Sanhedrin. Though a member of the Sanhedrin, Luke 23:51 tells us that he had not approved of the Sanhedrin’s decision to put Jesus to death. Further, in both Mark 15:43 and Luke 23:51, we are told that Joseph was personally waiting for the kingdom of God. This suggests he was a devout Pharisee who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Previously, however, according to John 19:38, Joseph had been a secret disciple who had feared the Jewish authorities. In other words, up to that point, he lacked courage.

But seeing the death of the Savior, a monumental evidence of who He was—the Son of God bearing the sin of the world—Joseph gathered up his courage and went boldly to Pilate. “Gathered up his courage” is a translation of the Greek *tolmao*, “to dare, have courage, be bold, be brave enough.” Joseph’s behavior was seen as an act of courage by Mark because:

(a) he was not related to Jesus; (b) his request was a favor that would likely be denied on principle since Jesus had been executed for treason; (c) he risked ceremonial defilement in handling a dead body; (d) his request amounted to an open confession of personal loyalty to the crucified Jesus which would doubtless incur his associates’ hostility. He was a secret disciple no longer—something Mark impressed on his readers.²

¹ *Today In The Word*, August, 1989, p. 7.

² John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, Editors, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1983,1985, electronic media.

As with all the other qualities of maturity and leadership, the Lord Jesus is our greatest example of courage. While none of the words used in the New Testament for acting courageously or boldly are specifically used of Jesus, He is still the epitome of courage as one who followed the will of God in the face of the greatest hostility and antagonism. Though He was deeply troubled when he was facing the cross where He (the sinless one) would bear the sin of the world, He courageously committed Himself to the will of the Father.

“Now my soul is greatly distressed. And what should I say? ‘Father, deliver me from this hour’? No, but for this very reason I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again” (John 12:27-28).

Jesus drew his courage from His faith in His purpose and in what the Father had promised to do. Thus, resting completely in the victory He would accomplish to defeat Satan, the world, and sin, He not only went boldly to the cross, but that’s not all. Just hours before His arrest, Jesus also sought to be an encourager and impart courage to His disciples:

I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In the world you have trouble and suffering; but have courage, I have conquered (overcome) the world (John 16:33).

As it relates to courage, there are a couple of powerful lessons here. First, Jesus gave us an example of courage and of the need for us to become encouragers. Right after demonstrating His own love and courage, He called upon His disciples to be courageous in the face of the many pressures, afflictions, and challenges they would face as His disciples in a hostile world. In doing so, He shows us that mature Christ-likeness seeks to impart courage to others as an encourager regardless of what one might be facing himself. Let us never forget that when we go through the fire, others are watching. May we be reminded that God is committed to reproducing in us the character of Jesus Christ. The qualities we see in His life in the Word are the very ones God want to reproduce in us and this will require suffering at times. Spiritual growth and greatness in God’s kingdom does not come through ease and luxury as those promoting the *health and wealth gospel* claim. Rather, it comes through pain and tears, tools God uses to draw us closer and closer to Himself. Even the Lord Jesus was perfected by the things which He suffered.

During his earthly life he offered both requests and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his devotion. 5:8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through the things he suffered. 5:9 And by being perfected in this way, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, 5:10 and he was designated by God as “high priest *in the order of Melchizedek*” (Heb. 5:7-10).

But there is a second and important truth in John 16:33. With the words, “I have conquered the world,” Jesus points us to the basis for courage. Against whatever we might face in this life, our capacity for courage rests in the historical events of the person, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ who now sits enthroned at the right hand of the Father. Here is the Christian’s basis for ultimate victory; Christ’s victory is the foundation for courage and the ability to live victoriously in life. It was to this end that the apostle prayed for the Ephesians in Ephesians 1:18b-22, but note especially verses 20-22.

... so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the incomparable greatness of his power toward us who believe, as displayed in the exercise of his immense strength. 20 This power he exercised in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms 21 far above every rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And God put all things under Christ’s feet and he gave him to the church as head over all things (Ephesians 1:18b-22).

Again, the Lord Jesus is our example, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. He is both our example for being courageous and becoming encouragers, and He is the basis for courage

The Meaning and Nature of Courage

Courage and Fearlessness

The Original Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases lists boldness and fearlessness as synonyms of courage, but courage often exists in spite of the presence of fear.³ In fact, it is probably true that courage is doing what one is afraid to do. Indeed, courage is the capacity to resist fear, to master it, not its absence. Thus, courage is that quality of the heart or mind that gives one the ability to encounter danger and difficulty with firmness and resolve in spite of the presence of fear. "Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway."⁴

The apostle Paul was not one who courted danger nor did he presume upon the Lord. As one who tenaciously pursued the will of God, Paul was always willing to move forward into danger if he was convinced it was God's will or that it was right even though his heart might have been gripped with fear.

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come with superior eloquence or wisdom as I proclaimed the testimony of God. 2 For I decided to be concerned about nothing among you except Jesus Christ, as one who had been crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and **in fear and in much trembling**. (1 Cor. 2:1-2, emphasis mine)

For even when we came into Macedonia, our body had no rest at all, but we were troubled in every way—struggles from the outside, **fears from within**. (2 Cor. 7:5, emphasis mine)

Sanders writes,

Martin Luther possessed this important quality in unusual measure. It has been asserted that he was perhaps as fearless a man as ever lived. When he set out on his momentous journey to Worms, he said, "you can expect from me everything except fear or recantation. I shall not flee, much less recant." His friends, warning him of the grave dangers he faced, sought to dissuade him. But Luther would not be dissuaded. "Not go to Worms!" he said. "I shall go to Worms though there were as many devils as tiles on the roofs."

... But not all men are courageous by nature as Luther was, and that fact is both explicit and implicit in Scripture. The highest degree of courage is seen in the person who is most fearful but refuses to capitulate to it. However fearful they might have been, God's leaders in succeeding generations have been commanded to be of good courage. Had they been without fear, the command would have been pointless...⁵

Courage and Maturity

As we saw with Joseph of Arimathea, courage is very much a part of spiritual growth and maturity because it is so vital to other qualities of Christ-like character. Speaking of the Lord Jesus, John wrote, "He had loved his own who were in the world, and now he loved them to the very end" (John. 13:1). But without the courage to face the horrors of the cross, He could not have loved them, and us, to the end or to the uttermost, the cross.

C. S. Lewis wrote, "Courage is not simply *one* of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means at the point of highest reality."⁶ Without courage, men and women will fail to be loving, to sacrifice, to count the cost, to tackle the challenges or take on the responsibilities that God calls them to.

Undoubtedly, one cause of remaining immature and one of the shortest routes to ineffectiveness is to run scared, to be overly cautious, to play it close to the vest. Unless, through the courage of faith, we are willing to saddle up, we will simply remain in the corral and miss the growth experiences and fruitfulness of the open range.

³ *The Original Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* (Americanized Version) is licensed from Longman Group UK Limited. Copyright © 1994 by Longman Group UK Limited. All rights reserved.

⁴ John Wayne, Source unknown.

⁵ Oswald J. Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1967, 1980, p. 78.

⁶ *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* is licensed from Columbia University Press. Copyright © 1993 by Columbia University Press. All rights reserved.

How much better to take on a few ornery bears and lions, like David did. They ready us for giants like Goliath. How much more thrilling to step out into the Red Sea like Moses and watch God part the waters.... How much more interesting to set sail for Jerusalem, like Paul, “not knowing what will happen to me there,” than to spend one’s days in monotonous Miletus, listening for footsteps and watching dull sunsets. Guard your heart from over protection.

Happily, not all have opted for safety. Some have overcome, regardless of the risks. Some have merged into greatness despite adversity. They refuse to listen to their fears...⁷

Frankly, courage is learning to tell our fears where to get off, not just so we can be brave but so we can courageously face the hurdles and continue on in the race God has laid out before us. Otherwise, there will be little or no progress in growth and little or no fruitfulness here in time and for eternity.

The Means and Source of Courage or Encouragement

Naturally, the question arises, where do the courageous get their courage? Or how do we develop the quality of courage in ourselves and in others? How can we learn to tell our fears to get lost? Some men might naturally be more courageous than others, as might have been the case with Martin Luther. But even with Luther, his courage was primarily a product of his biblical convictions and undaunted faith.

Needing courage or to be encouraged is one of the *common experiences* we all face as finite human beings, and we should never think it odd if we reach a place where we need to be encouraged. Such is clearly evident from Scripture itself where we often find the people of God in circumstances where they needed *to be encouraged*. Thus, Paul wrote:

For even when we came into Macedonia, our body had no rest at all, but we were troubled in every way—struggles from the outside, fears from within. 6 But God, who encourages the downhearted, encouraged us by the arrival of Titus. 7 We were encouraged not only by his arrival, but also by the encouragement you gave him, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your deep concern for me, so that I rejoiced more than ever (2 Cor. 7:5-7).

Facing a variety of troubles from within and without and experiencing fear and disappointment is a part of life though we do need to find courage to go forward. Thus, both *finding courage* to go forward when fearful, when life seems impossible and the road impassable, and *giving encouragement* to the discouraged or fearful is an important focus in Scripture. Courage comes from being *encouraged*. So what does the word *encourage* mean?

To encourage means give support in order “to inspire with hope, courage, or confidence.” In just the New Testament alone, the terms “encourage” or “encouragement” are found 23 times in the NET Bible and 21 times in the NASB, and “be courageous” or “be strong and courageous” and “take courage” are found numerous times in the whole of Scripture (cf. Deut. 31:6, 7, 23; Josh. 1:6-9, 18; 10:35; Mark 6:50; John 16:33; Acts 23:1).

So, how may we define encouragement biblically speaking? In the light of the whole of Scripture, we might define encouragement as follows:

Encouragement is finding (or helping others to find) the courage, by God’s grace and strength, to run the race He has laid out before us no matter how difficult or painful the course.

Everyone can become discouraged over conditions or lack courage to take on a responsibility or face a daunting task or a trial. Fortunately, we have a loving Lord who, having given His all for us, is committed to our need which includes our encouragement. Thankfully, He has numerous ways or tools He uses to encourage His people. Thus, what are some of the ways God gives courage or encouragement?

The Encouragement of Scripture and the Promises of God

Of all the sources of encouragement, the Scripture is one of our greatest—if not the greatest source of encouragement. God’s holy Word with its many principles and promises is our most important and fundamental

⁷ Charles R. Swindoll, *The Quest For Character*, Multomah Press, Portland, 1987, p. 84.

source of encouragement because it is God's special and authoritative revelation to us of both Himself and His plan of salvation in Christ.

Let us remember that all of the principles and promises of the Bible are based on the character and being of God's person and His historical acts in salvation just as He has promised. For instance, the book of Deuteronomy contains Moses' instruction given during the final months of his life. The setting for this is significant. The new generation was encamped in the plains of Moab prior to their entrance into the Promised Land. They were facing fortified cities and warring people, some of whom were giants. As they entered this new land there would also be many temptations and a whole new way of life. And all of this was to take place under the leadership of Joshua who at that time was unproved, at least as Moses replacement. Further, this new generation had not personally experienced the deliverance out of Egypt or at the Red Sea or the giving of the Law at Sinai. Thus, if they were to have the courage needed to face the difficulties before them, they needed to be reminded of God's person and his historical acts of deliverance. So Moses wrote these words in Deuteronomy 6.

“When your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What do the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments mean which the LORD our God commanded you?’ 21 then you shall say to your son, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt; and the LORD brought us from Egypt with a mighty hand. 22 ‘Moreover, the LORD showed great and distressing signs and wonders before our eyes against Egypt, Pharaoh and all his household; **23 and He brought us out from there in order to bring us in**, to give us the land which He had sworn to our fathers’ (Deut. 6:20-23, emphasis mine).

Another illustration is Solomon's prayer of dedication when the temple was completed. There, remembering God's historical acts of faithfulness, he wrote regarding the nation of Israel:

53 “For Thou has separated them from all the peoples of the earth as Your inheritance, as You spoke through Moses Your servant, when You brought our fathers forth from Egypt, O Lord GOD.” 54 And it came about that when Solomon had finished praying this entire prayer and supplication to the LORD, he arose from before the altar of the LORD, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread toward heaven. 55 And he stood and blessed all the assembly of Israel with a loud voice, saying, 56 “Blessed be the LORD, who has given rest to His people Israel, according to all that He promised; not one word has failed of all His good promise, which He promised through Moses His servant (1 Kings 8:53).

Thus, it is this God-breathed, inerrant, and infallible revelation of God in Scripture that provides us with the greatest means of courage.

Romans 15:4

For everything that was written in former times was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and **through encouragement of the scriptures** we may have hope.

In this verse, the apostle stated a vital truth concerning the purpose and ministry of the Scripture. The Scripture is designed to encourage us so that we might have hope. “Encouragement” is the Greek *parakle„sis*, which has a rather broad field of use. Depending on the context, it may mean “exhortation, encouragement, appeal, request, comfort.” *Parakle„sis* and its verb form *parakaleo„* may have a *prospective* appeal in the sense of an exhortation or appeal for “obedience” or some form of positive “response” (Rom. 12:1, 8). But it also had a *retrospective* appeal in the sense of “comfort, encourage” in the face of burdens, afflictions, etc. (Acts 20:2; 1 Cor. 14:3; 2 Cor. 7:4). As God's people we need both, but the focus in Romans 15:4 with the word “hope” is that of encouragement or gaining the courage to move forward in the will of God.

As Romans 15:4 teaches us, our ability to find encouragement from Scripture comes through its instruction. It is the Scripture as God's special, inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word that informs us about the nature and being of our God. Here we learn about His person,⁸ His plan of salvation and sanctification (past, present, and future), His

⁸ It is from the Bible that we learn about the many attributes of God, both His communicable (those that He shares with us like goodness, love, mercy, etc.) and incommunicable attributes (those that are peculiar to God alone like omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresent, etc.).

purposes in both time and eternity, the principles by which God and His plan operate, and His many promises of salvation, love, grace, mercy, and sovereign care. Included in this revelation is the promise of His impartial discipline and judgment against sin and His rewards for faithfulness. A good illustration of God's promises based on the character of God is Deuteronomy 31:7-8, but perhaps the classic passage is Joshua 1:6-9

Joshua 1:6-9

6 Be strong and **courageous**, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. 7 “Only be strong and very **courageous**; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. 8 “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. 9 “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and **courageous**! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

In Joshua 1:1-5, Joshua is commissioned by the LORD Himself to become the leader of Israel after the death of Moses. To say the least, this was a daunting task because the nation of Israel had been an extremely difficult people to lead, a fact all too well known by Joshua who had been Moses' military general in the field. Now God was calling Joshua to be the new leader of this very nation. From the repetition of the words “be strong and courageous” or “be very courageous” and the exhortation against trembling and becoming dismayed, it seems obvious the LORD knew that Joshua, as brave and as faithful as he had been, would still face hesitation and fear in stepping into the shoes of Moses to lead this rebellious nation into the land, a land of giants and fortified cities.

Thus, the Lord carefully sought to encourage Joshua. But it is significant that Joshua's encouragement to his commission proceeds out of God's personal communication, i.e., His revelation to Joshua. In fact, verses 1-18 are all related to this revelation from God. First, God speaks and commissions Joshua (1:1-5) and then calls him to be strong and courageous in light of God's promises (1:6-9). Second, in view of this word from God, Joshua speaks to the people and gives them instructions for preparing to cross the Jordan in three days (1:10-15). This is followed by the response of the people to these instructions which, of course, had its source in the Word of God (1:16-18). Thus, God's revelation, which is equivalent to our possession of the Bible today, became the source of courage for both Joshua and the people.

Joshua 1:1-9 can be divided into a four-fold source of encouragement for Joshua. In this we learn of four fundamental principles that are vital to courage and encouragement:

(1) Strength and courage come through recognizing and relating to God's pleasure, His will or having a sense of God's calling and destiny (1:1-2). With the words “the Lord spoke to Joshua” in verse one we see the principle of revelation from God—biblical insight. It is this that forms the foundation for courage and conviction for faith and action. Our need is to pray and seek God's will and wisdom from His Word because the foundation for courage is knowing the Word which enlightens us to His will. In addition it is also helpful to recognize our gifts, abilities, and training because this is an important part of preparation, ability, and the necessary confidence to do His pleasure or will. Again, the process is significant here: in verse 1 God speaks—we have revelation from God to Joshua. Then, based on this revelation, Joshua speaks to the people (vs.10). Thus, the courage that is called for here for both Joshua and the people is in part the direct result of the Word and knowing God's will (see Eph. 5:9-10).

“Joshua” means “the Lord (*Yahweh*) is salvation.” Joshua's very name was designed to remind him and Israel that the battle is the Lord's. Courage comes from knowing this and resting in the Lord as the source of our deliverance and ability for ministry and life.

The next thing we read about Joshua is that he was “Moses' servant.” Being the servant of Moses illustrates the principle of Luke 16:10-12 and its impact on the development of character and the courage to accept the will and call of God. Though Luke 16:10-12 deals with material blessings, the principle is applicable in other areas of responsibility in life.

“The one who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much; and the one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. 11 If then you haven't been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will entrust you with the true riches? 12 And if you haven't been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you your own? (Luke 16:10).

The principle of these verses certainly has an application on the development of courage. Courage for service in the larger and more difficult areas of responsibility start with faithfulness in the smaller and less difficult areas. Everyone needs to find a place to serve and grow because normally that becomes the training ground for greater responsibilities and other areas of ministry God may be calling us to.

“Moses my servant is dead” (vs. 2). This fact reminds us that no one is indispensable and leadership changes. If we aren’t training others, we leave gaping holes. We need to be trained ourselves and involved in the process of training others. Effective training is another source of courage because it gives people the confidence to take on responsibility or accept a difficult task.

The command to “arise” emphasizes the need for decisiveness and action. Courage manifests itself in decisiveness and action as root to fruit. Israel was then in the desert and God doesn’t want us in the desert, the place of fear, cowardice, and defeat. The background for this is Numbers 13-14.

But there is another element that is vital to courage and decisiveness in doing the will of God.

(2) Strength and courage come through resting in God’s promises (1:2b-6). To grasp Joshua’s need for courage and to appreciate God’s promises here, we must first take a look at some of the obstacles to God’s commission to Joshua:

The first obstacle is seen the command to “cross this Jordan.” The Jordan river represents a huge obstacle and an impediment to growth, ministry, and progress. There is good reason to believe that the Jordan was swollen out of its banks at this time of the year (cf. Jos. 3:15; 4:18). Further, to cross the Jordan meant to enter into a hostile land, a land full of enemies some of whom were giants and many of whom lived in strongly fortified cities. This was no simple challenge. Remember, the previous generation failed at Kadesh Barnea because they lacked courage to face these very giants.

A second obstacle is seen in the statement, “you and all this people.” This was no small group and the very numbers made this a colossal task. Furthermore, Joshua had the responsibility of leading a people who were noted for being stiff-necked and who threw stones at their leaders. But more importantly, the word “all” reminds us that it is God’s purpose for all His people to move into His will, i.e., to mature and become strong, and to live productively in the will of God.

Nevertheless, regardless of the obstacles, God’s will had been clearly made known to Joshua and he needed to act on this fact.

Now, a brief look at the promises:

There are several promises in verses 2-3, 5, 6, 9, but because of space, we will focus on only two: “To the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel (vs.2),” and “Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given to them, just as I spoke to Moses (vs. 3).” They were going into the Promised Land, to the land God Himself had personally promised to the patriarchs—to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And God, who is immutable, cannot go back on His promises. In fact, God had for some time been preparing the inhabitants for defeat (cf. 2:9f). The land had been theirs for forty years and they had failed to enter in because of unbelief and a lack of courage.

The principle is that God’s Word is filled with hundreds of promises. While many of these are not directly given to the church today, they do illustrate principles that are often applicable to us. In addition, every principle of Scripture ultimately becomes a promise since God’s veracity stands behind the principle. Our need is to know the promises and principles and act on them by faith. These are given to carry us **through** the Jordan rivers of life—not necessarily remove them. They are not given so we can avoid or go around, but so we can cross them through the enablement God gives us.

But how do we claim and act on these many promises? How do we make these promises a part of our thinking processes?

(3) Strength and courage come through daily renewal in God’s principles (1:7-8). Successful ministry is always related to successful Bible study. The Word is intrinsically powerful and able to produce godly change in believers’ lives as it motivates, encourages, gives hope and direction, and exposes us to both our needs and God’s will and provision. The Word has been given to us to establish a communicative relationship with God. It is a means of fellowship with Him.

But this takes time, quality time and diligence. Note the emphasis on this in these verses. “To do according to all the Law...; do not turn from it...” (vs. 7), and “but you shall meditate on it day and night...” (vs. 8). In keeping with the mentality of our age, the average person today wants a quick fix, an immediate solution or three easy steps. Bible study may involve reading something like the *Daily Bread* (a helpful and commendable pattern), but this alone is not enough. We also need ‘meat and potatoes’ Bible study. If our Bible study consists of short devotionals we can’t develop a deep understanding of Scripture or a strong biblical faith with life-changing results. Relationship with God, knowing Him, as with any relationship, takes time. It is this deeper relationship and knowledge that provides us with deep biblical convictions and the capacity to have the kind of courage that results in life-changing results and faithfulness in ministry and in life.

(4) Strength and courage come through reckoning on God’s person and presence (1:9). Last, but certainly not least is the promise of the ever-watchful and protective presence of God. This verse focused Joshua on two great principles of God’s Word. First, in the words, “Have not I commanded you,” the focus is on the source of these commands and promises—**God’s Person**. Who had commanded Joshua? It was no less than *Yahweh*, the eternal, independent, and sovereign God of the universe who is the God of revelation and redemption, the One who revealed Himself and called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans, who gave him the Abrahamic Covenant, and who later delivered this nation, Abraham’s descendents, from the destroying angel in Egypt and rolled back the Red Sea. Similarly, in the New Testament, our call to courage and the basis of our encouragement is the accomplished victory of Christ who now sits at God’s right hand as the victorious Savior.

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you spiritual wisdom and revelation in your growing knowledge of him, 18 —since the eyes of your heart have been enlightened—so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the incomparable greatness of his power toward us who believe, as displayed in the exercise of his immense strength. 20 This power he exercised in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms 21 far above every rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And God put all things under Christ’s feet and he gave him to the church as head over all things. 23 Now the church is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:17-23).

The second focus of verse 9, seen in the promise, “for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go,” points us to **God’s Presence**. For those who know God and are related to Him by faith in the Savior, there is no situation, no problem or enemy that they can or will ever face alone. The Lord is always there as the believer’s constant support and supply. Thus, to his readers who were facing difficult trials and persecution, the author of Hebrews quoted the Old Testament and wrote, “for he has said, ‘*I will never leave you and I will never abandon you.*’ So we can say with confidence, ‘*The Lord is my helper, and I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?*’” (Heb. 13:5b-6).

If we are concerned about the ministries God has called us to or about the Jordans He has called us to cross, we can be absolutely sure that God is infinitely more concerned for our needs than we are. “Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). “And God will exalt you in due time, if you humble yourselves under his mighty hand, by casting all your cares on him because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:6-7).

So, what’s our need? Our need is simply to walk in the light of His person and presence and to count on His sovereign support, guidance, supply, and care through keeping our focus on Him (Heb. 12:1-2).

The Encouragement of the Holy Spirit

Acts 9:31

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria experienced peace and thus was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

It is difficult to determine just how this passage should be translated because of the two Greek participles following the statement, “experienced peace.” Nearly all the versions translate it somewhat differently, but the

translation in the margin of the NET Bible seems to fit both the context and the wording of the Greek text best. The margin notes read, “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria experienced peace. Strengthened and living in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.” The peace was a result of Paul’s conversion which also led to his departure from the area because of danger to his life. But this time of calm after the storm of persecution was not wasted. It was used as a means of spiritual and physical growth. During this time, the church was strengthened or edified, built up spiritually, undoubtedly through the teaching of the Word (see Col. 2:6-8; 1 Cor. 14:3). It also continued to live in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. “The fear of the Lord” is surely a reference to a holy respect for God who, as seen with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), must sometimes discipline His people to promote holiness and faithfulness. “The encouragement of the Holy Spirit” refers to the ministry of the Spirit who, as the Spirit of Truth, uses the teaching of the Word to bring courage and comfort to the church and growth in the character of Christ, transforming believers into His likeness.

The companion truth here is that it takes both the teaching of the Word and the enabling ministry of the Spirit to bring encouragement and comfort. The Holy Spirit is called the *parakle,,tos*, variously translated “the Comforter” or “the Helper” or, as I prefer, “the Enabler” (see John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:17). So interestingly, the word used in Acts 9:31 for “encouragement” is *parakle,,sis* which, like *parakle,,tos*, is from the *parakaleo,,* family of words. *Parakaleo,,* means (1) “to entreat, beseech,” (2) “to admonish, exhort,” and then (3) “to comfort, encourage.” Thus, we see that the Holy Spirit as our spiritual enabler is vital to our encouragement.

The Encouragement from Members of the Body of Christ

The Analogy of the Body of Christ

The body of Christ is one of several pictures or analogies used to instruct us regarding the nature and function of the universal church (1 Cor. 12:12-13, 27; Eph. 1:23; 4:12). This picture portrays both the unity and the diversity of the church as an organic body, a spiritual organism, made up of many individual and diverse parts all designed to work together in a caring and functional way. In keeping with the nature of the church as a body made up of many members, numerous passages of the New Testament show us the important role the whole body has in mutual care and encouragement.

Through its diversity of members, as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 12, the New Testament has many illustrations of encouragement through the loving care of one another. This occurs in numerous ways. Some have the gift of encouragement (Rom. 12:8), some encourage through communication of God’s revelation (Acts 20:2; 1 Cor. 14:3, 31; 1 Thess. 4:18; Tit. 1:9), other by bringing good news (2 Cor. 7:6-7, 13; Eph. 6:22; Col. 4:8), others by giving various kinds of support—financial, lending a helping hand, giving a word of encouragement, supporting others in prayer, showing concern and just being there for one another (cf. Rom. 12:13, 15; Eph. 4:29; Phil. 1:5; 4:10; 1 Thess. 5:11-12).

Key Scriptures on Encouragement (1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 10:23-24)

Because we are to be supporting one another as members of the body of Christ, Scripture exhorts us to become be involved in encouragement of one another.⁹ Two passages stand out here.

The first is 1 Thessalonians 5:11 where Paul gives the simple exhortation, “Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, just as you are in fact doing.” The clear implication here is that building each other up, spiritual edification in the truth of Scripture, as it may apply to any given situation, is vital to one’s ability to give others the courage they need to move forward in the will and purpose of God.

The second passage occurs within the framework of Hebrews 10:19-24. The specific verses directed toward encouragement are 10:23-24, “And let us take thought of how to spur one another on to love and good works, not abandoning our own meetings, as some are in the habit of doing, but **encouraging each other**, and even more so because you see the day drawing near” (emphasis mine).

⁹ For more on the concept of “one another,” see the study entitled the “One Another Commands of Scripture” on our web site in the Spiritual Life section.

Here again we are told to be involved in *encouraging each another*. The contextual framework in which this admonition occurs, however, is important to encouraging and being encouraged. The author of Hebrews was writing to a group of Christians (primarily Jewish) who had experienced persecution (10:32-34; 13:3) and who were under pressure to return to their ancestral faith for he warns them about abandoning their confidence in Christ and returning to the old Jewish sacrificial system (cf. 3:6; 6:6; 10:35). Further, he was well aware and even addressed the cause of this—a failure to mature and go forward in the full assurance of the superiority of Christ over the old system because of the completeness and sufficiency of Christ’s finished work (see 5:11-6:6 and 10:19f). Thus, having declared the truth of the finality of Christ’s sacrifice in contrast to the lack of finality of the Old Testament sacrifices (10:1-18), the author of Hebrews appealed to his readers to do three things, each one being marked out by the words, “let us.”

(1) “Let us draw near with a sincere heart in the full assurance that faith brings...” (10:22). They (and we) are to get close to God in the sure confidence of an absolute acceptance by God through Christ. Such confidence is in view of His perfect and finished work as our Great Priest over the household of God (10:19-22). The point here is that apart from such mature understanding and faith in the sufficiency of Christ, there can and will be no capacity for courage along the pathway of life with its many trials.

(2) “And let us hold unwaveringly to the hope that we confess, for the one who made the promise is trustworthy” (10:23). They (and we) are to tenaciously cling to the prospect of not just eternal life or entrance into heaven, but of the eternal blessings of the kingdom. This includes participation in the rewards of the kingdom and we can be sure of such rewards because of the trustworthiness of God who had made such promises (vs. 23). The author views believers as partners with Christ and sharers of the kingdom (Heb. 3:1, 14; 2:5-8). Our faithfulness here on earth will result in special privileges in the eternal kingdom, but to be faithful, we must maintain our confidence in the sufficiency of the Savior.

(3) “And let us take thought of how to spur one another on to love and good works,...” (10:24). They (and we) are to give serious consideration to the role we each have to mutually help one another down the pathway of the Christian life as partners in the service of the King. Thus, we are to each consider how we can be used of God to encourage others in the progress of their faith and faithfulness as partners in Christ’s kingdom and enterprise here on earth. The problem is that there are difficulties along our journey that can hinder our determination and courage to follow the Savior and to be faithful to our calling as partners with Him (see Heb. 3:12-14). As a protection and help against the deceitfulness of sin that can sidetrack us, Hebrews 3:13 calls on us to “exhort one another daily.” “Exhort” is *parakaleo*, which may mean, “to exhort” or “to encourage.” Either way, it shows the mutual responsibility Christians have in helping one another experience the power of Christ for faithful living. But in 10:24, the author gives us more details on this process and purpose.

Literally, the Greek text of verse 24 says, “And let us take note of (observe, perceive) one another.” The verb here is *katanoeo*, (1) “notice, observe carefully,” (2) “look at (with reflection), consider, contemplate something or someone” (Heb. 3:1; 10:24). The text exhorts us to carefully consider or observe others. Contextually, this is not to be done pharisaically as nit-pickers or as fruit inspectors, but as enablers, as those committed to helping others find the courage they need to go forward in the will of God. The first responsibility is, in a caring way, to genuinely notice people. This is a call to lovingly pay attention to people that we might pick up on their hurts or needs in order to minister accordingly. More will be said on this below, but this is in keeping with Ephesians 4:29, “You must let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth, but only what is beneficial for the building up of the one in need, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

The next part of the verse takes us to the goal of such observation, “to spur or stimulate one another to love and good works.” “To spur” is the Greek *paroxusmos*, (cf. the English word *paroxysm*), which may mean negatively, “to provoke, irritate,” or positively, “to stir, stimulate, encourage.”¹⁰ Thus, we are to pay attention to people with a view to encouraging them toward love and good works.

Verse 24 then goes on to explain how this objective of verse 23 is to be carried out. There are three things focused on here: two methods or means and a motive.

First, by “not abandoning our own meetings, as some are in the habit of doing.” As previously stressed, one of God’s means for developing and maintaining courage is people—the body of Christ. And one of the places this is to

¹⁰ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Translated by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, electronic media.

occur is when the church is assembled together whether in small groups or in the main assembly meetings. Simply put, absenteeism hinders the process of encouragement because it cuts us off from caring for others and us from their care. Naturally, just meeting together does not guarantee that the process of encouragement takes place.

So again, using a different word than that of verse 23, we are specifically told to be “encouraging each other.” This is a verb we have met with before, the verb *parakaleo*. Remember, this verb may have a *prospective* appeal in the sense of an exhortation or appeal to others for “obedience” or some form of positive “response” (Rom. 12:1, 8) or it may have, as here, a *retrospective* appeal in the sense of giving “comfort, encouragement” in the face of burdens, afflictions, or difficult circumstances. As God’s people we need both, but the emphasis here is that of encouragement or gaining the courage to move forward in the will of God.

But would you notice that we are not given specifics on what to do in order to encourage others. This is left up to the discretion of believers who, through the wisdom of God’s Word and dependence on the Holy Spirit, are to look for biblical ways to give courage. Note Paul’s words to the Romans:

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe in him, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. But I myself am fully convinced about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct (or admonish) one another (Rom. 15:13-14).

While the terms *encourage* or *give courage* are not used, the principles are fundamentally the same. Through biblical wisdom and the Holy Spirit, Christians can and should be ministering to one another.

Finally, with the words, “and even more so because you see **the day** drawing near,” an important prophetic or eschatological motivation is brought into the picture. *The day* refers to that well-known time of Christ’s coming and judgment in the future. A similar use of “day” can be seen in 1 Corinthians 3:13. The urgency of the responsibility of encouraging one another is due to the imminence of this Day of Christ for two reasons:

1. While imminent, there will be an ever growing apostasy which carries with it the danger of apostasy or apathy by Christians (see 1 Thess. 5:4f; 2 Tim. 3:1-13).
2. The coming of Christ for the church will immediately be followed by the *Bema*, “The Judgment Seat of Christ.” It is here that every Christian will be carefully examined by the Lord Jesus for rewards or their loss on the basis of their faithfulness or works.¹¹

Application: So what then is our responsibility to one another in the body of Christ? The emphasis and focus of this passage in Hebrews is not only instructive, but very contrary to the mentality of our day. The purpose of encouragement is not to simply help one another feel better. As seen in the words, “let us consider one another with a view to love and good works” the first objective is to help one another experience the sufficiency of Christ and Christ-like behavior.

Simply put, every problem, when understood biblically, finds its solution in fellowship with the Savior and with resting in His love and sufficiency, not necessarily in the removal of the problem. Our calling, then, is to help one another experience Jesus Christ. To stimulate or encourage others to love and good works is synonymous with experiencing, in a growing way, the character of Christ or being transformed into His image and character.

Michelangelo, it is said, looked at a block of marble and said, “I see an angel in that block of marble.” God goes into the quarry of sin, takes rough stones, and hews them into the shape of Christ. He is pleased when He looks at us and we remind Him of His only begotten Son, who was a servant.¹²

Believers, as fellow servants in the body of Christ, are just one of the tools God uses in this process of transformation. This must be the ultimate objective of the encourager.

Knowing Christ intimately and experiencing His transforming life is a repeated emphasis of the New Testament, especially in Paul’s letters. Notice this thrust in the following passages:

¹¹ For more on the concept of the Bema, see the study entitled “The Doctrine of the Judgments: Past, Present and Future” on our web site in the Theology / Eschatology section.

¹² Lutzer, *Your Eternal Reward*, p. 148.

(1) Life is to be found in the experience of Christ. He is our source of life and righteousness positionally and experientially.

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God who love me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

(2) When faced with the prospects of death while daily chained to a Roman soldier in his own apartment, Paul's concern was that he would experience Christ regardless of the outcome.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, 19 for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the support of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. 0 My confident hope is that I will in no way be ashamed but that with complete boldness, even now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Phil. 1:18b-21).

(3) People have all kinds of things they rely upon for their comfort or confidence and significance, but having come to realize that such things were really only liabilities and hindered us from the true purpose in life (Phil. 3:2-9), Paul had this to say:

My aim is to know him, to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, and to be like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:10).

(4) Then, in thanking the Philippians for their financial support, Paul could write:

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content in any circumstance. I have experienced times of need and times of abundance. In any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of contentment, whether I go satisfied or hungry, have plenty or nothing. I am able to do all things through the one who strengthens me (Phil. 4:11-13).

The exhortations of 1 Thessalonians 5:11 and Hebrews 10:23-24 remind us of another principle that is foundational for our willingness and ability to become committed encouragers. It's the mindset of seeking to serve rather than be served and of considering the needs of others above our own (Mark 10:45; Phil. 2:3-5).

One of the greatest hindrances to "contemplating others with a view to encouraging them to love and good works" is preoccupation with our own needs or fears and defensive strategies by which we seek to promote or protect self. Someone may say, "Hey, it's good to see you. How are you doing?" But when you start telling them about a need or burden they interrupted with a barrage of their own difficulties. Underlying this kind of response is the issue of being so self-centered that people only make casual conversation as a spring board to talk about themselves. Or they may simply respond, "Oh, I'm so sorry" and then politely slip away. It's what could be called, the problem of a *surface community* that only *casually* gets involved with one another.

To become genuine encouragers or to engage in any form of ministry, we must become ruthlessly honest regarding our motives (see 1 Cor. 4:5). Because of our natural self-centeredness, it is simply too easy for us to either ignore others or seek to help out of some form of self-love—to be appreciated, to gain a hearing, to be recognized, praised, i.e., to get something in return. Undoubtedly, Paul had this in mind with his appeal to "let love be without hypocrisy" (Rom. 12:9).

Some Final Thoughts

To repeat our definition of encouragement, *encouragement is finding (or helping others to find) the courage, by God's grace and strength, to run the race He has laid out before us no matter how difficult or painful the course.* The ultimate goal of the encourager, then, is to help others relate their lives to the Savior and rest in His love, plan, purpose, and provision. Ultimately, if we haven't helped others to rest in God alone as the source of their courage, comfort, and hope, then we have fallen short as encouragers. I remember after my Dad had passed away from lung cancer, a number of people came to encourage my Mom. She was very appreciative of their care and concern, but I remember her saying we need the encouragement and comfort of others, but ultimately, unless we find our comfort in the Lord who alone is the God of all comfort, we will never truly be comforted. This echoes the words of the Psalmist:

My soul, wait in silence for God only, For my hope is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation, My stronghold; I shall not be shaken. On God my salvation and my glory rest; The rock of my strength, my refuge is in God. Trust in Him at all times, O people; Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us. [Selah] (Psalm 62:5-8).

As part of the process of seeking to do this, there are many practical things we can do to demonstrate love, thoughtfulness, and encourage others.

First, what better place to teach and practice encouragement than in the intimacy of one's home. The home is nothing less than the laboratory of life—the place any facade becomes quickly obvious and where life makes up its mind and can find its greatest encouragement. But too often our homes tend to be places of discouragement through apathy in the pursuit of success or material things or through the prevalence of a critical, overbearing, and sometimes legalistic spirit. Spouses, however, as helpers fitted to each other by God's design, should become courage givers, parents should encourage their children, and children can even learn to encourage their brothers and sisters and their parents. Children naturally pick up the art of encouragement from their parents when they are the recipients of the mother's and dad's words of love, hope, acceptance, approval, and patient instruction. Paul undoubtedly had this in mind when he warned fathers against exasperating their children to anger and appealed to them to become those who nourish them up (physical and spiritual nourishment) in the training and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).

Second, here are a few ideas to help us put encouragement into action.

1. As we seek to follow the guidelines of Hebrews 10:23-24, we might seek to observe and mention admirable character qualities we see in others, such as punctuality, tactfulness, faithfulness, thoroughness, diligence, honesty, compassion, vision, and faith.
2. As servants who are seeking to be observant encouragers of others, we might notice and call attention to a job well done or to the faithful use of one's spiritual gift(s). Such is encouraging because it can help people recognize their own spiritual growth and value in the body of Christ.
3. Then, we should especially show support and offer whatever help we can to someone who is going through deep waters or is struggling with a particular problem. While we can't relieve the problem or make it go away, we can demonstrate God's love and care and offer *words* of concern, hope, and comfort. This involves the power of a word given at the right time and in the right way—an important message in the book of Proverbs:

Death and life are in the power of the tongue (Prov. 18:21)

Anxiety in the heart of a man weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad (Prov. 12:25).

A soothing tongue is a tree of life (Prov. 15:4)

Pleasant words are a honeycomb, Sweet to the soul and healing to the bones (Prov. 16:24).

Like apples of gold in settings of silver Is a word spoken in right circumstances (Prov. 25:11).

In their book on encouragement, Crabb and Allender write:

The Scriptures also say that speaking light words of cheer at the wrong time is “like one who takes off a garment on a cold day” (Prov. 25:20).

Words are important. They have very real power. James warns us that although the tongue is a small part of the body, it has the power to determine the whole course of human existence (James 3:5-6).

When God instructs us to encourage one another whenever we come together, He is including the admonition to harness the power of words for a specific purpose. Of course, there are many ways to encourage one another by kind deeds as well as by kind words—taking food to sick friends, visiting folks in the hospital or inviting new folks in church to dinner. But the capacity of words to do serious damage or great good makes *verbal* encouragement an especially important topic to

consider. And that is the theme of this book: *encouragement through the careful selection of words that are intended to influence another person meaningfully toward increased godliness.*¹³

So our words need to be carefully weighed because they can either sting or soothe, help or hurt, tear down or build up. This is why Paul warned:

You must let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth, but only what is beneficial for the building up of the one in need, that it may give grace to those who hear (Eph. 4:29).

Let's note three things about this verse:

(1) We are told that **no** unwholesome word is to be spoken. This means every word that proceeds out of our mouth is to be carefully weighed according to the objective of this verse.

(2) Further, each word is to be weighed so that it is consistent with the **objective** of building up the one in need. If what is said will compromise or hinder this biblical goal, it is to be rejected. The emphasis here is not on **what** we say, but on **why**, on the motivation that stands behind our words. Having the right purpose will go a long way in correcting what is said.

(3) Finally, in this context, the warning against an **unwholesome** word concerns using the **wrong words**, those that are critical, hurtful, or frivolous, or **words** that are spoken **at the wrong time**, those that aren't carefully weighed according to the need of the moment.

God has called us to be encouragers or courage builders. The goal is never simply to help people feel better or to be more comfortable. The goal is to help people experience the sufficiency of the Savior and continue on in the race with their eyes fixed on the finish line regardless of the hurdles or distractions that suddenly loom up along the way. This means we may need to get into the race with a fellow believer, with a parent, a spouse, or a son or daughter and pick them up if they have fallen or put an arm around their waist to help them along.

In the 1992 Olympics, Derek Redmond of Great Britain popped his hamstring in the 400-meter semifinal heat. He limped and hobbled around half the Olympic Stadium track. The sight of his son's distress was too much for Jim Redmond, who had been sitting near the top row of the stadium packed with 65,000 people. He rushed down flights of stairs and blew past security people, who challenged his lack of credentials to be on the track.

"I wasn't interested in what they were saying," he said of the security guards. He caught up to his son on the top of the final curve, some 120 meters from the finish. He put one arm around Derek's waist, another around his left wrist. Then they did a three-legged hobble toward the finish line.

Derek had not a chance of winning a medal, but his determination earned him the respect of the crowd. His father said, "He worked eight years for this. I wasn't going to let him not finish." Whether or not his father knew it, he was acting biblically.

"Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed" (Hebrews 12:12-13).

Some people have to be helped across the finish line. Some have stumbled over their own feet; other have been tripped by family members and so-called friends. We must help those who have fallen into the snares of the devil; we must lift up the fallen, bind up their wounds, and help them on their journey toward home.¹⁴

There are many reasons why we struggle and sometimes stumble or just get discouraged when the race seems impossible or overwhelming. Whatever we or others may face, God has called us to become encouragers, those who seek to help each other in running the race God has laid out before us.

¹³ Lawrence J. Crabb, Jr. and Dan B. Allender, *Encouragement, The Key to Caring*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1984, 19-20.

¹⁴ Erwin W. Lutzer, *Your Eternal Reward*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1998, p. 124.

Conclusion

In the previous study on endurance and patience, I mentioned that my wife has a serious type of cancer of the bone marrow called multiple myeloma. By God's grace, we found out about her cancer very early, before it had advanced beyond what one oncologist called stage I. Still, the traditional treatment of the medical establishment in this country is not too promising, to say the least. Because of this she has opted for some alternative approaches that focus on building up the immune system to help the body do what God designed it to do, fight disease including cancer. This has meant a very rigid routine that includes diet, exercise, and a host of supplements designed to enhance the immune system. Naturally, there are conflicting ideas and approaches and one of the difficulties is weighing all choices and claims and choosing which diet to follow and what supplements to take. Frankly, the whole thing sometimes seems overwhelming if not impossible.

As Christians who live by faith in a sovereign God who has laid out a race for us to run, hurdles and all, the Lord is our burden bearer. We are seeking His wisdom, and if it's His will, healing for my dear wife. Above all, however, she wants Christ to be magnified in her life whether by life or by death. Still, sometimes it is terribly difficult, not just for her but for me also because of my love for her. Facing this disease, praying for wisdom, making the choices, and following the routine requires courage—a lot of courage.

One day recently we'd had a particularly difficult day. Kathie had been to the doctor and was overwhelmed with all that was going on and I wasn't far behind. Looking at all she had to do and trying to make the right choices appeared hopeless and impossible. I could see the pain in her eyes and the strain on her face. Well, it was time for our afternoon walk. So I said, "Come on, it's time to walk and we can talk." We spent that time talking, as usual, but I did most of the talking (not preaching). My goal was to help her (and myself) to rest in the sufficiency of the Savior. I could not "make it all better" nor could I remove the problem, but I could show my love and support and help both of us focus on the eternal perspective and on a God who cares and who is infinitely bigger than any of our problems. I'll never forget her words and her face as we arrived back at the house some 35 minutes later. With a smile on her face and peace in her eyes, she said, "Thank you sweetheart, that really encouraged me. It no longer seems so overwhelming."

I know there will be other times like this in the months ahead, but as we are there for each other and as the Lord is there for us, we are committed to giving each other the courage to continue in the fight. With the Lord as our primary source of strength and encouragement and taking it one day at a time, we will find the courage to fight the good fight and continue on toward the finish line together.

Mark #14: Faithfulness

Introduction

It was a stormy night in Birmingham, England, and the famous missionary, Hudson Taylor, was to speak at a meeting at the Seven Street schoolroom. His hostess assured him that nobody would attend on such a stormy night, but Taylor insisted on going. "I must go even if there is no one but the doorkeeper." As it turned out, less than a dozen people showed up, but the meeting was marked with unusual spiritual power. Half of those present either became missionaries or gave their children as missionaries; and the rest were faithful supporters of the China Inland Mission for years to come.¹

Hudson Taylor was committed to serving the Savior regardless of names (who showed up) or numbers (how many showed) or the nature of the situation (stormy conditions) and God honored his faithfulness. In previous studies we have discussed endurance and courage, but at the center of each is faithfulness to continue on in spite of the circumstances. Indeed, faithfulness is an important subject of the Bible. In just the New Testament alone, the words "faithful" and "faithfulness" occur some 56 times in the NET Bible, 49 in the NASB and 47 in the NIV. In the Old Testament these two words occur 95 times in the NIV and 86 in the NASB. This repetition speaks loudly for the importance and need of this spiritual quality both to the people of God who depend on God's faithfulness and in the people of God as His people who are to faithfully model God's character to a world that is too often anything but faithful (1 Pet. 1:14-16).

Faithfulness is not only one of the attributes of God, but one that is highly extolled in Scripture. Many times in the Psalms we find the faithfulness of God highlighted as a source of encouragement and comfort (see Ps. 25:10; 30:9; 33:4; 36:5). Because of God's faithfulness we can always count on God even though the picture is as bleak as the Arctic and the circumstances impossible. Though faced with the desolation of Jerusalem because of the nation's sin, the prophet Jeremiah could say of the Lord, "Great is Your faithfulness" (Lam. 3:23). Both the devastation that had occurred and the glories of the future depended on the fact of God's faithfulness to His promises—promises of discipline as recorded in Deuteronomy 28 and promises of Israel's restoration and future glory as promised throughout the Old Testament.

All the heartaches and hardships experienced by Jerusalem in the Book of Lamentations had been predicted about 900 years earlier by Moses. God had warned of the fearful consequences of disobedience and, as Jeremiah carefully noted, God faithfully carried out those curses. Yet this characteristic makes the Book of Lamentations a book of hope for Israel. God was *faithful* in discharging every aspect of the covenant He had made. Israel was punished for disobedience, but she was not consumed because God's covenant was still in force. The same covenant that promised judgment for disobedience also promised restoration for repentance (cf. Deut. 30:1-10).

In other words, because of God's immutable faithfulness, Jeremiah could speak of hope in the midst of the nation's despair because "great is Thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3:21-32). Jeremiah's message to the Israelites in captivity was to know that **just as** God had been faithful to the warnings and promises of Deuteronomy 28, **so** He would be faithful to the future promises of restoration from captivity.

Of what value would the promises of God be without His faithfulness and of what value would we be to God, to our families, to the body of Christ, and to society as a whole without faithfulness? Absolutely none! The faithful person is one who can be counted on to carry out his or her responsibilities and promises to the best of his or her ability through thick and thin no matter how bad the situation.

Faithfulness, then, is a quality that God wants to reproduce in us through the salvation that comes in Christ. It is another of the qualities of maturity to be sought in the life of the Christian.

But what exactly is faithfulness? What does it look like? How do we develop a consistent faithfulness in the Christian life? This study will look at:

¹ Taken from the *Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching and Preachers*, Warren Wiersbe, p. 242.

- Our Supreme Model of Faithfulness
- The Meaning and Essence of Faithfulness
- Motivations for Faithfulness
- The Means for Faithfulness
- The Blessings and Products of Faithfulness.

Our Supreme Model of Faithfulness

The Bible is loaded with examples of faithfulness throughout its pages. In the Old Testament, there are Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, David, Daniel and his three friends and many others. In the New Testament there are the Disciples, Paul, Timothy and Titus and many others as well. But as in all the qualities of maturity, the Lord Jesus is our supreme example or model of faithfulness. In fact, a number of times the New Testament not only points to the faithfulness of Christ, but does so in such a way that it stresses that our salvation and sanctification are based on the faithfulness of Christ Himself. The following verses as translated in the NET Bible illustrate this:

...namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction (Rom. 3:22).

This was also to demonstrate his righteousness in the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who lives because of Jesus' faithfulness (Rom. 3:26).

And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified (Gal. 2:16).

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

But the scripture imprisoned everything and everyone under sin so that the promise could be given—because of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ—to those who believe (Gal. 3:22).

This was according to the eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, 3:12 in whom we have boldness and confident access to God because of Christ's faithfulness (Eph. 3:11).

...and be found in him, not because of having my own righteousness derived from the law, but because of having the righteousness that comes by way of Christ's faithfulness—a righteousness from God that is based on Christ's faithfulness (Phil. 3:9).

These verses have traditionally been translated "faith in Christ" rather than "Christ's faithfulness," but an increasing number of New Testament scholars are arguing that the Greek construction (*pistis Christou*) and similar phrases in Paul's writings (Rom 3:22, 26; Gal 2:16, 20; 3:22; Phil 3:9) involve what is known in Greek grammar as a *subjective genitive* and means "Christ's faith" or "Christ's faithfulness." Wallace, who notes that the grammar is not decisive, nevertheless suggests that "the faith/faithfulness of Christ is not a denial of faith *in* Christ as a Pauline concept (for the idea is expressed in many of the same contexts, only with the verb *pisteuo*, rather than the noun), but implies that the object of faith is a worthy object, for he himself is faithful" (*Exegetical Syntax*, p. 116). While the apostle Paul elsewhere clearly teaches justification is by faith alone in Christ alone, the focus of these passages is not on **our** faith, but on the **reliable object** of our faith because of Christ's faithfulness. It stresses that our faith is anchored in a worthy object—a tremendous assurance for the Christian's faith.

Thus, in a passage where Peter calls for specific faithfulness in a number of duties for which Christians are responsible, he points to the Lord Jesus as our example and appeals to us to follow after His footsteps.

Our Responsibilities

1 Peter 2:13-20

Be subject to every human institution for the Lord's sake, whether to a king as supreme 14 or to governors as those he commissions to punish wrongdoers and praise those who do good. 15 For God wants you to silence the ignorance of foolish people by doing good. 16 Live as free people, not using your freedom as a pretext for evil, but as God's slaves. 17 Honor all people, love your fellow Christians, fear God, honor the king.

18 Slaves, be subject to your masters with all reverence, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the perverse. 19 For this finds God's favor, if because of conscience toward God someone endures hardships in suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if you sin and are mistreated and endure it? But if you do good and suffer and so endure, this finds favor with God (1 Pet. 2:13-20).

Our Example

For to this you were called, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example for you to follow in his steps. 22 He *committed no sin nor was deceit found in his mouth*.²³ When he was maligned, he did not answer back; when he suffered, he threatened no retaliation, but committed himself to God who judges justly. 24 He *himself bore our sins* in his body on the tree, that we may leave sin behind and live for righteousness. *By his wounds you were healed*. 25 For you were *going astray like sheep* but now you have turned back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls (1 Pet. 2:21-25).

Consistently, then, we are called on to look to the Lord Jesus as our model or the forerunner of the faith life. It is no wonder that in a passage that calls on Christians to be faithful and good citizens—recognizing the nature of government as a divine institution—that he concludes with, “but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to arouse its desires” (Rom. 13:14). In other words, experience the Christ-exchanged life; become like Him.

The Meaning and Essence of Faithfulness

The Meaning

In English

The American Heritage Dictionary defines *faithful* as “(1) Adhering firmly and devotedly, as to a person, a cause, or an idea; loyal. (2) Having or full of faith. (3) Worthy of trust or belief; reliable. (4) Consistent with truth or actuality: *a faithful reproduction of the portrait*.” Synonyms listed with these definitions are faithful, loyal, true, constant, fast, steadfast, and staunch. “These adjectives mean adhering firmly and devotedly to someone or something, such as a person, cause, or duty, that elicits or demands one’s fidelity.”²

When I looked at this definition, I was particularly struck with the illustration used for the last definition, “Consistent with truth or actuality: *a faithful reproduction of the portrait*.” For the Christian, faithfulness occurs when we allow the Lord Jesus to reproduce Himself in us or when we put on the Lord Jesus Christ and become transformed by His life.

In the Greek of the New Testament

The word used for *faithfulness* in the New Testament is the noun *pistis*, which has both an active and a passive sense or use. First, in its active use, it often refers to “faith, belief, trust.” But in the passive sense, it means “faithfulness, reliability, fidelity.” It is used of the “faithfulness” of God, of Christ, and of man. Sometimes, however, it is difficult to determine whether *pistis* should be translated “faith” or “faithfulness” as in Titus 2:10, 1 Timothy 4:12; 6:11, and 2 Thessalonians 1:4. The reason is that ultimately, at least for human beings, being faithful is the result of having faith or, if one can make a play on the word faithfulness, of being full of faith. For the Christian at least, it is the person of faith who has the capacity to be faithful in their responsibilities before God and man (see

² Excerpted from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* Copyright ©1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from Lernout & Hauspie Speech Products N.V., further reproduction and distribution restricted in accordance with the Copyright Law of the United States. All rights reserved.

Numb. 12:7; Neh. 9:7; Dan. 6:4). For instance, Christ rebuked the religious Pharisees for their lack of faithfulness. The reason was because their faith was not truly in God but in their own legalistic system of works.

“Woe to you experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You give a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, yet you neglect what is more important in the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness (*pistis*)! You needed to do these without neglecting the other.

A good illustration of the use of *pistis* where it means loyalty or faithfulness in service or ministry is 3 John 5-6.

Dear friend, you demonstrate **faithfulness** by whatever you do for the brothers (even though they are strangers). 6 They have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. (3 John 5-6, emphasis mine)

The study notes in the NET Bible explain, “When the author tells Gaius “*you demonstrate faithfulness by whatever you do*” he is commending him for his faithful service to the traveling missionaries (*the brothers*). Gaius has assisted them, and they have now returned with a report of this to the author (3 John 3).”³ But clearly, Gaius’ faithful actions were the result of his faith in the message of the gospel.

In the Hebrew of the Old Testament

In the Old Testament several words are used for faithfulness—*áe†mun*, “trusting, faithfulness,” *áe†mu,na*, “firmness, faithfulness, fidelity,” *áe†met*, “firmness, truth, faithfulness, verity.” All of these, however, are derivatives of the verb *áa,man*, “to confirm, support, uphold,” and so, “be established, be faithful, certain, i.e. to believe in (Hiphil stem).”⁴ The root idea is *firmness* or *certainty*. Thus in the Hiphil stem, the verb means “to cause to be certain, sure” or “be certain about, be assured.”⁵

In this sense the word in the Hiphil conjugation is the biblical word for “to believe” and shows that biblical faith is an assurance, a certainty, in contrast with modern concepts of faith as something possible, hopefully true, but not certain.⁶

In all of these words there is the element of being firm, steady, or lasting. In fact, the first biblical occurrence of the noun *áe†mu,na*, in Exodus 17:12 illustrates this. “But Moses’ hands were heavy. Then they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it; and Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other. Thus his hands **were steady** until the sun set” (emphasis mine). Then, an interesting play on words occurs in Isaiah’s confrontation with Ahaz when he said, “If you will not believe (the hiphil imperfect of *áa,man*), you will not be established (the niphil imperfect of *áa,man*)” (Isa. 7:9). To bring out the play on the words, we could translate “If you will not be sure (i.e., believe God’s promises), you cannot be secure” or “unsure—insecure.”

Thus, the idea of being *firm* or *lasting* naturally leads to the ideas of *reliable*, *trustworthy*, *faithful*.

The Essence of Faithfulness

Faithfulness and Success

The nature of faithfulness is expressed well in the comments of *The Teachers’ Commentary* on Exodus 1-4.

There are limits to the responsibility of leaders. These limits are imposed by the very freedom God Himself gives all men to turn to Him, or to turn away. Moses’ ministry could bring Israel to the point of decision. Moses performed this ministry well. But Moses could not decide for them. One generation turned from God. And one generation turned to God. It was their own choice.

³ *The New English Translation*, The Biblical Studies Press, www.bible.org.

⁴ R. Laird Harris, Editor, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Associate Editor, Bruce K. Waltke, Associate Editor, *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 51.

⁵ The Hebrew verbal system consists of different stem or verbal conjugations that affect the meaning of a verb. For instance, *áaman* in the *qal* stem may mean, “support, nourish.” In the *niphil* stem it may mean “made firm” or “established, sure,” or “reliable, faithful.” But in the *hiphil* stem, it may mean “stand firm” or “trust, believe.”

⁶ Harris, Archer, Waltke, p. 51.

It was not through Moses' failure that the first generation turned away. Nor was it by Moses' skill and success that the second turned to the Lord.

The point, of course, is simple. Moses was called *to be faithful* to God and to fulfill his commission. He was not called to "succeed" or to "fail." And so the New Testament commendation of Moses focuses *not on what Moses accomplished, but on his faithfulness*. "Moses...faithfully discharged his duty in the household of God" (Heb. 3:2, PH). It was Moses' faithfulness to his task which counted with God all along.⁷ (emphasis mine)

Faithfulness, then, is not a matter of success or failure from the standpoint of results. If there is faithfulness, failure does not bring blame nor should it lead to a sense of guilt! Where there is faithfulness to discharge one's duties regardless of the results there is success in God's sight. This points us to the true issue in our responsibility which is limited. We are to be faithful to the gifts, abilities, and opportunities God gives us and leave the results to Him.

Mark Hatfield tells of touring Calcutta with Mother Teresa and visiting the so-called "House of Dying," where sick children are cared for in their last days, and the dispensary, where the poor line up by the hundreds to receive medical attention. Watching Mother Teresa minister to these people, feeding and nursing those left by others to die, Hatfield was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the suffering she and her co-workers face daily. "How can you bear the load without being crushed by it?" he asked. Mother Teresa replied, "My dear Senator, I am not called to be successful, I am called to be faithful."⁸

Paul stresses this point in 1 Corinthians 3:5-8.

What is Apollos, really? Or what is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, and each of us in the ministry the Lord gave us. **3:6** I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused it to grow. **3:7** So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters counts for anything, but God who causes things to grow.

A servant is simply to be faithful to his or her God-given responsibilities (sowing or watering or whatever) and leave the results to the Master. The results are His job. So later (1 Cor. 4:1-2), to those who were making unwarranted human comparisons between the servants, Paul had this to say:

People should think about us this way—as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Now what is sought in stewards is that one be found faithful.

Faithful Christian servants often labor faithfully in fields that yield little fruit humanly speaking, but this in no way means they are not faithful.

An elderly preacher was rebuked by one of his deacons one Sunday morning before the service. "Pastor," said the man, "something must be wrong with your preaching and your work. There's been only one person added to the church in a whole year, and he's just a boy."

The minister listened, his eyes moistening and his thin hand trembling. "I feel it all," he replied, "but God knows I've tried to do my duty." On that day the minister's heart was heavy as he stood before his flock. As he finished the message, he felt a strong inclination to resign.

After everyone else had left, that one boy came to him and asked, "Do you think if I worked hard for an education, I could become a preacher—perhaps a missionary?"

Again tears welled up in the minister's eyes. "Ah, this heals the ache I feel," he said. "Robert, I see the Divine hand now. May God bless you, my boy. Yes, I think you will become a preacher."

Many years later an aged missionary returned to London from Africa. His name was spoken with reverence. Nobles invited him to their homes. He had added many souls to the church of Jesus

⁷ Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teachers' Commentary*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1987, electronic media.

⁸ Beyond Hunger, by Beals as quoted in Illustration database, The Biblical Studies Foundation, electronic media.

Christ, reaching even some of Africa's most savage chiefs. His name was Robert Moffat, the same Robert who years before had spoken to the pastor that Sunday morning in the old Scottish kirk.⁹

Our need and prayer should be, "Lord, help us to be faithful to the gifts, abilities, and opportunities you have given us according to the strength you give us (see Col. 1:28-29). Then give us the grace and faith to leave the results to you."

Manifested in Obedience to Specific Responsibilities

Naturally, there is a general faithfulness for which we are all responsible—prayer, Bible study, loving one another, assembling together for worship and encouragement and edification, giving, showing mercy, and on the list goes in accord with the principles and imperative of Scripture. However, there are also very specific responsibilities or duties that are related to our individual situations of life—where we live, giftedness, training, God's leading, and many other variables. As just seen in 1 Corinthians 3 and 4, faithfulness is often related to the specific duties given to us.

The fruit of faith in God and His faithful Word produces a faithfulness which will manifest itself in various forms of reliability depending on the responsibilities and the situation of the one with faith. Daniel was faithful in his responsibilities regarding the affairs of state, but we know from the book of Daniel that this was the result of his faith and devotion to the Lord (Dan. 6:4). God said that Moses was "faithful in all My household" (Num. 12:7; Heb. 3:2), but we know this too was the result of Moses' faith. "By faith, when he grew up, Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be ill-treated with the people of God than to enjoy sin's fleeting pleasure" (Heb. 11:24-25). In Nehemiah 7:2, we read that Nehemiah put his brother Hanani in charge of Jerusalem "for he was a faithful man," but the source and motivation for his faithfulness is quickly seen in the attached statement "and feared God more than many."

Another illustration of faithfulness according to specific responsibilities is seen in view of the unfaithfulness of Eli and especially his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, to discharge their duties in accordance with the conditions prescribed by God's Word (1 Sam. 2:29-33). Thus, an unnamed man of God declared to Eli that his priesthood would end. Nevertheless, the LORD would not terminate the office of priest. Instead, He promised, "But I will raise up for Myself a **faithful priest** who will do according to what is in My heart and in My soul; and I will build him an enduring house, and he will walk before My anointed always." In the more immediate fulfillment, this was fulfilled when the priesthood was taken from Abiathar, descendant of Aaron's son Ithamar, and given to Zadok, descendant of Aaron's son Eleazar (1 Kings 2:27, 35). But in the ultimate fulfillment the "faithful Priest" and "anointed one" mentioned here are one and the same, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. He fulfills both offices of Priest and King (Ps. 110; Heb. 5:6; Rev. 19:16).

So while there is a general faithfulness to basic Christian responsibilities for which all Christians are responsible, we each need to be alert to the specific responsibilities in the will of God that He calls us to in the daily affairs of life.

The Means of Faithfulness

As with all the qualities of Christ-like maturity, faithfulness is the product of the grace of God through the various avenues God uses to produce spiritual growth and maturity in a believer's life. The three *primary* sources being God's truth (His Word), the ministry of the Spirit, and the edifying and encouraging ministry the body of Christ. But we should note that faithfulness is essentially dependent on other qualities of spiritual maturity like courage, devotion and reverence for God, faith, love for others, endurance, and a sense of purpose or destiny regarding the will of God. Such qualities form the foundation or the *secondary* resources for faithfulness. The following are five key areas God uses to build faithfulness in His people.

Faithfulness and Our Focus and Expectations

When facing difficult and painful conditions, we can easily become so discouraged by those circumstances or by our false expectations that we give up, run away, and either fail to carry on in our responsibilities or becomes so

⁹ Source Unknown

lethargic that our efficiency is minimized or nullified. As a man of like passions or with a human nature like us (Jam. 5:17), the prophet Elijah illustrates this potential that we all face.

Just a casual reading of 1 Kings 17-19 reveal some striking and even startling contrasts in the prophet, the man of God, between 1 Kings 17-18 and 1 Kings 19. His behavior is as different as night and day. Previously Elijah is courageous and faithful to God's call in the face of great danger with all the odds stacked against him. He victoriously faces the 850 prophets of Baal with chapter 18 concluding: "the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he girded up his loins and outran Ahab to Jezreel." Elijah was faithful to his responsibilities and experienced God's supernatural strength to do the extraordinary. But when we turn to chapter 19, what we find almost stuns us. Suddenly Elijah becomes fearful, running scared, exhausted, depressed, and wants to die. He has become neutralized and fails in his responsibilities as a prophet of God.

In 1 Kings 19 we find the cause of the change in Elijah. King Ahab tells the notorious Jezebel what Elijah had done. She reacts with vengeance and threatens Elijah's life. Suddenly, with his eyes off the Lord, he runs for his life down to Beersheba in the desert in the southern most part of Judah. Leaving his servant, he continues another day's journey further into the desert, crawls under a scrubby tree and, in deep depression, asks God to let him die.

Have you ever been there, in the gloom of despair and defeat when all your expectations exploded in your face? I believe this was a problem of misplaced expectations. I don't know exactly what Elijah was expecting, but with the power of God so clearly manifested perhaps Elijah thought there would be some positive response in Ahab that would result in changes in the kingdom of Israel. We aren't told. We can only guess. But something really shattered Elijah's focus, his faith, and his capacity for faithfulness.

Perhaps the first lesson we can learn from Elijah's response concerns the issue of our expectations and the impact this can have on us negatively. As already mentioned, he was expecting something different—something more positive. Undoubtedly, he was looking for a real turnaround in the spiritual condition of the kingdom and his expectations may have moved into the realm of a sense of demandingness with God. This is supported in Elijah's response to God's questions later on in the chapter (19:9-14). Elijah was focused on what he saw as his failure.

Life is full of disappointments and if we are not extremely careful, those expectations will derail us as they become demands of our heart. It is not wrong for us to hope for the best and to look to the Lord for that. First Corinthians 13:7 says "love...believes all things, hopes all things." The same is true for faith according to Hebrews 11:1. But 1 Corinthians 13:7 also says, "love bears all things,...endures all things." Please note, believing and hoping is sandwiched between bearing and enduring.

The principle, as seen previously, is that God holds us responsible for trusting in Him, for obedience, for love, for endurance, and **for faithfulness** to do what He has called us to do. *He does not hold us responsible for the results.* The results are in His hands, not ours. We can't change people, and we often can't change our circumstances, only God can. Further, our expectations can easily slip into a sense of a demandingness—demanding that things work out the way we think they should. When that happens we are usurping God's sovereignty and acting as though we the creature were the all wise Creator (cf. Job. 40:1-9). When we focus on our expectations and make the results we want the source of our happiness, security, or significance, we end up in the ***Elijah syndrome***—fearful, ready to run away, engulfed in feelings of failure and depression or fear and frustration, and isolated.

Elijah, of course, was not alone. The Lord was there and even sent His angel to minister to him. Not only is the Lord omnipresent, but how comforting to know He has promised to never leave nor forsake believers no matter what they face or what they do (Ps. 139; Heb. 13:5-6). Elijah was also not alone from the human standpoint. God had 7,000 that had not bowed the knee to Baal, but he had run away from their company.

But the Lord came alongside to minister to the prophet in his failure and despair. He did this in several ways: (1) Before He dealt with Elijah's spiritual condition, He rejuvenated him physically with rest and nourishment. (2) He then got Elijah to face his true condition, the real problem. Taking the position of a counselor, the Lord twice asked Elijah "why are you here?" In other words, take stock, think about where you are and what got you here (vss. 9 and 13). (3) In all of this, the Lord spoke to the prophet personally in verses 9, 12, 13, and 15. This illustrates our need to be in the Word where we listen to the Lord (hear His still small voice), **focus** on Him, and can be instructed and encouraged by His truth. (4) The Lord then ordered Elijah to become active and involved in faithful ministry again. Note the "Go, return on your way..." in verse 15. When feeling down, depressed, apart from getting needed rest, do not give in to the temptation to mope about and do nothing. Doing nothing only reinforces depression and leads to

greater unfaithfulness. By the same token, never use activity to narcotize (dull) the pain. Give it to the Lord. Rest, relaxation, and solitude with the Lord needs the balance of involvement in faithful work and ministry, but always out of a spirit of faith, never just activity.

Application: There is a song that was popular in the 1950s with the words, “O what a beautiful morning, O what a beautiful day, I’ve got a wonderful feeling, everything’s going my way.” This song expresses the typical attitude of the world. This is the way we would like it, but it’s simply not the way things are in a fallen world. Wanting and expecting everything to go our way is not only unrealistic, it is self-centered. It also suggests we are seeking our security and happiness in good times rather than in the Sovereign Lord. It is living according to sight, not faith.

By contrast, the apostle Paul said, “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice” (Phil. 4:4). But where was he when he said that? While everything was going his way? NO! He said it while he was chained daily to a Roman soldier awaiting trial, which could have meant his head. He said it while others were seeking to do him harm, even within the Christian community (Phil. 1:15-18). Instead, Paul might have sung, “O what a beautiful morning, O what a beautiful day, though things aren’t going my way, the Lord rules over all day by day.”

Faithfulness and God’s Truth

Faithfulness is always related to God’s truth. One of the words mentioned previously for *faithfulness*, *ἀετμετ*, may also mean “truth” and is used to describe God’s instruction, His Word, because His Word is totally reliable as stressed in Psalm 19:9, “The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true (*ἀετμετ*); they are righteous altogether.” This is a consistent theme of the Old Testament.

Lead me in Thy **truth** and teach me, For Thou art the God of my salvation; (Ps. 25:5)

43 And do not take the word of **truth** utterly out of my mouth, For I wait for Your ordinances (Ps. 119:43).

Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, And Thy law is **truth** (Ps. 119:142).

Thou art near, O LORD, And all Thy commandments are **truth** (Ps. 119:151).

The sum of Thy word is **truth**, And every one of Thy righteous ordinances is everlasting (Ps. 119:160)..

The brief overview of the Hebrew and Greek words used for faithfulness teach us that, biblically speaking, faith and faithfulness stand to each other as *root* and *fruit*. The ultimate source or the means of faithfulness is one’s relationship with God through faith, but especially as that faith is exercised in the light of God’s truth. It is God’s Word of truth that establishes man in the way of truth or the way of faithfulness because His Word is an expression of God’s faithfulness or trustworthiness; it is God’s Holy Word that reveals the faithfulness or reliability of God (cf. Ps. 119:86a with 33:4). Thus, the Psalmist wrote, “I have chosen the faithful way; I have placed Your ordinances *before* me” (NASB). The NIV reads, “I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws.” The NET Bible makes the issue even more clear, “I choose the path of faithfulness, I am committed to your regulations (i.e., God’s Word). The path of faithfulness is the product of a life committed to God’s Word.

Faithfulness and the Character of God

Fundamentally, since faithfulness is an attribute that is a vital part of the character of God Himself, His faithfulness becomes a great resource for faithfulness in His people (Deut. 7:9; 32:4; 1 Sam. 26:23; Ps. 36:5; 40:10; 143:1; Lam. 3:23). For instance, in the song of instruction by Moses in Deuteronomy 32, Moses proclaimed the name of the Lord, that is he gave a description of the Lord’s character and His works, at the heart of which lay His faithfulness or reliability. The objective was to cause Israel to give serious consideration to the character and work of God, thereby motivating not only faith and faithful obedience in Him, but the expectation of God’s blessings.

The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of **faithfulness** and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He. (Deut. 32:4, NASB) (emphasis mine)

Similarly, in Isaiah 25:1-12, in a way reminiscent of the psalmists, the prophet offered a psalm of praise extolling the Lord’s future deliverance of His people or the triumphs of the kingdom age. Importantly, however, the focus of the Psalm is not simply on the marvelous acts of the Lord but on His faithfulness. All that the Lord will do reveals His unwavering faithfulness and makes us aware of what He is in His perfect character. This is especially

seen in verse 1, “O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done marvelous things, things planned long ago” (NIV). Note the translation of the *NET Bible*, but especially the translator’s notes that follow:

O LORD, you are my God! I will exalt you in praise, I will extol your fame. For you have done extraordinary things, and executed plans made long ago exactly as you decreed (NET).

Translators Notes: Heb “plans from long ago (in) faithfulness, trustworthiness.” The feminine noun *áe,muna*, “faithfulness,” and masculine noun *áomen*, “trustworthiness,” both of which are derived from the root *áa,,man*, are juxtaposed to emphasize the basic idea conveyed by the synonyms. Here they describe the absolute reliability of the divine plans.

Remembering and keeping one’s focus on God’s unchangeable character and His eternal faithfulness becomes one of our greatest resources for courage and the faithfulness we need to go on even when things seem their blackest. A beautiful illustration of this is found in the book of Lamentations.

Here at the heart of this book we find one of the greatest confessions of faith found anywhere in the Bible. Jeremiah had been dwelling on his sorrows and the sorrows of his people, but then he lifted his eyes to the Lord—and this was the turning point. In the midst of sorrow and ruin he remembered the mercy of the Lord. “His compassions fail not.” We have failed Him, but He cannot fail us. “Great is Your faithfulness.”

The faithfulness of God is a tremendous encouragement in days when people’s hearts are failing them for fear. If you build your life on people or on the things of this world, you will have no hope or security; but if you build on Christ, the Faithful One, you will be safe forever. He is *faithful to chasten* (Ps. 119:75); Lamentations itself teaches this lesson. He wants to bring us to the place of repentance and confession (Lam. 3:39–41). He is *faithful to forgive* when we do confess our sins (1 John 1:9). He is *faithful to sympathize* when we have burdens and problems (Heb. 2:17–18; 4:14–16). We never need fear that He is too busy to listen or too tired to help. He is *faithful to deliver* when we cry out for help in temptation (1 Cor. 10:13). He is *faithful to keep us* in this life and unto life eternal (1 Tim. 1:15; 1 Thes. 5:23–24). We can commit our lives and souls into the hands of the faithful Creator (1 Peter 4:19) and know that He will do all things well.¹⁰

Thus, God’s perfect faithfulness, even in the face of Israel’s continued rebellion, becomes the foundation for our faithfulness. In deep depression, Jeremiah could have thrown in the towel, but putting his focus back on the Lord, he found renewed confidence in God’s compassion and great faithfulness to His promises. Thus, he gathered up his courage and continued to minister to Judah with the book of Lamentations being one of the results.

Faithfulness and the Holy Spirit

Naturally, another source or means of faithfulness in a believer’s life is the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit. Faithfulness is one aspect of the fruit of the Spirit, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, *faithfulness*,...” (Gal. 5:22). The Word of truth is vital to faithfulness, but it is the Spirit of Truth, as the teacher of God’s truth, who takes the things of Christ and makes them real to us to motivate us to act in faith and obedience. However, the flesh is weak; in ourselves we lack the strength and ability to live faithfully, at least for the right motives. Thus, it is the Holy Spirit who empowers us to live the Christian life (Gal. 5:16ff; Eph. 5:18f; Rom. 8:4f). Only those who walk in dependence on the power of the Spirit will experience the discipline and courage needed for faithfulness.

Faithfulness and the Body of Christ

Finally, numerous passages demonstrate the important part the body of Christ plays in the spiritual life and growth of one another. As members of one body, believers are to show the same care for one another (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:25), and be involved in ministering to one another. This is abundantly evident in the many *one another* commands of the New Testament. We are to love one another, build up one another, encourage one another, honor one another, admonish one another, serve one another, show forbearance to one another, be kind to one another,

¹⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines On the Old Testament*, Victor Books, 1993, electronic media.

comfort one another, etc. Along these lines, Ephesians 4:12-16 teaches us that the goal of Christ-like maturity occurs through the mutual work of the whole body of Christ. This naturally include promoting the restoration of those who have fallen and the general purpose of equipping one another for faithful ministry (see Rom. 15:1; Gal. 6:1f; 1 Thess. 5:11f; 1 Pet. 4:8-10; Jam. 5:19).

Motivations for Faithfulness

The Impact of Motives on Faithfulness

We have seen that faithfulness means reliability or adhering firmly and devotedly to a person, a cause, an idea, or to certain responsibilities. However, the sad fact is that many people find themselves working in a job they really do not enjoy and that does not mix well with their interests, abilities, and training. It is simply a matter of necessity, of putting bread on the table. For others, it is simply a matter of having the means to take part in the fun and games of our society; they work five days a week so they can play on the weekends. People may be found faithful for many reasons or motives. A man may be very faithful to his employer and his responsibilities because he wants a raise, doesn't want to lose his job, and wants to advance in his company. He may be faithful because he loves his work and genuinely enjoys his job. He may be faithful because he cares about his company and the people he works with and wants to see it grow and be successful.

On the surface, these are legitimate concerns and reasons, but for Christians, we need to be guided and undergirded by motives that are in keeping with eternal values and with God's will and purpose for believers as set forth in Scripture regardless of working conditions. In the time of the New Testament the Roman world was filled with slaves. Slaves had no rights, no chance of promotion, and generally, little or no chance of freedom. Some served good masters and were given work they enjoyed. For most, however, their plight was not a happy one. Very often the primary motivation for faithfulness was self-preservation. However, to these Paul wrote that they should serve their masters from a different motive—from the desire to serve the Lord Christ.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in every respect; not only when they are watching—like those who are strictly people-pleasers—but with a sincere heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you are doing, work at it with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not for people, 24 because you know that you will receive your inheritance from the Lord as the reward. Serve the Lord Christ. 25 For the one who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there are no exceptions (Col. 3:22-25).

A motive is an emotion, desire, a felt need, or an impulse of some kind that impels a person to action or to certain pursuits. Thus, motives are crucial to everything a Christian does. They not only have temporal repercussions, but God's promises of future and eternal rewards are related to both faithfulness on the job and to motives. Proverbs tells us, "All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, But the LORD weighs the motives" (Prov. 16:2). Thus, motives are vital to whatever we do. To the Corinthians he wrote, "For our reason for confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that **with pure motives** and godly sincerity, not by human wisdom but by the grace of God, we conducted ourselves in the world, and all the more toward you" (2 Cor. 1:12). Then in 1 Corinthians he wrote, "So then, do not judge anything before the time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and **reveal the motives** of hearts. Then each will receive recognition from God" (1 Cor. 4:5, emphasis mine). More will be said on faithfulness and eternal rewards later in this study.

Further, impure motives destroy one's capacity to discharge his or her responsibilities in a godly and biblical manner, i.e., with a singleness of vision for kingdom values and heavenly treasure. After warning His disciple about the futility of pursuing earthly treasures because of self-centered motives, He pointed to these fundamental principles in Matthew 6:21-24

1. **Values, what one treasures, determine motives or that which impels one to action:** "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (vs. 21).
2. **One's perspective or insight to life determines values and so also one's pursuits:** "The eye is the lamp of the body. If then your eye is sound (lit., "simple, single"), your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (vss. 22-23).
3. **Behind the choice of treasures is the choice of masters. Double minded pursuits (impure motives) make faithfulness impossible:** "No one is able to serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and

love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. No one is able to serve God and possessions (vs. 24).

So, while impure motive ruin one's capacity for faithfulness, godly motives promote one's ability to be faithful stewards of God's grace. A wonderful example of this is seen in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Paul reviewed his ministry (really that of his mission team) and in so doing, he gave us a model for faithfulness, serving as "faithful stewards entrusted with the gospel." In reviewing their ministry, he used two instructive analogies: (1) that of faithful stewards (vss.1-6), and (2) that of faithful and loving parents: first as a loving mother (vss. 7-8), and then as a concerned father (vss. 9-12). In verses 1-7a we have a glimpse of the manner, the motives, methods, and the means of their ministry. But the key focus is on the purity of their motives. As is clear from the text, this enhanced their capacity for faithfulness.

For you yourselves know, brothers and sisters, about our coming to you: it has not proven to be purposeless. 2 But although we suffered earlier and were mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of much opposition. 3 **For the appeal we make does not come from error or impurity or with deceit,** 4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we declare it, **not to please people but God, who examines our hearts.** 5 For we never appeared **with flattering speech,** as you know, **nor with a pretext for greed**—God is our witness— 6 **nor to seek glory** from people, either from you or from others, 7 although we could have imposed our weight as apostles of Christ. (1 Thess. 2:1-7, emphasis mine)

Impure motives would have sent Paul and his team running for cover after the ill treatment at Philippi and would have kept them from faithfully declaring the gospel to the Thessalonians where they also met with much opposition. Up front, Paul was able to say, their coming to the Thessalonians was not in vain or meaningless, empty of significance.

"Purposeless" (NET) or "vain" (NASB) is *keno*, which means "empty, without content, without any basis, without truth or power," or it could be used in the sense of "without result, effect, or profit, fruitless." It was used of an empty jar, empty words, or of sending someone away empty handed.

Paul could be using this word with reference to the results in the lives of the Thessalonians as described in chapter 1 or in reference to the content and character of their preaching and ministry. Since he dealt with the results in the lives of the Thessalonians in chapter 1, and in view of the context that follows here in chapter 2, it seems clear that he is using this word with regard to the essential character, earnestness, and sincerity of their entrance and coming to proclaim God's truth to the Thessalonians. Thus, what follows sets forth Paul's proof that their coming was full of authentic earnestness and substance. It was not empty and without power because it was not prompted by vain methods, motives, and means. Commenting on this text as found in the NIV, Thomas writes:

The opposite of the empty ministry denied in v. 1 is one where no obstacle or threat is sufficient to deter the speaker of God's gospel (2:2). In Philippi, Paul and Silas had been beaten and severely flogged; they had been put in prison with their feet in stocks (Acts 16:22-24) and possibly otherwise cruelly mistreated because they had rescued a slave girl in the name of Jesus Christ. They had also been insulted by being arrested unjustly, stripped of their clothes, and treated like dangerous fugitives. Their Roman citizenship had been violated, and for this Paul demanded restitution (Acts 16:37). Still staggering from these injuries and indignities, the two came to Thessalonica. Under such conditions, most people would have refrained from repeating a message that had led to such violent treatment, but not these men. With God's help, they mustered sufficient courage to declare in this new city their gospel from God. *Eparresiasametha*, "we dared," richly describes how they boldly spoke out despite the same potential dangers as faced in Philippi.

Here again they encountered "strong opposition." *Agoni*, represented in the text above by "opposition," pictures an athlete's struggle to gain first place in a race or contest. Paul's conflict may have been inward (cf. Col 2:1), but most likely it came from outward persecutions and dangers originated by his Jewish opponents (cf. Philippians 1:30), since inner strivings cannot equal the tempo of persecution set earlier in v. 2. Though Luke does not directly mention "strong

opposition” in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-10), it is clear from the present Epistle that such did come.¹¹

The point is that in spite of their sufferings and opposition, by God’s enabling grace and through pure motives, the missionary team continued to faithfully proclaim the gospel and minister to the needs of the Thessalonians like loving parents.

But Christians can appear faithful to their responsibilities when in reality, because of wrong motives, they will not win the praise of Christ at His coming (1 Cor. 4:5). A case in point is found in Philippians 1:12-17. Paul’s imprisonment caused some to become bold and to begin proclaiming the Savior themselves in Paul’s absence, but some were doing so from entirely wrong motives.

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, 13 so that my imprisonment in *the cause of* Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, 14 and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. 15 Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; 16 the latter *do it* out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; 17 the former **proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives**, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment (NASB). (Phil. 1:12-17, emphasis mine)

Believers may be doing good deeds or fulfilling their duties, but if their motives are impure, it does not honor the Lord and can scarcely be called faithfulness. Because of the presence of impure motives, it constitutes unfaithfulness and amounts to works that grieve and quench the Spirit. Paul rejoiced because Christ was being preached. This was undoubtedly because there is inherent power in the message regardless of the messenger. But the actions of those mentioned in Philippians 1:15-17 had to have fallen into the category of wood, hay, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:12f). The mention of wood, hay, and stubble naturally provides a good transition to the next point regarding our faithfulness.

God’s Glory

It is not without reason that the call of Romans 12:1, “present your bodies as a living sacrifice” is immediately preceded by “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever! Amen.” The Westminster Shorter Catechism rightly concludes that “man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” We are here on this earth to glorify God whether in conditions of blessing or suffering, whether by life or by death. All that we think and are and do should be aimed at bringing glory to God. In this divine purpose, bringing glory to God, we have the chief motive for faithfulness.

Following Jesus’ prediction of the nature of Peter’s death and the awesome change that would occur in his character, John appended this remark, “Now Jesus said this to indicate clearly by what kind of death Peter was going to glorify God” (John 21:19).

The aim of our praise is God’s glory. Having again referred to the mercy Gentiles received through the gospel, Paul wrote of the glory that would accrue to God because of the praise offered to God by the Gentile nations:

...and thus the **Gentiles glorify God for his mercy**. As it is written, “Because of this I will confess you among the Gentiles, and I will sing praises to your name.” And again it says: “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” And again, “Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him.” And again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse will come, and the one who rises to rule over the Gentiles, in him will the Gentiles hope.” (Rom. 15:9-12).

Our bodies are to be kept from fornication and moral impurity because they are instruments that glorify God:

Flee sexual immorality! Every sin a person commits is outside of the body, but the immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit in

¹¹ Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976-1992, electronic media.

you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought with a price. Therefore glorify God with your body (1 Cor. 6:18-20).

Faithfully giving of our financial resources is one of our privileges and responsibilities, but the ultimate goal is God's glory:

Through the evidence of this service (giving) they will glorify God because of your obedience to your confession in the gospel of Christ and the generosity of your sharing with them and with everyone (2 Cor. 9:13).

The same is also true for suffering. While suffering is never painless, it is a means by which we bring glory to God:

...and maintain good conduct among the non-Christians, so that though they now malign you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God when he appears (1 Pet. 2:12).

But if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but glorify God that you bear such a name (1 Pet. 4:16).

So, in a passage where Paul is appealing to Christians to live by the principle of love rather than to harmfully misuse their liberty, he concludes with this general principle that is to govern everything a Christian does, "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

Through the Lord Jesus, we have a salvation that is so beyond description that Paul describes it as "the unfathomable riches of Christ." In it we are not only reconciled to God with the assurance of eternity, but we are given new meaning and capacity for life and the privilege of faithfully serving Him now for special rewards like reigning with Christ in His future kingdom. All of history finds its redemption and summation in the person and work of Christ and His future reign as the sovereign King of Kings (Eph. 1:6-11). Thus, Paul wrote,

As a result God exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, **2:10** so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth, **2:11** and every tongue confess to the glory of God the Father that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:9-11).

Since our very capacity for faithfulness has its source in God, we are to be faithful for His glory. This is surely the point of Romans 11:36. "All things" are (1) "from Him," He is our derivation, our source of existence, life, salvation, sanctification, etc., (2) "through Him," He is our dynamic, our force or enablement for life, (3) "and to Him," our destination, our course. Certainly, then, if this is the goal of history, the supreme motive for our faithfulness is to bring glory to God. "To Him be the glory forever, Amen."

The Mercies of God (Rom. 12:1)

Flowing out of Romans 11:36 and writing to believers, to Christians, to those he had earlier addressed as "called to belong to Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:6), "to those loved by God in Rome, called to be saints" (vs. 7), and as those whose "faith is proclaimed throughout the world" (vs. 1:8), the apostle made a strong appeal for them "to present your bodies as a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God—which is your reasonable service." Some would see this as a one-time or once-and-for-all dedication to God, but the use of the word "present" in chapter 6 and Greek grammar does not really support such a view. Obviously, there must be a beginning point for such a commitment, but the appeal is for a lifetime of on-going, daily, moment-by-moment commitment of one's life as a sacrifice. The aorist tense in the verb "present" is best understood as either a constative or comprehensive, or an ingressive aorist. If constative, the action is viewed as a whole and the stress is on the fact and covers a multitude of actions. If ingressive, the stress is on the entrance into a new state, one that is to characterize the life of every believer. In keeping with the rest of the New Testament, Paul is showing us that Christ-like living is nothing less than a life of sacrifice in which the Christian is to use his or her body in carrying out God's will in faithful service.

The nature of this life of faithful, sacrificial service is first described by the terms "alive, holy, and pleasing to God." But he goes on to show something of what this means in verses 2ff.—a life that refuses to be conformed to this world, but is transformed by the renewing of the mind (vs. 2), that recognizes one's gifts and seeks to use them in service for the body of Christ (vss. 3-8).

But why? The reason or motivation is seen in the words, "therefore" and "by the mercies of God." The "therefore" is inferential and shows that what follows is a deduction based on what has preceded. In the first eleven

chapters of Romans, Paul has dealt with the *declarative*, with what is needed for sinful man (Jew and Gentile alike) to be brought into a right relationship with God—namely, the work of God in Christ. This dealt with all mankind; the immoral, the moral, and the religious, for all fall short of the glory or the perfect holiness of God. But above all, this work of God demonstrates the mercies of God. The term “mercy” refers to that quality in God that moved him to deliver sinful mankind from his sinful state and misery that he might experience God’s salvation. But as always in Paul’s writings, this is followed by the *imperative*. The imperative deals with that which should occur in the life of the Christian in view of all that God has done—the mercies of God.

The simple fact is that no one, neither Jew nor Gentile, is worthy of what God has done for sinners. This was clearly declared in chapters 1-3 and again in 9-11. All deserve God’s judgment because of sin. Therefore, for those who have trusted in the Savior, the only reasonable or rational response (vs. 1c, “which is your reasonable service”) is to present our bodies as sacrifices—living, holy, and well pleasing to God. There is a deep moral obligation to do so because of God’s great mercy. Here, then, is a powerful motivation for faithfulness in the Christian life. Naturally, since this is all of God, as stressed in the previous section, the underlying motive should be God’s glory, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever! Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

Eternal Rewards

The subject of eternal rewards is extensive in the New Testament, yet for some reason very little attention is devoted to it in spite of the New Testament’s many passages that deal with rewards or their loss. The Lord Jesus spoke of rewards at least 16 times in the Gospels (cf. Matt. 5:12, 46; 6:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 16, 19-21; 18; 10:41, 42; 16:27; 18; 25, 26, 29) and Paul spoke of this truth over and over again. At the heart of this focus is the doctrine of the Judgment Seat (the *Bema*) of Christ which must be distinguished from the Great White Throne (GWTJ). The *Bema* is only for believers and the GWT is only for unbelievers. The *Bema* occurs after the rapture of the church at His coming for us and the GWT occurs at the end of the 1000-year reign of Christ (Rev. 20:11-15).¹² Thus, the basic principle of the biblical teaching of rewards is *that the way we live today will determine the rewards we will receive tomorrow*.

Those who are pleasing to Christ will be generously rewarded; those who are not pleasing to Him will receive negative consequences and a lesser reward. In other words, your life *here* will impact your life *there* forever.¹³

Simply put, knowing and living in the light of this biblical truth should have a resounding impact on our faithfulness.

12 If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, 13 each builder’s work will be plainly seen, for the Day will make it clear, because it will be revealed by fire. And the fire will test what kind of work each has done. 14 If what someone has built survives, he will receive a reward. 15 If someone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Cor. 3:12-15).

For we must all appear before the judgment seat (*Bema Seat*) of Christ, so that each one may be paid back according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or evil (2 Cor. 5:10).

But why do you judge your brother or sister? Or again, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11 For it is written, “***As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give praise to God.***” 12 Therefore, each of us will give an account of himself to God (Rom. 14:10-12).

A practical illustration of this can be seen in the passage mentioned in the previous section. Colossians 3:22-25 stresses that slaves were to faithfully serve their masters as a service unto the Lord knowing that Christ would reward them. By application, this means all Christians are to do their work as a service to the Lord Jesus Christ. Being devoted to Christ and doing our work in faithful obedience to Him will result in rewards at the *Bema Seat of Christ*. The principle is that slaves (and so workers today) could accept unjust treatment with the assurance that regardless, if

¹² For more on the judgments see the study on our web site, “The Doctrine of the Judgments (Past, Present, and Future)” located in the “Theology / Eschatology” section.

¹³ Erwin W. Lutzer, *Your Eternal Reward*, Moody, Chicago, 1998, p. 21.

they served as an obedience to Christ without grumbling, He would reward them in the future with heavenly treasures. But the opposite is also true. If one does wrong (retaliates, does his work half-heartedly, murmurs, etc.), he will be repaid for the wrong done (a loss of rewards).

The following passages clearly paint the picture.

Luke 19:17 “And the king said to him, ‘Well done, good slave! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you will have authority over ten cities.’” The faithful servant was given greater responsibility (*authority over ten cities*) as a result of his faithfulness. Thus, this becomes an exhortation to faithfulness for us today.

Luke 19:26 “I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given; but from the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.” Again we see how faithfulness produces great reward (see Luke 8:18; also Matt 13:12; Mark 4:25).

Luke 22:28-30 “You are the ones who have remained with me in my trials. Thus I grant to you a kingdom, just as my Father granted to me, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Not only did Jesus acknowledge the faithfulness of His disciples, but he promised them the reward of ruling with Christ in the coming kingdom.

Another important passage, though debated, is 2 Timothy 2:11:

2:11 This saying is trustworthy: If we died with him, we will also live with him.

2:12 If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we deny him, he will also deny us.

2:13 If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, since he cannot deny himself.

The study notes in the NET Bible have this short and excellent explanation for this text.

This could be (1) a word of warning (The Lord will exact punishment; he cannot deny his holiness) or (2) a word of hope (Because of who he is, he remains faithful to us despite our lapses). The latter is more likely, since Paul consistently cites God’s faithfulness as a reassurance, not as a warning (cf. especially Rom 3:3; also 1 Cor 1:9; 10:13; 2 Cor 1:18; 1 Thess 5:24; 2 Thess 3:3).

The Fruits of Faithfulness

As seen previously, the Scripture promises rewards for our service as a motivation for faithful ministry. And for the Christian, at least, this promise is true and guaranteed regardless of the apparent success or rewards received here in time. Sometimes it appears that doing what is right goes without obvious blessing or reward. Faithful service may not lead to recognition, a promotion, or the raise one counted on—maybe not even a thank you. And often, faithfulness, especially when it is to Christ and biblical principles, can lead to persecution—“They that live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12).

But as Christians we must never allow the absence of immediate reward or blessing to deter us from steadfast faithfulness. I have read that the Chinese bamboo tree does absolutely nothing—or so it seems—for the first four years, but sometime during the fifth year, it suddenly shoots up ninety feet in sixty days. Now we might ask the question, “Does the bamboo tree grows in six weeks or in five years?” Regardless of the answer, the fact is that at the end of five years there is a tremendous difference. Being faithful in our lives and responsibilities is often like the bamboo tree. Sometimes we continue to expend a great deal of effort and see few results—nothing appears to be happening. But the promise of Scripture is that if we continue to be faithful to the Lord, we will eventually receive rewards for our efforts. If not in this life, definitely in the life to come.¹⁴

So then, dear brothers and sisters, be firm. Do not be moved! Always be outstanding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58).

Many are the blessings or fruits of the faithfulness of others, but for purposes of this study, we will concentrate only on three.

¹⁴ Taken from a quote by S. Truett Cathy, quoted in *Secrets of Staying Power*, by Kevin Miller, Word Books, Waco, 1988, p. 51.

A Blessing to Others

Since faithfulness leads to obedience to the truth of the Word and its vision or perspective about life, its priorities and values, faithfulness will lead to multiple blessings in a variety of ways. Proverbs 28:20 promises, “a faithful man will be richly blessed...” And not only will he be blessed, but he will become a blessing to others. Proverbs 13:17 reminds us, “A wicked messenger falls into adversity, But a faithful envoy *brings* healing.” So, Acts 20:27; 1 Thessalonians 2:4; 1 Timothy 1:11; 4:16; 6:20 and many other passages demonstrate how a faithful messenger, one who is faithful to proclaim the truth entrusted to him, leads to the salvation of lost sinners and the transformation of the saints—saved sinners. So it is that faithfulness to truth will lead to spiritual growth, unity or harmony in the body of Christ (Eph. 4:1f; Phil. 1:27), to the provision of the needs of others (Gal. 6:6-10; Phil. 1:5; 4:10-14), and help with stumbling saints (Gal. 6:1-5). Faithfulness to believe and appropriate the truth of the salvation that is in Christ leads to freedom from sin’s domination and control and a peace that passes all understanding (Rom. 6-8; Phil. 4:6-7)..

The blessings of faithfulness are manifold for both time and eternity. In fact, the blessings of the faithfulness of others to pursue a task, a responsibility, a vision, or an idea are all around us, so much so that we take them for granted without really giving them a second thought. So look around and note the fruits of someone’s faithfulness.

- The Bible in your hand is the result of those who faithfully and with great care made copy after copy of the original autographs, all of which agree with each other with astounding accuracy. How do we know that? Because these copies, over 5000, have been catalogued and compared by faithful scholars.
- Think of the various translations. They are the product of those who faithfully poured over the Hebrew and Greek texts to give us so many good translations of God’s faithful Word.
- In my library and on my computer are wonderful commentaries, Greek and Hebrew lexicons, concordances, and other study helps that are the product of the faithful and painstaking labor of scholars and those skilled in the development of computer software.
- In my home and office are bright electric lights, the fruit of the faithful pursuit of Thomas Edison.
- On my nose are eyeglasses, the fruit of the labor of Ben Franklin.
- In the background I hear the beautiful and soothing music of my stereo, the fruit of faithful composers and orchestras.
- We are in the Christmas season as I write and our home is beautifully decorated throughout to add to this season of the year. And what’s more, it has been that way each of the past forty years of our marriage, the fruit of my wife’s faithful decorative skill and love.
- In our garage is an automobile (also a large touring motorcycle) either of which will take us wherever we want to go, the fruit of the faithful pursuits and innovation of men like Henry Ford.

So look around, the blessings of faithfulness to some degree are all around us.

One of the chief purposes of the Christian life is ministry where we function not only as good stewards of God’s grace, but as servants of others, serving one another in love. It should go without saying, then, that our ability to be a blessing to others is very much dependent on our faithfulness to use our God-given spiritual gifts, talents, finances, other physical resources, and the opportunities given to us. This naturally includes faithfulness in the specific roles God has given us as spouses, parents, elders and deacons, Bible teachers, Sunday school teachers, small group leaders, etc. Paul wrote, “I am grateful to the one who has strengthened me, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he considered me faithful in putting me into ministry (1 Tim. 1:12), but this ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles was designed for their blessing.

Note the following passages:

To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given **for the benefit of all** (1 Cor. 12:7).

Show hospitality to one another without complaining. 10 Just as each one has received a gift, use it **to serve one another as good stewards** of the varied grace of God (1 Pet. 4:9-10).

4 For just as in one body we have many members, and not all the members serve the same function, 5 so we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually **we are members who belong to one another**. 6 And we have different gifts, according to the grace given to us. If the gift is prophecy, that individual must use it in proportion to his faith. 7 If it is service, he must serve; if it is teaching, he must teach; 8 if it is exhortation, he must exhort; if it is contributing, he must do so with sincerity; if it is leadership, he must do so with diligence; if it is showing mercy, he must do so with cheerfulness (Rom. 12:4-8, emphasis mine).

If we are unfaithful, the body is sorely hurt. As we seek to serve others in any capacity, we should remember that such faithfulness is also a faithfulness to Christ as the Lord stressed in Matthew 25:37-40:

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or naked and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ 40 And the king will answer them, ‘I tell you the truth, just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me’ (Matt. 25:37-40).

Peace and Personal Satisfaction

While there is always room for improvement, because no one ever reaches perfect maturity, there is still a certain amount of personal peace and satisfaction derived from being faithful to one’s responsibilities. Unless one has become hardened through continued rebellion and the deceitfulness of sin, unfaithfulness will bring the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and a sense of blame or guilt. On the other hand, obedience or being faithful to God brings a sense of peace, an awareness of fellowship with Him, and confidence in prayer. John wrote:

Dear friends, if our conscience does not condemn us, we have confidence in the presence of God, and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do the things that are pleasing to him (1 John 3:21-22).

Similarly, Paul had this to say about being faithful in our thoughts and actions:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is worthy of respect, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if something is excellent or praiseworthy, **think** about these things. 9 And what you learned and received and heard and saw in me, **do** these things. And the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4:8-9).

Then, speaking about a life controlled by the Spirit, which is the basis of faithful obedience, Paul wrote of this peace in Romans 8:6, “For the viewpoint (mindset, way of thinking) of the flesh is death (separation in the sense of loss of fellowship and futile living), but the viewpoint of the Spirit is life and peace.” And again in Galatians 5:22, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,…”

Entrusted with Greater Responsibilities

The Christian life with the gifts and opportunities God gives us is a stewardship—a trust from God with precious responsibilities that call for faithfulness. But it is important to realize that faithfulness in the smaller responsibilities forms the basis for being entrusted with greater responsibilities. The Lord pointed to this basic principle in Luke 16:10, “The one who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much; and the one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.” How one handles the smaller responsibilities of life demonstrates character and the capacity for faithfulness in greater responsibilities. They serve as stepping stones for the privilege of serving in areas of greater responsibility.

Obviously, then, certain qualities are a prerequisite for any ministry responsibility in the New Testament, but the greater the responsibility, the greater the requirements. In Titus 1:7, Paul refers to the “overseer” as “God’s steward,” but for this stewardship with its leadership duties (deacons and the wives also, 1 Tim. 3:8f), certain qualities are listed as necessary prerequisites. These qualities demonstrate previous faithfulness and the capacity for faithfulness in the leadership responsibilities required in the office of overseer.

Luke 12:48 teaches us another important related principle. “From everyone who has been given much (i.e. responsibility), much will be required; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be asked.” The words, “entrusted with much,” teach us that the greater the responsibilities given to us from God, the

greater our responsibility to be faithful because such stewardships are so determinative and influential on others. To be gifted with precious responsibility is something that requires faithfulness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, two stories will be shared to illustrate what faithfulness looks like in the practical outworking of one's faith. The first is the story of Clarence Jordan.

Clarence Jordan was a man of unusual abilities and commitment. He had two Ph.D.s, one in agriculture and one in Greek and Hebrew. So gifted was he, he could have chosen to do anything he wanted. He chose to serve the poor.

In the 1940s, he founded a farm in Americus, Georgia, and called it Koinonia Farm. It was a community for poor whites and poor blacks. As you might guess, such an idea did not go over well in the Deep South of the '40s. Ironically, much of the resistance came from good church people who followed the laws of segregation as much as the other folk in town. The town people tried everything to stop Clarence. They tried boycotting him, and slashing workers' tires when they came to town. Over and over, for fourteen years, they tried to stop him.

Finally, in 1954, the Ku Klux Klan had enough of Clarence Jordan, so they decided to get rid of him once and for all. They came one night with guns and torches and set fire to every building on Koinonia Farm but Clarence's home, which they riddled with bullets. And they chased off all the families except one black family which refused to leave.

Clarence recognized the voices of many of the Klansmen, and, as you might guess, some of them were church people. Another was the local newspaper's reporter. The next day, the reporter came out to see what remained of the farm. The rubble still smoldered and the land was scorched, but he found Clarence in the field, hoeing and planting.

"I heard the awful news," he called to Clarence, "and I came out to do a story on the tragedy of your farm closing." Clarence just kept on hoeing and planting. The reporter kept prodding, kept poking, trying to get a rise from this quietly determined man who seemed to be planting instead of packing his bags. So, finally, the reporter said in a haughty voice, "Well, Dr. Jordan, you got two of them Ph.D.s and you've put fourteen years into this farm, and there's nothing left of it at all. Just how successful do you think you've been?"

Clarence stopped hoeing, turned toward the reporter with his penetrating blue eyes, and said quietly but firmly, "About as successful as the cross. Sir, I don't think you understand us. What we are about is not success but faithfulness. We're staying. Good day."

Beginning that day, Clarence and his companions rebuilt Koinonia and the farm is going strong today.¹⁵

The second story is about Samuel Zwemer.

Samuel Zwemer, famous for his missionary work among the Muslims, did not see many converts during his years of work in the Persian Gulf. The temperatures often soared to 107 degrees, and in 1904 both of his daughters died within a few days of each other. Nevertheless, fifty years later he looked aback upon his trials and wrote, "The sheer joy of it all comes back. Gladly would I do it all over again."¹⁶

Surely, when these two stand before the Savior at the *Bema, the Judgment Seat of Christ*, they will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master." May God enable us to be faithful to the trusts He has given us that we too may hear such accolades from the Savior.

¹⁵ Tim Hansel, *Holy Sweat*, Word Books Publisher, Waco, 1987, pp.188-189.

¹⁶ Taken from Erwin W. Lutzer's *Christ Among Other Gods*, Moody, Chicago, 1994, p. 202.

Mark #15: A Team Player

Introduction

The role of the church in the world is a team effort that requires the cooperation of all the members of the body of Christ. Sometimes its members make serious mistakes, but this never means they are not needed. They may need rebuke followed by forgiveness and restoration, but we must recognize they are needed as members of the body of Christ as Paul make so clear in 1 Corinthians 12.

In the realm of sports today and even in the corporate world, we often hear the terms, *team player*, *team effort*. In football, the truly great running backs are usually quick to give credit to the effort of the whole team, especially to the linemen, because they wisely realize a running back's ability to make yardage is dependent upon the efforts of the rest of the team. We often hear players and coaches praising members of the team as a team players. It's a quality highly regarded because it is so valuable to the team effort.

It is teamwork that enables common men to do uncommon things.

No organization can depend on genius; the supply is always scarce and unreliable. It is the test of an organization to make ordinary human beings perform better than they seem capable of, to bring out whatever strength there is in its members, and to use each man's strength to help all the others perform. The purpose of an organization is to enable common men to do uncommon things.¹

One of the problems in the church today is its failure to function as a team. Too frequently we have situations where a few people, often very gifted, are trying to do all or most of the work. This is completely contrary to Scripture and always leads, at least eventually, to inefficiency and failure biblically speaking, even when there is apparent success. No matter how gifted or capable, the ones who think they need no one else or that they are fundamentally indispensable, are immature. No person is an island. A teamwork mentality is another one of the litmus test qualities of maturity.

Our Model: The Lord Jesus Taught Teamwork

Again, as with each of the qualities we've discussed, the Lord Jesus always comes to the front as our perfect example and teacher. That is no less true regarding the issue of *teamwork* and I say that because of who He is as the God-man Savior. One might think that Jesus, of all people, would not have enlisted the help of others to accomplish the things the Father had sent Him to do. This One who could still the storms, raise the dead, heal the sick, make the blind see and the lame walk, bind the demonic, forgive sin, and even call ten thousand angels to his aid still enlisted a team of men, a small band of disciples. However, it is significant that, rather than the religious elite or hotshots of the day, the Lord selected common men that we might describe as a rather motley group. Robert Coleman described them as follows:

By any standard of sophisticated culture then and now they would surely be considered as a rather ragged aggregation of souls. One might wonder how Jesus could ever use them. They were impulsive, temperamental, easily offended, and had all the prejudices of their environment. In short, these men selected by the Lord to be his assistants represented an average cross section of the lot of society in their day. Not the kind of group one would expect to win the world for Christ.²

But with the exception of Judas, the Lord saw in these men the potential for turning the world right side up as they grew in their relationship with Him and as they would learn to work together as a team for the kingdom of God. Thus, at the very outset of His ministry Christ called a small team of twelve men to be with Him for training and to whom He also delegated responsibilities (see Mark 1:14-18; 3:13-19). Jesus' team of disciples was hardly the epitome of success in the early part of their ministry, but after the Lord's ascension and the coming of the Spirit of

¹ Peter F. Drucker, *Management* (HarperCollins), *Reader's Digest*, p. 209.

² Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, Fleming H. Revell, Old Tappan, J.J., 1963, p. 23.

God, history demonstrates how this first-century team of men became tremendously successful as they went forth to spread the message of the gospel. They not only led people to Christ, but invested and multiplied themselves in others in a great team effort. Thus, by His very methods, the Lord Jesus illustrates the indispensable principle of teamwork and being a team player. If we are to grow, mature, and follow in His footsteps, we must learn to become team players whether leaders or followers.

Definitions and Explanations

Simply put, a *team* is a group organized to work together for a common goal or project. *Team effort* is the cooperative effort by the members of a group or team to achieve a common goal, and a *team player* is one who does his best to do his part in cooperation with the other members of the team. A team player does not seek to be a one-man show, but works together with his teammates and relies on their skills and abilities as he seeks to use his own abilities and gifts in a cooperative way.

From a biblical standpoint, *teamwork* means sharing in the biblical responsibilities based on biblical goals, values, priorities, giftedness, training, and God's leading. This will be amplified in what follows.

The New Testament Model: The Church, the Body of Christ

The nature and character of the church is far too extensive to be exhausted in the meaning of the single term "church" (*ekkle,sia*, "a called out assembly"). Because of this the New Testament writers employed numerous descriptive expressions to describe its manifold meaning and significance. They portrayed the truth of the church both in literal and in rich metaphorical descriptions. Such a richness of descriptions precludes a narrow concept of the church and warns against magnification of one aspect to the disregard of the others. When we do this, it generally results in imbalance and hurt to the body of Christ. It has been estimated that there are some 80 plus images of the church. But perhaps none are so instructive as are the **seven images or figures** of the church that are **directly related** to the Lord Jesus.³ These seven demonstrate how vital He is to the church corporately and individually in the way they demonstrate how the church is related, dependent, and responsible to Him. But one of the most instructive figures is that of Christ as the head of the body, the church (Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:12-16; 5:23; Col. 1:18, 24; 2:19). This beautiful picture as portrayed in these verses stress:

1. the **leadership**, authority and **preeminence** of Christ as the head of the body,
2. the **unity** of the body, one body of mutually adapted parts working together as a team, as one,
3. the **diversity** of the body, a diversity of abilities and gifts varying in function, in strength, and in honor, yet every singly one a vital and needed part of the body,
4. the **mutuality** of the body, each member being dependent on all the other members as are the members of the human body—no man is an island, and thus,
5. the **necessity** of the growth, care, and function of each member of the body as part of the team.

Further, other terms used in the New Testament to describe Christians and their activity as "fellow heirs," "fellow members," "fellow partakers," and "working together" all speak of the fact that we are a body of people united together by our common salvation in Christ, each blessed with every spiritual blessing and complete in Christ, and under His sovereign headship and authority. This means we are not only sharers together in the blessings of salvation, but also in the calling of the gospel from the standpoint of Christ-like character and His goals, purposes, and the ministry we are to have together. It means we are a team, a body, a family, a fellowship or partnership.

As fellow members together of one body, every Christian becomes a co-member of the one body of Christ. Being likened to the human body means the church is a spiritual organism. It is made up of many members while possessing a oneness or unity. Thus, regardless of background, nationality, or social status, every believer becomes a co-member and is essential to the function of the body or the church. There are no unimportant members (1 Cor.

³ The seven figures of Christ and the church are (1) The Last Adam and the New Creation, (2) the Shepherd and the Sheep, (3) the Head and the Body, (4) the Bridegroom and the Bride, (5) the Foundation and Chief Cornerstone and the Superstructure, (6) the High Priest and the Royal Priesthood, and (7) the Vine and the Branches.

12:12f). Just as it is physically impossible to divide a human body without detrimental results, so any division or distinctions made between Jew and Gentile or any other man-made distinctions does serious harm to the function of the church in carrying out its goal to the praise of God's glory and to its ministry to one another in the world.

The emphasis of the New Testament, therefore, is on unity, not distinction. One of the basic skills we pick up from our youth is how to make distinctions based on our prejudices, likes, cultural habits, and opinions. This creates disunity rather than unity and nullifies or destroys our capacity for effective teamwork. The emphasis of Scripture is on a unified body working together in **unity**. When disunity occurs, the result is not only discord in the body of Christ (the church, God's spiritual team) but the inability of a church to follow the headship of Christ and to function as a coordinated team.

In Colossians 1:18-20, the apostle Paul stresses the preeminence of Christ as the head of the body, the church:

18 He is the head of the body, the church, as well as the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead so that he himself may become first in all things. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him 20 and through him to reconcile all things to himself by making peace through the blood of his cross—whether things on the earth or things in heaven.

Then, building on this truth, in Colossians 3:1-17 Paul gave us some very practical teaching that is pertinent to effective team effort, especially verses 10-15.

...and have been clothed with the new man that is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the one who created it. 11 Here (literally, "where there is neither") there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free (i.e., no human distinctions like race or human religion or social status), but Christ is all and in all (again cf. 1:18f). 12 Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if someone happens to have a complaint against anyone else. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you too forgive others. 14 And to all these virtues, add love which is the perfect bond. 15 Let the peace of Christ be in control in your heart, for you were in fact called to this peace, and be thankful.

First, verses 1-4 show us that Christ is the very source and sphere of our life and security. Consequently, based on our new life in Christ, there is to be radical character change—transformed behavior patterns through daily renewal in the Word and our new life in Christ (3:5-10).

Verse 11 is literally, "where there is neither Greek nor Jew, ..." In other words,

The new man lives in a new environment where all racial, national, religious, cultural and social distinctions are no more. Rather, Christ is now all that matters and in all who believe. The statement is one of the most inclusive in the New Testament and is amply supported by the preeminence of Christ in New Testament theology.⁴

With Christ as the preeminent one and the new center of the Christian's life, this new life in Christ means that all man-made distinctions have been removed. There is now a new basis for our attitudes and actions concerning ourselves and others and our life together in service and worship as those called to work together as a team, as a coordinated body (3:11-17).

The implications of this are awesome. This means: (1) All racial, past religious associations, social and economic distinctions have been permanently removed because Christ is all and in all. (2) Thus, Christ is to become the complete source of the life of each believer. He is not only the source of salvation, but the source of all our relationships together, our ministry and worship together and the source of our identity and feelings about who we are. (3) In the past as unbelievers, our identity and sense of self-worth was derived from the **typical human distinctions** of race, religion, social and economic status, physical size, IQ, education, awards, degrees and you name it. In other words, such distinctions of the past became one's means or were a part of one's strategy for finding significance and security, which naturally negatively impacts teamwork.

⁴ S. Lewis Johnson, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Dallas, Texas: Dallas Theological Seminary, Electronic edition by Galaxie Software, 1999.

Why does this impact teamwork? Because of what these human distinctions create! They create discord, competition, partiality, playing the game of “spiritual king of the mountain,” and feelings of inferiority or superiority, or security or insecurity. All of this works against unity and the glory of God and a daily faith that rests in who we are in the Lord Jesus. Why? Because one’s focus and trust is in these human distinctions rather than in the Savior who is all and in all.

This “no distinction” mental attitude comes out of the process of doctrinal and spiritual renewal according to the new man created in the image of Christ. It comes from who and what we are in Him who is all and in all as the preeminent head of the body. The point is that Christ must become the standard and source by which we are to grow, for how we think about and see ourselves and others, for how we treat others, and how we serve together.

But there is another truth here that is vital to good teamwork or to the proper function of the body of Christ—the **Contribution of the Grace of Diversity**. The truth of the body of Christ also stresses that unity and the absence of distinctions do not mean sameness. While we are part of the one body of Christ, we are each different just as the members of the human body are different for the sake of the orderly and effective function of the body. *This difference, however, is grace given* so we never have a cause for boasting or jealousy which always harms unity and the orderly function of the body of Christ. It harms the function of the body as a team as well as its government under Christ’s headship and the leadership He gives to His church.

This means there must be the recognition of the special abilities and limitations of others by individuals and leaders alike so people can be placed in jobs where they can do their best in cooperation with the rest of the team. Thus, part of the responsibility of the church through its leadership involves first the ability to appreciate the gifts and abilities of a variety of people and then the ability to help them find places of ministry in accordance with their own giftedness, personalities, and God’s specific leading. Because we too often fail to do this, we end up with the futile exercise of attempting to fit square pegs into round holes. Churches and their leaders must help the members of the body of Christ work to their strengths rather than their weaknesses.

This truth is especially vital to the leadership of churches and organizations. Too often we end up with ten percent of the people attempting to do ninety percent of the work, which is both futile and disheartening and a travesty on the body/team principle of the New Testament. There are, of course, many reasons for this—a poor or unbiblical philosophy of the ministry including the *Clergy Mentality*, a lack of strong Bible teaching, and a failure of those in leadership to delegate responsibility.

“The degree to which a leader is able to delegate work is a measure of his success.” It has been rightly contended that a one-person activity can never grow bigger than the greatest load that one person can carry. Some leaders feel threatened by brilliant subordinates and therefore are reluctant to delegate authority.

The man in a place of leadership who fails to delegate is constantly enmeshed in a morass of secondary detail that not only overburdens him but deflects him from his primary responsibilities. He also fails to release the leadership potential of those under him. To insist on doing things oneself because it will be done better is not only a short-sighted policy but may be evidence of an unwarranted conceit. The leader who is meticulous in observing priorities adds immeasurably to his own effectiveness.⁵

Dwight L. Moody had the right perspective. He once said that he would rather put a thousand men to work than do the work of a thousand men. As we have seen, the Lord Jesus, after a night of prayer (Luke 6:12), chose twelve disciples, poured Himself into them, and ultimately put thousands to work doing the Father’s business.

The Benefits of Teamwork: Some Biblical Illustrations

An old Swedish motto says, “Shared joy is double joy. Shared sorrow is half the sorrow.” The secret to life is not simply enjoying life’s joys and enduring its sorrows, but being involved in both with others like co-workers or team members working together—rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep (Rom. 12:15). There are many benefits of good teamwork, but a few biblical examples will help to clarify some of the issues.

⁵ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1967, 1980, p. 168.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two people are better than one person, because they can enjoy a better benefit from their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his companion; but pity the person who falls down and has no one to help him up. 11 Furthermore, if two lie together, they can keep each other warm; but how can one person keep warm by himself? 12 Although an assailant may overpower one person who is alone, two would be able to withstand him. Moreover, a three-fold cord is not quickly broken.

With great wisdom, Solomon addresses those who would seek to handle life or ministry alone. It's risky business and very unwise. The passage can be divided into two sections: a statement of the basic principle (vs. 9) and the reasons the principle is true (vss. 10-12).

1. A Statement of the Basic Principle (vs. 9a) with the Basic Reason (vs. 9b)

Following on the heels of the discussion of one who works alone (vss. 7-8), who works selfishly only for himself and with no one for support or fellowship, verse 9a points us a basic principle of life, "Two people are better than one person." We are quickly reminded of God's pronouncement in Genesis 2:18, "it is not good for man to be alone." Even when man was walking in the beauty of the Garden of Eden and in the presence of God, he could not be happy without a mate, a helper fitted to him. People who are happily married, especially when living according the principles of Scripture, can truly relate to this truth. However, this is a truth that is true for all, married or unmarried.

But why are two better off than one? Verse 9b explains—simply "because they can enjoy a better benefit from their toil." The abilities of one compliment and make up for the needs and weaknesses of the other and vice versa.

We gain perspective by having somebody at our side. We gain objectivity. We gain courage in threatening situations. Having others near tempers our dogmatism and softens our intolerance. We gain another opinion. We gain what today, in our technical world is called "input."

In other words, it is better not to work or live one's life all alone. It's better not to minister all alone. It's better to have someone alongside us in the battle. For that reason, during my days in the Marines, we were taught that if the command "dig in" were issued, we should dig a hole large enough for two.⁶

Here again the Lord Jesus is our example. He never sent the disciples out alone. He sent them out two by two. Even when He wanted the upper room prepared for the last Passover, He sent more than one.

2. Other Reasons Why Two Are Better Than One (vss. 10-12)**a. We Need Mutual Support Because We are Weak (vs. 10)**

In the statement, "If one falls down, his friend can help him up," we are confronted with our natural human weakness. If we were not weak and prone to stumbling, we would never fall down in the first place. Further, because of our own weaknesses and the nature of a world around us that is often very hostile, conditions often exist that make getting up after a fall sometimes difficult, so much so that it requires the aid of others. Here is an interesting story that illustrates how we need the support of others because of our inherent weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

According to *USA Today*, on Wednesday, November 23, 1994, a couple named Sandy and Theresa boarded TWA flight 265 in New York to fly to Orlando and see Disney World. Theresa was almost seven months pregnant. Thirty minutes into the flight, Theresa doubled over in pain and began bleeding. Flight attendants announced that they needed a doctor, and a Long Island internist volunteered.

Theresa soon gave birth to a boy. But the baby was in trouble. The umbilical cord was wrapped tightly around the neck, and he wasn't breathing. His face was blue.

Two paramedics rushed forward to help, one of whom specialized in infant respiratory procedures. He asked if anyone had a straw, which he wanted to use to suction fluid from the baby's lungs. The

⁶ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living On The Ragged Edge, Coming to Terms With Reality*, Word Books, Waco, 1985, p. 134.

plane did not stock straws, but a flight attendant remembered having a straw left over from a juice box she had brought on board the plane. The paramedic inserted the straw in the baby's lungs as the internist administered CPR. The internist asked for something he could use to tie off the umbilical cord. A passenger offered a shoelace.

Four minutes of terror passed. Then the little baby whimpered. Soon the crew was able to joyfully announce that it was a boy, and everyone on board cheered and clapped.

The parents gave the little boy the name Matthew. Matthew means "Godsent." The people on board the plane "were all godsend," the father said.

Indeed, God had met the need through people that gave what they had and did what they could. God usually meets needs through people.⁷

What a different outcome if Theresa had been alone where no one could have come to her aid. This is what Ecclesiastes refers to when it adds, "but pity (or woe to) the person who falls down and has no one to help him up." A lot of difficulties were overcome in these few tense minutes on Flight 265, but through the care and team effort of those on board, the story had a happy ending.

So also, when a person stumbles spiritually, that person needs those (note the plural and the team effort focus) who will come along and help him or her get out of the ditch into which he or she has fallen. Someone has said, "When one finds himself in a hole, the first thing needed is to stop digging," but one also needs to find help from others. So Paul wrote:

Brothers and sisters, if a person is discovered in some sin (i.e., if a person has stumbled in sin), you who are spiritual restore (both the pronoun "you" and the verb "restore" are plural in the Greek text) such a person in a spirit of gentleness. Pay close attention to yourselves, so that you are not tempted too. ² Carry one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:1-2).

b. Mutual Support Because We are Vulnerable (vs. 11)

Furthermore, if two lie together, they can keep each other warm; but how can one person keep warm by himself?

Again, because of the nature of the fallen world in which we live, we are all vulnerable to the elements and different conditions for which we need others. It may just be their presence as with the warmth of another human body or even that of an animal when its cold. I remember reading of a little boy who wandered off and became lost in the woods in the winter. The temperature was below freezing but he had his dog with him. When he was found, he had made it through the night by snuggling up in the leaves with his big old dog.

Because of the problems we may face, we also need others because of their skill, gifts, and expertise. Ships at sea or those moving up and down our large rivers are vulnerable to many forms of danger that require the teamwork of the whole crew.

A sea captain and his chief engineer were arguing over who was most important to the ship. To prove their point to each other, they decided to swap places. The chief engineer ascended to the bridge, and the captain went to the engine room.

Several hours later, the captain suddenly appeared on deck covered with oil and dirt. "Chief!" he yelled, waving aloft a monkey wrench. "You have to get down there: I can't make her go.!"

"Of course you can't," replied the chief, "She's aground!"

On a team we don't excel each other; we depend on each other.⁸

c. Mutual Support Because We Have Assailants (vs. 12)

⁷ Craig Brian Larson, *contemporary Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Writers*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 81.

⁸ Larson, p. 256.

Although an assailant may overpower one person who is alone, two would be able to withstand him. Moreover, a three-fold cord is not quickly broken.

Every Christian should be able to identify with this. Scripture teaches us we all face three great assailants, the devil against us who walks about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Pet. 5:8), the sinful nature within us that opposes a walk by God's Spirit (Gal. 5:16-17), and a hostile world system that stands against us (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 2:16; Gal. 1:4). This is a constant issue for every Christian and for which we need the team effort of the body of Christ. While every Christian is responsible to put on the full armor of God (Eph. 6:10-17), we also need the support of the body of Christ as fellow soldiers to aid one another against these assailants. We see this when Paul concludes this call to put on our spiritual armor by writing,

With every prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit, and to this end being alert, with all perseverance and requests for all the saints. Pray for me, that I may be given the message when I begin to speak—that I may confidently make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may be able to speak boldly as I ought to speak (Ephesians 6:18-20).

Finally, Ecclesiastes 4:12 adds, "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." The point is that if two are better than one, if two can help in our weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and against our assailants, then how much better (as with the story of Flight 265) to have more—to have three or four or even more working together on the team.

A good illustration is 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 where the apostle deals with the prophetic subject of the Day of the Lord. Here he teaches us that our understanding of the prophetic word should mark us out as a distinct people just as cream is separated from milk. We are not of this world which is dominated by sin and Satan, just as the Savior is not. This should show itself in the moral quality of our lives, in our values, priorities, and pursuits. Paul uses several analogies in this passage to illustrate this: light versus darkness, sleep versus alertness, drunkenness versus soberness, and wrath versus deliverance. But the point is, biblical prophecy is not designed to satisfy our curiosity or desire for the sensational. In view of what it means spiritually, it is designed to motivate Christians to holy living. But this is greatly enhanced by the important equation, one plus one equals survival or victory. So he concludes with these exhortations:

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, just as you are in fact doing. Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who labor among you and preside over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them most highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the undisciplined, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient toward all (1 Thess. 5:11-14).

Exodus 18:1-27

An outstanding illustration of the importance of the team principle and of the need for delegation of responsibility and authority is the advice given to Moses by Jethro, his son-in-law, in Exodus 18. Sanders writes:

In essence, the nation of Israel had emerged from their slavery in Egypt as an unorganized horde. But gradually, as a new national spirit was beginning to take shape through the leadership of Moses, they began to become more and more organized. As so often happens, organization can lead to an unbearable workload if there is not proper delegation. And this happened with Moses. From morning to evening he sat making judgments and this kept him from taking care of his primary responsibilities. On seeing these conditions and the strain it put on Moses and the people, Jethro gave Moses some very wise advice. Let's note the interchange between Jethro and Moses.

13 The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. 14 When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you **alone** sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?" (emphasis mine)

15 Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. 16 Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws."

17 Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. 18 You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.

Wise advice! The principle is simply that there are "limits to the expenditure of physical and nervous force beyond which it is not safe to go."⁹ Furthermore, Moses' approach was inefficient. It was impossible for one man to meet the needs of all the people. By delegating and sharing responsibility, Moses could speed up the process, meet the needs of the people, and they could go about their own business as a satisfied people (v. 23).

Jethro then proceeded to point Moses to the path of delegation so the nation could experience the blessings of teamwork. He said:

19 Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. 20 Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. 21 But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. 22 Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. 23 If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."

In this advice we see three vital principles. First, without God's presence and enablement, all the delegation in the world will be ineffective. We need God's hand on whatever is done. Second, we must work to our primary responsibilities according to the gifts and leading of the Lord. For Moses, this was teaching the people God's decrees and laws and showing them the way to live. Third, for Moses to accomplish God's primary will he must delegate the other needs by selecting qualified people to aid in the tasks at hand.

Moses response is not only refreshing, but it illustrates true spiritual maturity and humility.

24 Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. 25 He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. 26 They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves.

Lesser and immature men, out of foolish pride, would have resented Jethro's input and advice and would have told Jethro to mind his own business. But seeing the wisdom of this advice, Moses immediately put it into practice to the benefit of the nation.

Acts 6:1-7 is a New Testament illustration of this same principle.

1 Now in these days, when the disciples were growing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Greek-speaking Jews against the native Hebraic Jews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 2 So the twelve called the whole group of the disciples together and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to wait on tables. 3 But carefully select from among you, brothers, seven men who are well-attested, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this necessary task. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word." 5 The proposal pleased the entire group, so they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a Jewish convert from Antioch. 6 They stood these men before the apostles, who prayed and placed their hands on them. 7 The word of God continued to spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.

Many other passages give witness to the important principle of teamwork and the team mind-set as not only a vital principle for life, but as a quality of spiritual maturity. See also Ephesians 4:12-16; 1 Timothy 4:13f; 2 Timothy 2:2.

⁹ Sanders, p. 170.

Practical Suggestions For Good Teamwork

First, if we are going to function as a good team member, it would be wise to examine our own lives to determine what God has called us to do as a member of His team, the body of Christ. For this we should know ourselves (our gifts, talents, abilities, training, burdens, etc.) examine our motives, seek input from others, and prayerfully seek God leading (Rom. 12:1-8).

Second, it would also seem wise to take inventory periodically and examine where our priorities ought to be according to the standards or guidelines of the Word. Our responsibilities and priorities change to some degree through the various stages and circumstances of life—and circumstances can change and may move us in a very different direction with regard to what we do as members of the body of Christ. This is easily seen through the various stages of life. Parents of small children have responsibilities and priorities that might keep them from serving in certain spheres or at least keep them from serving to greater degrees. But once the children are out of the nest these can change drastically. Changing health conditions may also revamp the direction of one's ministry.

Third, the needs seem overwhelming, but we can each do just so much. A basic principle we should remember is that *the need does not constitute the call*. There are infinitely more needs than we can each handle. The actions of the Lord Jesus in Mark 1:32-39 provide us with a wonderful example. We will let the passage speak for itself.

When it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered by the door. So he healed many sick with various diseases and drove out many demons. But he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him

Then Jesus got up in the darkness of the early morning and went out to a deserted place, and there he spent time in prayer. Simon and his companions searched for him. When they found him, they said, "Everyone is looking for you." He answered, "Let us go elsewhere, into the surrounding villages, so that I can preach there too. For that is what I came to do." So he went into all of Galilee preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

This principle, however, must never be used as an excuse to avoid responsibilities in the things God has called us to do.

Fourth, the issue for every team member is simply, what position is God calling me to play and what are some guide lines to help determine that?

(a) Take inventory of priorities: We must take on ministry according to God's priorities and not on the basis of peer pressure or false guilt. As mentioned, Moses did this at the advice of Jethro and the apostles did this in Acts 6. Biblical priorities would naturally include putting God first and one's relationship with Him, and then, out of that relationship, caring for one's family, getting involved in a local church or other ministries in the neighborhood or community (1 Tim. 3:1f).

(b) Burden: We should ask, "Where are my concerns, what does the Lord seem to be burdening me with?" A good example might be Paul's response to what he saw in Athens (see Acts 17:16f; 16:6-10). Then, in going to Macedonia, Paul and his cohorts walked past one need after another because God had directed them to Macedonia rather than Asia.

(c) What are my gifts, abilities, training, interests? Can I get training in the area of my interests? How does my age and health fit into the scheme of things?

(d) What needs could I get involved in? Where am I needed according to the above guidelines.

(e) If uncertain about your gifts, get involved on a trial basis. The trial is not to ministry, but to a specific ministry. We are all called to ministry. The trial is to a particular ministry for the purpose of discernment.

Fifth, we should also note that God is not calling all of us to minister in a local church. He may be calling some to minister outside the church. Some may be able to do both to some degree, but there should be one main focus.

Finally, when our ministry gets too big, or if we see other potential ministries, rather than jump in and overload ourselves, we need to pray for and enlist help to share in the responsibilities. If help doesn't come, then God is not ready or is not in the project. So WAIT!

The Importance of Delegation and Sharing Responsibilities to the Team Process

When We Fail to Delegate¹⁰

(1) It manifests shortsightedness. Without shared responsibility, we fail to discover and develop the potential of others and fail to allow the body of Christ to function according to the gifts of God. When Moses followed Jethro's advice, the unknown talents of many in Israel were discovered.

(2) It manifests conceit. We think no one can replace us or do it as well as I can. It may also manifest fear—someone will take my spotlight or do it better than I do it or if I do not do it, I'll be criticized. As Sanders points out, "It is often a mistake to assume more duties than we can adequately and satisfactorily discharge. There is no virtue in doing more than our fair share of the work. It is good to recognize and accept our own limitations."¹¹

(3) It hinders our own effectiveness. As mentioned, D.L. Moody said he would rather put a thousand men to work than do the work of a thousand men. Without this we become entangled in a morass of detail and secondary things that prohibit us from functioning in our primary responsibilities. When the apostles insisted on the selection of qualified men to care for the neglected widows, they were able to concentrate on their primary responsibilities of prayer and the teaching of the Word. Many pastors today come to the pulpit ill prepared for this very reason.

(4) It causes burnout. We lose the joy of the Lord in the work God has called us to do. Serving the Lord with gladness is not only what God desires, but it makes serving a lot easier (cf. Ps. 100:2; Mark 6:30f; Ex. 18:17-18).

(5) It hinders the function of the body creating inactive members. If we go ahead and do it, others will not and can't. Ephesians 4 strongly stresses the principle of every member involvement as a part of the team (Eph. 4:12-16).

(6) It causes failure and the dissatisfaction of others because of the failure to get things done efficiently (again, compare Exodus 18 and Acts 6).

Blessings of Shared Responsibilities

1. We are able to concentrate on the greater obligations of our responsibilities.
2. Through shared responsibilities, we discover the latent and often unsuspected talents of others.
3. The problem of dissatisfaction is stifled by greater efficiency in the ministry or organization.
4. It helps train others for the future.
5. It protects against burnout and frustration.
6. It improves communication and understanding between the members of the body. More people understand what is happening and are involved with the process of ministry.
7. It provides a sense of teamwork and a sense that "I belong and am important to the body of Christ."

"One definition of leadership is the ability to recognize the abilities and limitations of others, combined with the capacity to fit each one into the job where he will do his best."¹²

Summary

First of all, understanding and acting on the principle of teamwork means recognizing that God has gifted each of us and called us to be part of a ministering team—the body of Christ. Second, it means becoming responsible for our **primary** responsibilities, the things we believe God is telling us to do according to our God given gifts, abilities, training, burden, and God's leading in our lives. Third, understanding the teamwork concept also means we must grasp the need to limit what we add into our schedule and workload so we can do quality work and avoid the inefficiency and harassment of overstretch. In other words, it means refusing to take on more than we can effectively

¹⁰ Much of the following is drawn from J. Oswald Sander's, *Spiritual Leadership*, pp. 168-171.

¹¹ Sanders, p. 171.

¹² Sanders, p 167.

handle for the sake of our priorities and God's leading, as did the apostles in Acts 6. Fourth, it means a willingness to share the workload and a willingness to be involved in being trained and in training and/or enlisting others as needed under the principle of careful selectivity according to biblical standards (Ex. 18:21, 25; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Tim. 3:1f; Tit. 1:5f).

Conclusion

We live in a work ethic society where people are measured and tend to measure themselves in terms of busyness or quantity. They put quantity and activity over quality. The focus needs to be not just on the **product**, but on the **process**. If the process is right, the product will be right both in quality and in quantity. The point is that God has called each of us to ministry and service (1 Pet. 4:10,11), but He has also called us first of all to be with Him, to know him more deeply. Then out of that personal relationship/fellowship He has called us to serve in the strength of His might (Mk. 3:13, 14, 15; Col. 1:27-2:2). The emphasis is on quality of life—the process—taking root downward and bearing fruit upward (Isa. 37:31). So, the mark of teamwork includes the need for a balanced life. In some cases, doing less, but doing it better—quality and not just quantity. Perhaps we can say that one of the acid tests for maturity, whether in a place of leadership or otherwise, is one's willingness to either delegate responsibility or accept responsibility as part of God's team.

In our fast-paced, activity-oriented society today, this has become even more difficult. Many people become "workaholics" by becoming over committed financially, by making unrealistic plans, or simply by failing to recognize a compulsive need to work to prove something to one's self or to others. We have all either known or heard of those who worked to prove something to a parent who never seemed to accept a child or be satisfied with their performance. Many people use work as an escape for their loneliness or unhappiness, or because they are afraid of allowing others to get too close. Thus, many people become so driven by these underlying and compulsive needs that they exclude what should be their priorities and the priorities of the team by overwork.

It is most unfortunate that we deplore drug and alcoholic addicts, but somehow promote and admire the work addict. We give him status and accept his estimate of himself. And all the while his family may be getting so little of his time and energy that they hardly know him.

Over work is not the disease itself. It is the symptom of a deeper problem—of tension, of inadequacy, of a need to achieve that may have neurotic implications.... Such a person also is usually defending against having to get close to people.¹³

The workaholic behavior will not only work against the team effort, but is destructive to one's own spiritual well being and effectiveness.

By contrast, in a true team environment, there will be freedom to develop one's gifts and abilities, to be innovative, to share ideas, but also to make mistakes and learn from one another. In addition, there will be an environment where each team member feels loved, supported, and affirmed. Rather than suspicion and put-downs, there will be a trust that builds a team spirit or comradeship. Not only will stress be held to a minimum, but there will be an excitement or enthusiasm about what God is doing in and through the team.

¹³ Ted W. Engstrom, *The Making of a Christian Leader*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976, pp. 117-118).

Mark #16: Accountability

Introduction

The apostle Paul warns the Christian community against the evil of judging one another concerning certain doubtful or debatable practices¹ where one Christian holds one opinion and another a different opinion. He then concludes this portion of his argument with a reminder of every Christian's accountability at the Judgment Seat of God. He writes:

But why do you judge your brother or sister? Or again, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11 For it is written, "***As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give praise to God.***" 12 Therefore, each of us will give an account of himself to God (Rom 14:10-12)..

The stark reality of Scripture is that every person, Christian and non-Christian, is accountable before a sovereign God (see Rom. 3:9-19) and will one day have to bow before Christ (Phil. 2:9-11). Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be asked" (Luke 12:48b). Many reject this declaration of Scripture by all manner of human rationalizations and bias, but their rejection cannot alter the reality of accountability.

Jesus emphatically taught that a day of judgment is coming when every person will have to give an account. For instance, in a context where the Pharisees had spoken evil of Jesus by attributing His miracle to Satan, Jesus condemned them as a brood of vipers who could never say anything good since their hearts were evil. He then went on to make the point that people are responsible for all their actions and words, which will acquit or condemn them on the day of judgment. In Matthew 12:36 He said, "I tell you that on the day of judgment, people will give an account for every worthless word they speak."

Unfortunately, however, man is a rebel who wants to do his own thing without any or very little accountability for his actions. Since the fall of man (Gen. 3), this has been the case, but a worldwide phenomenon of our day is a defiance of any form of established authority whether religious or secular, social or political. This sad reality has colored the beliefs and actions of our present society worldwide. Without a sense of accountability to a sovereign God, the world can quickly gravitate in the direction of the ruthless acts and tyranny of people like Hitler. When God either does not exist in the beliefs of men or when the truth about God is distorted into man's own image of who and what God is like, everything is permitted, morally speaking.

Today, we live in a time when, having fundamentally rejected the absolutes and clear teachings of Scripture, man seeks to make God accountable to him for his comfort and pleasure. Thus, people are not only doing what is right in their own eyes, but the prevailing attitude is 'Do your own thing. You are only accountable to yourself and your own self-fulfillment.' This is a shift from a God-centered perspective of life to a man-centered perspective. This is all part of man's attempt to dismiss any accountability to God. The reality is that when men seek to ignore accountability to God and others, they leave themselves vulnerable to the cold misery of slavery and eventually to the menace of a dictator.

Accountability to God and to one another according to the directives of Scripture is the foundation for freedom and liberty. But what is true freedom and wherein lies its source? Freedom is not the right to do as one pleases as a capricious child. Certainly it means the capacity to exercise choice, but never so that it is devoid of responsibility or accountability. Freedom is both the responsibility and the ability, by the grace of God, to do what is right according to the absolute and righteous standards of truth as given to us in God's Holy Word. Many see freedom as the right to abandon accountability to God and men in order to do what they please in the promotion of self gratification. But that is not freedom. It is slavery, or at least leads to slavery. Speaking of false teachers who either twist Scripture to their own self-centered objectives or deny its authority altogether, Peter writes, "...promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved" (2 Pet. 2:19).

¹ Debatable practices refers to those things that are not specified as wrong by the Scripture.

Beliefs or one's world view always has consequences. It is like a train which is free to do what it was created to do as long as it is on its track.

Accountability is one of the means God uses to bring about solid growth and maturity with the freedom to be what God has created us for. But as we've just stressed, the problem is that we live in a society that has become very individualistic. The prevailing attitude is be your own man or woman, do your own thing, be your own boss, and often this attitude is promoted or stated in a way that undermines accountability to God and others. The Bible in no way denies our individualism. Indeed, it promotes it, but in a way that holds us each accountable to others. Proper individualism leads to a certain amount of inventiveness, ingenuity, and freedom, but it can also breed license and irresponsibility without accountability. The fact is you can't make disciples or produce growing and mature Christians without accountability.

So again, true freedom is not the ability to do as one pleases, which is license, but the power by God's grace to do as one ought. But what do we mean by accountability?

The Meaning of Accountability, What it is

By accountability, we are not talking about coercive tactics, the invasion of privacy, or bringing others under the weight of someone's taboos or legalism or manipulative or dominating tactics. Rather, by accountability we mean developing relationships with other Christians that help to promote spiritual reality, honesty, obedience to God, and genuine evaluations of one's walk and relationship with God and with others. We are talking about relationships that help believers change by the Spirit of God and the truth of the Word of God through inward spiritual conviction and faith.

Being what we are, sheep that are prone to wander, accountability to others is simply one of the ways God holds us accountable to Him. Left to ourselves, there is the great temptation to do mainly what we want rather than what God wants and what is best for others. So what is meant by accountability? We are talking about teaching, exhorting, supporting, and encouraging one another in such a way that it promotes accountability to Christ and to others in the body of Christ, but never by manipulation or domination.

The Necessity of Accountability, Why we need it

In his book, *The Disciple Making Pastor*, Bill Hull writes about the need of accountability in the disciple-making process. He says,

To believe you can make disciples or develop true maturity in others without some form of accountability is like believing that you can raise children without discipline, run a company without rules, or lead an army without authority. Accountability is to the Great Commission what tracks are to a train.²

So, what are some of the reasons for establishing some form of accountability?

(1) Accountability is an essential part of a functional society. But even more importantly, the prototype for it is the Triune Godhead itself. Though the members of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are co-eternal and co-equal, each being God of very God, Scripture gives evidence of an accountability that exists within the Godhead. From the standpoint of the Holy Spirit, this is seen in the truth of the procession of the Spirit who proceeds from the Father through the Son to believers (see John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). The Spirit accepts His role as the Enabler or Comforter to come and indwell believers of the church age. As to the Son, He accepts His role as the suffering Savior of the world first by becoming true humanity that He might die for our sin and then as our Advocate sit at God's right hand, etc. (see Phil. 2:5f; Heb. 10:5-10; Rom. 8:34f). But this accountability of the Son is also seen in Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 3:23; 11:3, and 15:24-28.

And when all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

This in no way implies that the Son is inferior to the Father. Rather, it shows that when death is conquered at the close of the Millennium, then all things will come under the administration of the triune Godhead. This concept is

² Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Pastor*, Fleming H. Revell, Old Tappan, New Jersey, 1988, p. 159.

illustrated in a corporation in which there are three equal owners, but for the sake of the orderly function and effectiveness of the company and by the agreement of each partner, one is elected president of the company with other two serving as vice presidents. Each has different roles and responsibilities and the things they are accountable for.

(2) Accountability helps to promote biblical controls or checks and balances. It provides the necessary *discipline and support* needed to see people reach godly goals. While we are all ultimately accountable to God, as stressed in Romans 14:7-12, God has established other levels of accountability to aid us in the matter of control, support, and growth.

God has given the Word and the Holy Spirit as His agents of control to help provide direction and controls on our lives, but accountability to other believers becomes another key instrument to aid in bringing about self-discipline and inner controls.

(3) Accountability is necessary because like sheep we tend to go our own way. We are all self-willed. We want to protect our comfort zones and avoid having to deal with certain issues that are important to becoming obedient Christians, which is one of the goals of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20). Making disciples means teaching others to obey the Lord and this is very difficult without some measure of accountability. Accountability is part of the means God uses, as will be demonstrated below.

(4) Accountability promotes servant-like leadership in keeping with the pastoral mandate to watch over the flock (Eph. 4:11f; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). One of the key requirements of a servant leader is faithfulness to the things entrusted to him (1 Cor. 4:1-2). So, in 1 Timothy 2:2, Paul told Timothy to entrust what he had learned to what kind of men? To faithful men. The fact he was to selectively train only faithful men suggests accountability. Is it not a strange paradox that we generally accept accountability in most aspects of life as something which is necessary, but when it comes to the body of Christ, many fight accountability, especially, if it begins to affect their comfort zones or their self-willed agendas.

(5) Accountability is protective to both leaders and to the flock. The biblical model for church leadership is a collective leadership of elders which provides a structure for genuine accountability.

Shared, brotherly leadership provides needed restraint on pride, greed, and “playing,” to quote Earl D. Radmacher, ... Human leaders, even Christian ones, are sinners and they only accomplish God’s will imperfectly. Multiple leaders, therefore, will serve as a ‘check and balance’ on each other and serve as a safeguard against the very human tendency to play God over other people.”³

Shared leadership provides close accountability, genuine partnership, and peer relationships—the very things imperial pastors shrink from at all costs.⁴

As to the flock, Hebrews 13:17 tells the flock to submit to their leaders because they keep watch over the souls of God’s people. People too often understand this primarily in a negative way, but keeping watch not only means correcting people when they fail to walk with the Lord, but helping them to do so. As will be shown below, the goal of accountability is not riding herd over people like a task master—something completely contrary to Scripture. Rather, the goal is to help people grow in Christ and learn to find Him as the source and force and course of life.

The Justification for Accountability, It is biblical

There are numerous New Testament passages which teach the concept of accountability of the flock to the leaders (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:1-5; Heb. 13:7, 17; 1 Pet. 5:2-3). But the elders are limited in their capacity to effectively promote accountability throughout the body of Christ. As the Lord was focused on only a few, the twelve and then the three, so the leaders should follow his example. The need for accountability goes beyond the leadership and falls into the realm of the “one another” concept of the New Testament.

³ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership, an Urgent Call To Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, Lewis and Roth Publishers, Littleton, CO, 1995, p. 43.

⁴ Strauch, p. 44.

Ephesians 5:21

and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

First, it should be noted that “submitting” is the fourth in a series of adverbial participles. These can be detected in most translations by words that end in “ing” beginning with verse 19. These participles are best understood as expressing the results of the filling by means of the Spirit (vs. 18). Submission, which certainly includes accountability, is applied to the whole body of Christ as a Spirit-produced and mutual responsibility to promote obedience to Christ.

“Submitting” is *hupotasso*, a military word used of soldiers submitting to their superior or slaves submitting to their masters. In the middle voice as here, it carries the idea of voluntarily submitting or subordinating oneself. As a specific application of the various areas of accountability, *hupotasso*, is applied in relation to God in 1 Corinthians 15:28, Hebrews 12:9, and James 4:7, to Christ in Ephesians 5:24, to wives in Ephesians 5:22, Colossians 3:18, Titus 2:5, and 1 Peter 3:1, to parents in Luke 2:51, to masters in Titus 2:9 and 1 Peter 2:18, to secular authorities in Romans 13:1, and in a general sense of a voluntary submission to others in the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 16:16, 1 Peter 5:5, and here in Ephesians 5:21. Included in the word ‘submission’ are the ideas of authority and accountability to another. “In Scripture it appears in contexts describing servanthood, humility, respect, reverence, honor, teachableness, and openness”⁵ and I might add, *accountability*. But we should quickly add that such submission or accountability is to bring about greater and greater obedience to the Savior as those first and foremost accountable to Him.

1 Peter 5:5

In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. And all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God *opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*.

In 1 Peter 5:5 we again meet with the word *hupotasso*. Here it is applied to younger men with older men of wisdom. But if accountability is going to work, there must be genuine humility toward one another (vs. 5b). Further, accountability with humility is related to humbling ourselves under God’s authority—its goal is becoming accountable to God.

1 Thessalonians 5:11

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, just as you are in fact doing.

Verse 11 uses two more terms which show the emphasis in the matter of accountability as believers minister to one another. “Encourage” is the Greek *parakaleo*. It means “to call along side to help, to enable, to comfort, exhort, encourage.” It is the verb form of the word used of the Holy Spirit as the comforter, encourager, helper, enabler, but the verb may also contain the idea of “exhort, appeal to, or challenge” to a certain behavior as in Romans 12:1; 15:30; 16:17. “Build up” is *oikodomeo*, “to build up, edify,” or “to restore, repair.” Accountability to one another always has as its goal the restoration and edification of others in their relationship with the Savior because we are all accountable to Him.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-14 (see also Heb. 13:7, 17)

Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who labor among you and preside over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them most highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, brothers and sisters, admonish the undisciplined, comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient toward all.

Verses 12-13 naturally point to a dual accountability. First, there is that of the leadership whom God holds responsible to care for His flock (Heb. 13:17). Then there is responsibility of the flock to submit to the leadership. These leaders, like shepherds, are responsible for the spiritual well being of the local church.

Verses 14-15 move us to the whole body and point to *three methods* by which we may help one another remain accountable to the Lord: by warning, encouraging, helping, and to *three distinct need groups*: the undisciplined, the discouraged, and the weak. From these verses we see how accountability has many faces or aspects as we learn to

⁵ Gene A. Getz, *Building Up One Another*, Victor Books, Wheaton, 1980, pp. 99-100.

reach out to one another, but the goal is being accountable to the Lord by helping one another relate our lives to Jesus Christ by faith. Finally, this entire passage which deals with accountability concludes with a general application to all, “be patient with all men” followed by a warning in verse 15 that includes the goal or objective, seeking the good of others.

As seen in the previous study on *Teamwork*, 1Corinthians 12:20f teaches Christians are members of one body, not independent agents. In that regard, we are responsible to each other within certain limits. The Lord is the head of the body and that includes each member, but He works through the various members of the body and accountability to one another is one of the ways He holds us accountable to Him.

Illustrations and Types of Accountability

Within the church, the body of Christ, there are a number of illustrations of the form in which accountability makes its shape in the process of making disciples.

(1) Paul with Timothy and Titus. If we each had a Timothy or a Titus, someone we are giving ourselves to, someone we are helping to grow, someone we are responsible for and who is responsible to us, certainly we would see a great deal more spiritual maturity and obedience.

(2) Paul and Barnabus. Paul had a Barnabus (a son of encouragement) with whom he could identify. Paul could go to him with problems and discouragement. He was someone with whom he could pray, or from whom he could get counsel, guidance, and encouragement. He was someone to give another viewpoint or perspective. As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.

(3) A team or small group. This is not just a prayer group or a Bible study, but a small group of men or women with whom to interact, share ideas, pain, burdens, and victories. It is a small group like the disciples of the Lord or like a board of elders, those with whom we can pray and discuss the Word together without fear of rejection.

(4) Marriage illustrates another place where accountability takes place. If we are married we need to develop our relationship with our spouses so we can share our problems and concerns with each other, discuss them, and get honest input without fear of rejection.

(5) The local church. The local church consists of overseers, those who are to be responsible for and accountable to the flock, and there is the flock, those who are to be accountable and responsible to their leaders as Hebrews 13:17 teaches.

(6) The Godhead. Finally, The Son Himself, though God of very God, is subject to or accountable to the Father (1 Cor. 11:3; 3:23; 15:24-28).

With this in mind, it would be well to think about how one can implement this more in one's own ministry. Mini-flocks provides an opportunity and team training another, but surely we need more accountability. One method is the buddy system where believers divide up into smaller groups of two or three who regularly meet for fellowship and input together.

Biblical Ways to Promote Accountability

An important question is what happens (or should happen) when a small team meets together?

Goals and objectives to promote Christ-like growth in measurable ways:

Meeting together is not just a time when good old boys meet to talk about fishing, football, or chew the fat. Here are some suggestions.

(1) Study: Part of the time should be spent around a portion of the Word, thinking together about what it means and how it applies.

(2) Prayer: This means it will be a time when the team shares needs and concerns. Pray together when you meet and covenant to pray for each other during the week.

(3) A schedule: Develop a schedule to give guidance in the use of time with the Lord, family, church, the team, etc.

(4) Report: Part of the team's time should be spent sharing how each member has been doing—the battles, victories, problems, temptations, etc. How each one has been able or not been able to keep to their schedule, prayer time, study, etc.

Some guidelines and warnings:

(1) Be honest and humble about struggles. Watch the tendency to protect those comfort zones and layers of self-protection.

(2) Be patient, and understanding. Don't come across as condemning. Maintain a spirit of acceptance of the other person. This does not mean there can't be challenge, exhortation, and even rebuke, but it must be done in love and with patience and acceptance.

(3) Guard your tongue. In keeping with the biblical goal, guard against gossip and being critical. What is shared must be kept in strict confidence. Each person needs to know they can trust the others. (Prov. 16:27; 17:4, 27; 18:8, 21; 21:23; 26:30).

(4) Be faithful or dependable. Do the study or other assignments, show up, follow through.

Conclusion

It was Howard Hendricks, professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, who said, "Every man should have three individuals in his life: a Paul, a Barnabas, and a Timothy."⁶ Naturally, this is applicable to both men and women, but for reasons of maintaining moral purity and to avoid temptation, such should be of the same sex. Hendricks continues:

A Paul is an older man who is willing to mentor you, to build into your life. Not someone who's smarter or more gifted than you, but somebody who's been down the road. Somebody willing to share his strengths and weaknesses—everything he's learned in the laboratory of life. Somebody whose faith you'll want to imitate.

A Barnabas is a soul brother, somebody who loves you but is not impressed by you. Somebody to whom you can be accountable. Somebody who's willing to keep you honest, who's willing to say, "Hey, man, you're neglecting your wife, and don't give me any guff!"

A Timothy is a younger man into whose life you are building. For a model, read 1 and 2 Timothy. Here was Paul, the quintessential mentor, building into the life of his protégé—affirming, encouraging, teaching, correcting, directing, praying.

Do you have these three guys in your life?⁷

In view of the fact the Christian life is a spiritual warfare, the following is a great illustration of the importance of having someone to accountable to.

In 1967 we were at war with Vietnam. And there I was, at the U.S. Army Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia. It was brutal.

I can still hear the raspy voice of the sergeant: "We are here to save your lives. We're going to see to it that you overcome all your natural fears. We're going to show you just how much incredible stress the human mind and body can endure. And when we're finished with you, you will be the U.S. Army's best!"

Then, before he dismissed the formation, he announced our first assignment. We'd steeled ourselves for something really tough—like running 10 miles in full battle gear or rappelling down a sheer cliff. Instead, he told us to—find a buddy.

⁶ Howard Hendricks, *Men of Integrity*, Vol. 1, No 1.

⁷ Hendricks.

“Find yourself a Ranger buddy,” he growled. “You will stick together. You will never leave each other. You will encourage each other, and, as necessary, you will carry each other.” It was the army’s way of saying, “Difficult assignments require a friend. Together is better.”

Who’s your “Ranger buddy”?⁸

⁸ Stu Weber, pastor of Good Shepherd Community Church in Boring, Oregon. *Men of Integrity*, Vol. 1, No. 1.

Mark #17: The Wisdom to Deal With Failure

Introduction

Everyone wants to be a success. I have never met anyone who purposely set out to be a failure. Undoubtedly, this is why so much has been written on the topic “How to be a Success” and why these books are so popular. I think it was Theodore Roosevelt who said, “The only man who never makes a mistake is the man who never does anything.” The simple reality is that failure is one of those ugly realities of life—a common experience to all of us to some degree. Thus, the ability to handle failure in its various forms and degrees is a vital part of the spiritual life and another sign of maturity. A careful study of the Bible reveals that most of the great figures of Scripture experienced failure at one time or another, yet those failures did not keep them from effective service for God. As a partial list, this was true of Abraham, Moses, Elijah, David, and Peter. Though they failed at some point, and often in significant ways, they not only recovered from their failure, but they used it as a tool of growth—they learned from their failure, confessed it to God, and were often able to be used in even mightier ways.

The manner in which a leader meets his own failure will have a significant effect on his future ministry. One would have been justified in concluding that Peter’s failure in the judgment hall had forever slammed the door on leadership in Christ’s kingdom. Instead, the depth of his repentance and the reality of his love for Christ reopened the door of opportunity to a yet wider sphere of service. “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.”

A study of Bible characters reveals that most of those who made history were men who failed at some point, and some of them drastically, but who refused to continue lying in the dust. Their very failure and repentance secured for them a more ample conception of the grace of God. They learned to know Him as the God of the second chance to His children who had failed Him—and third chance, too.

The historian Froude wrote, “The worth of a man must be measured by his life, not by his failure under a singular and peculiar trial. Peter the apostle, through forewarned, thrice denied his Master on the first alarm of danger; yet that Master, who knew his nature in its strength and in its infirmity, chose him.”¹

Understanding the amazing grace of God and His incredible forgiveness and acceptance through Christ, a mature Christian is one who has grasped the truth that his or her failure is not the end of an effective life with and for the Lord. While there may be consequences to live with (as with David) and serious issues to work through, the mature believer rests in the grace of God and uses the failure as a backdoor to success through growth and understanding.

A favorite hymn for many Christians is “Victory in Jesus” because there IS victory in the Savior. In fact, Christians are super-conquerors in Christ. They are those who have, as translated by the NET Bible, “complete victory” (Rom. 8:37). Significantly, this statement by Paul is made in a context that considers the reality of the varied onslaughts of life which must include failure.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will trouble, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or death? 36 As it is written, “***For your sake we encounter death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.***” 37 No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things that are present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35-39).

In view of this, we often speak of the **victorious** Christian life. But the truth is there is a lot of defeat in the Christian’s life because none of us will always and perfectly appropriate the victory over sin that Christ has

¹ Oswald J. Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1967, 1980, p. 163.

accomplished for us by the cross. Further, the amount of deliverance we each experience is a matter of growth; so on the road to maturity and even after reaching a certain degree of spiritual maturity, Christians will sin and fail—sometimes seriously so. We don't like to talk about it or admit it, but there is a lot of failure. Failure is a fact of life for the Christian community, but God's grace is more than adequate to overcome any situation. The mature Christian is one who has learned to apply God's grace remedy for failure.

The Prevailing Attitude About Failure

Presently the bookstores are full of popular "How to Succeed Manuals" on every conceivable subject. And why is that? Because we are so concerned with the glory of God? I would hope so, but there are also other reasons. Too often, it is because we look at failure with eyes of scorn. We view failure as a Waterloo. We see it as the plague of plagues and as the worst thing that could happen to us.

As a result, the fear of failure has many people in neutral or paralyzed or playing the game of cover up. We consciously or subconsciously ignore our sins and failures because to admit them is to admit failure and that's a plague worse than death. People often refuse to tackle a job or take on a responsibility for fear of failure. People believe if they fail they are no good. They think failure means you are a bad person and *you are a failure*. But, as previously mentioned, most of the great leaders in Scripture at some time in their careers experienced some sort of failure. For instance:

- When Abraham should have stayed in the land and trusted the Lord, he fled to Egypt because of the drought. And this was by no means the last of Abraham's failures.
- Moses, in trying to help his people, ran ahead of the Lord and killed the Egyptian. Later, against the command of God, he struck the rock in his anger.
- When David should have been out in the field of battle, he stayed home and committed adultery with Bathsheba and then plotted the murder of her husband.
- Peter, in spite of his self-confidence and his great boast, denied the Lord, as did the rest of the disciples who fled before the evening our Lord's arrest was over.

There is a fundamental principle here. Sometimes God must engineer failure in us before He can bring about success with us. Our failures are often rungs on the ladder of growth—if we will learn from our mistakes rather than grovel in the dirt.

This is not to make excuses for sin or to place a premium on mistakes or failure. This does not mean that a person must fail before they can be a success, but our failures, whether in the form of rebellion or just foolish blunders, can become tools of learning and stepping stones to success. The point is, we should never allow our fear of failure to paralyze us from tackling a job or trying something that challenges our comfort zone.

Nor should we allow past failures to keep us down or keep us from recovering and moving on in the service of the Savior. This means we should never allow failure to make us think we are a failure or that we can never change or that we can never again count for the Lord or that God can't do anything with us because we have failed in some way. The Bible says we are all sinners and prone to failure, but in Christ we can become overcomers.

After the horrible carnage and Confederate retreat at Gettysburg, General Robert E. Lee wrote this to Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy: "We must expect reverses, even defeats. They are sent to teach us wisdom and prudence, to call forth greater energies, and to prevent our falling into greater disasters."²

Mature Attitudes About Failure and Success

(1) Mature believers understand that a Christian can become successful in spite of failure because of God's incredible grace and forgiveness. We may have to live with the results of some of our failures or sins, yet God is free to continue to love us in Christ and use us for His purposes because of *grace* (cf. John 21 & Peter).

² "Today In the Word," Moody Bible Institute, November, 1989, p. 21.

(2) The mature believer seeks to use failures as lessons for growth and change. Mature believers will act on two principles: (a) They understand that failures remind us of the consequences of our decisions. We reap what we sow. This is the law of harvest. Failures remind us of what can happen, they can make us careful, but they should not be allowed to paralyze us. (b) The mature believer recognizes that our failures show us what we should and should not do; they become lessons in where we went wrong and why. You know what they say, “hindsight is 10/20.” It can help us avoid the same mistake twice if we will learn from history.

Thomas Edison invented the microphone, the phonograph, the incandescent light, the storage battery, talking movies, and more than 1000 other things. December 1914 he had worked for 10 years on a storage battery. This had greatly strained his finances. This particular evening spontaneous combustion had broken out in the film room. Within minutes all the packing compounds, celluloid for records and film, and other flammable goods were in flames. Fire companies from eight surrounding towns arrived, but the heat was so intense and the water pressure so low that the attempt to douse the flames was futile. Everything was destroyed. Edison was 67.

With all his assets going up in a whoosh (although the damage exceeded two million dollars, the buildings were only insured for \$238,000 because they were made of concrete and thought to be fireproof), would his spirit be broken?

The inventor’s 24-year old son, Charles, searched frantically for his father. He finally found him, calmly watching the fire, his face glowing in the reflection, his white hair blowing in the wind. “My heart ached for him,” said Charles. “He was 67—no longer a young man—and everything was going up in flames. When he saw me, he shouted, ‘Charles, where’s your mother?’ When I told him I didn’t know, he said, ‘Find her. Bring her here. She will never see anything like this as long as she lives.’”

The next morning, Edison looked at the ruins and said, “There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew.” Three weeks after the fire, Edison managed to deliver the first phonograph.³

(3) When mature believers fail they:

- Acknowledge their failures and refuse to hide behind any lame duck excuses.
- Confess any sin to God when sin is involved in the failure.
- Study or examine what happened so they can learn from the failure.
- Put it behind them and move ahead (1 John 1:9; Phil. 3:13).

Being assured of God’s forgiveness, we are to put our failures behind us, count on and rest in His forgiveness, and refuse to use them as an excuse for morbid introspection, pessimism, self pity, depression, and fear of moving on for the Lord.

(4) Mature believers grow through failure. They will know and act on certain truths:

- We are accepted in the Lord on the basis of Grace, not our performance.
- We are human and, as a result, we are not now perfect nor will we ever be.
- God still has a plan for our lives. God is not through with us yet, and we need to get on with His plan.

(5) The mature believer will be one who understands there are different kinds of failure.

- **There are those who have genuinely failed according to the principles of Scripture.** If we fail to know why we believe what we believe and then fail to give an adequate reason to those who ask for a reason for our hope (1 Pet. 3:15), then we have failed in our responsibility to witness. That can become a stepping stone to getting equipped and to becoming bold in our witness, but at that point there was failure.

³ Charles Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, Thomas Nelson, 1978, pp. 82-83.

- **There is a false guilt of failure because of a wrong view of success.** Many missionaries have labored faithfully in foreign countries without much success by way of converts, but that by no means indicates they are failures. A biblical illustration is Isaiah. Right from the beginning, after seeing the Lord high and lifted up, after confessing his own sin and that of his nation, and after saying, “Here am I, send me,” God sent him to preach to a people who would not listen and told him so beforehand (see Isa. 6:8-10). In the eyes of people, he was a failure, but not in God’s eyes.
- **There is another class of failure; those who mistakenly believe they are successes!** These believers may earn an honest living and be fine supporters of the church. They unconsciously (or sometimes all too consciously) consider themselves examples for others to follow. Yet they do not realize that from God’s perspective they are failures. One man put it this way: “I climbed the ladder of success only to discover that my ladder was leaning against the wrong wall!”

Heaven will be filled with surprises! Many “successful” Christians will be nobodies, and some whose lives were strewn with the wreckage of one failure after another will be great in the kingdom.⁴

(6) The mature believer is one who understands the importance of choosing the right standard of measurement to determine success and failure. There are a number common worldly beliefs about success that people apply to themselves and others, but they are all distortions of the truth.⁵ Most of these are based on some form of faulty comparison. To those who were guilty of this kind of foolishness, the apostle Paul wrote: “For we would not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who recommend themselves. But when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are **without understanding**” (2 Cor. 10:12, emphasis mine)

Fundamentally, this is the distortion of comparing ourselves with others. We are all to do our best according to the abilities God has given us and we are right in using others as models of Christ-like character. Paul told the Corinthians, “Be imitators of me as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). But this is not the same as when we compare ourselves with other people from the standpoint of their gifts, abilities, bank accounts, possessions, position and other such standards and then attempt to determine our success or failure or that of someone else based on such comparisons.

When in seminary, we wrote our test answers in a little booklet called “The Blue Book.” After the tests were graded, they were placed in our mail boxes in the seminary mail room. Naturally, we all anticipated or dreaded, as the case might be, looking through the little glass door and seeing that little Blue Book stuffed in our box. The tendency for students was to inquire about the grades of their classmates or to loudly declare the grade they received, “Great, I made 100!” Many students refused to be involved in this game and kept their grades to themselves because of the foolish comparisons that sometimes occurred. Some students, regardless of how hard they studied, actually began to see themselves as failures because they were not able to make the high grades of some of their class mates and questioned whether or not they should even stay in seminary.

Other people determine their level of success by their bank accounts as measured by the luxury items they are able to purchase—a huge home, furniture, automobiles, boats, etc. Lutzer writes,

If money is a basis of judging success or failure, it is obvious that Jesus Christ was a failure! Consider this: when He had to pay taxes, He asked Peter to find a coin in a fish’s mouth. Why? He didn’t have a coin of His own.

Christ was born under the shelter of a stable’s roof. Most of us would be appalled if our children could not be born in a modern hospital! When He died, the soldiers cast lots for His garment. *That* was all He owned of this world’s goods. He died naked, in the presence of gawking bystanders.

Was Christ a failure? Yes, if money is the standard by which He is judged. The foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man did not have a place He could call home.

⁴ Erwin W. Lutzer, *Failure, the Backdoor to Success*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1975, 1984, p. 17.

⁵ For a more detailed consideration of these issues, see Lutzer’s discussion of this on pages 20-26 of his excellent book, *Failure, the Backdoor to Success*.

Of course, earning money (and even saving some) is both legitimate and necessary. But the amount we earn is not a barometer of God's blessing.⁶

And I might add, lots of money and things are never an evidence of success in God's eyes. Many who are wealthy are failures from God's viewpoint. The point, then, is the absence or presence of money is not in itself proof of success or failure.

The comparison game reaches out to almost every area of life. It may involve comparing friends, i.e., name-dropping to suggest that one is successful because he runs with the right people. Or it may involve believers comparing the size of their church, the size of their mission's budget, the number of books one has had published, etc. None of these things are in themselves a proof of success in God's eyes. A classic illustration is when Moses struck the rock when God had told him to only speak to the rock.

Water flowed. The people were jubilant! Was Moses a success? *Yes, in the eyes of men. No, in the eyes of God!* His disobedience brought water, but it also brought punishment.

Results in themselves are not a proof that God is pleased. It is possible to win attendance contests and disseminate the Gospel and see results; all these activities can be done without pleasing God! Such results can be achieved by deceptive gimmicks or for purely personal satisfaction. It is not enough to do God's work; it must be done in his way and for His credit.⁷

Conclusion

There are many causes for failure. Some are the product of specific acts of sin, but some are not. Some are simply the product of ignorance or of circumstances beyond our control like a drop in the stock market or extreme weather conditions (drought, floods), which can cause a farmer or rancher to lose his shirt, as they say. Naturally, this kind of failure, as serious and painful as it is, is not as serious as spiritual failure like, for instance, the sin of David. While David did recover from his sin and was still used of God afterward, there were lifelong consequences in his life and in the lives of others.

Whether caused by sin or by the many things that can happen beyond our control, all failure teaches us the important truth of just how desperately we need God and His mercy and grace in our lives. Sometimes our failures are mirrors of reproof, but always they can become tools for growth and deeper levels of trust and commitment to God if we will respond to them as such rather than rebel and become hardened through the difficulty. "God is adequate for all kinds of failure. Some failures may not be our fault, but they serve as reminders that we must live with eternal priorities in mind. Other failures are directly the result of our own sinful choices."⁸

Regardless, God has made more than adequate provision for us in Christ and His finished work on the cross, which is the sole basis of our relationship and forgiveness with God and our means of a meaningful and productive life with Him.

⁶ Lutzer, p. 21.

⁷ Lutzer, p. 25.

⁸ Lutzer, p. 42.

Conclusion to the Marks of Maturity

This brings us to the conclusion to this study on maturity. The seventeen qualities of maturity discussed in this series by no means exhaust the qualities that mark out a mature Christian. For instance, I have not attempted to deal with all the qualities required of overseers and deacons mentioned in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 or of one's ability to take in solid food as stressed in Hebrew 5:12-14. And certainly, there are more qualities that could be added. It is my prayer that these marks of maturity are seen as nothing less than growth in the character of the mature qualities of Christ's life as He is revealed to us in the pages of the New Testament. They are the experience of the Christ-exchanged life. As Christ is the Spirit of prophecy and the central theme of the Bible, so He is our life and so also He is our goal and the means of attaining that goal as we learn to appropriate His life (the fundamental issue of maturity) through the enabling ministry of the Holy Spirit and the life-strengthening power of God's Holy Word. We are not just seeking to become moral by our own strength or determination. Rather, the goal is spiritual change through **biblical spirituality** with an emphasis on **biblical**.¹ This was stressed in the introduction under the heading, *The Nature of Maturity as the Product of Spirituality*. But by spirituality, I am not referring to the so-called relative spirituality of the New Age movement or of some form of mysticism.

Further, as mentioned in the beginning of this series, it is my hope that those who have taken the time to read through this study, or even parts of it, will see these marks of maturity as goals or targets to aim for and as marks of identification and confirmation that make us examples of the Lord Jesus that we might flesh out His life to a dying and hurting world. The pursuit of these marks is the quest for the character of Christ. This is a world that needs to see an authentic picture of the real thing in those who are also able to give a reason for the hope that is in them. In this way our lives back up what is said from our lips.

But may we all the while realize there will always be room for growth and greater levels of development and experience of these qualities of the Savior's life. Of course, we all fail in many ways and fall short of what we should be, but may this not discourage us. Rather, may our failure become a strong motivation, not to give up, but to press on while thanking God for His matchless grace and forgiveness in the person and work of His Blessed Son. May our failures simply renew our awareness of our desperate need of the saving grace of the Lord.

Not that I have already attained this—that is, I have not already been perfected—but I strive to lay hold of that for which I also was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have attained this. Instead I am single-minded: forgetting the things behind and reaching out for the things ahead, 14 with this goal in mind, I strive toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us who are “perfect” embrace this point of view. If you think otherwise, God will reveal to you the error of your ways. 16 Nevertheless, let us live up to the standard that we have already attained (Phil. 3:12-16).

¹ For a detailed study of biblical spirituality, see *The ABCs of Christian Growth, Laying the Foundation* on our web site at www.bible.org/docs/splife/abc/toc.htm.