



Grow!

*"Grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ."
II Peter 3:18*

A compilation of articles and blogs from Sink Your Roots.

Paula J. Marolewski

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Anxiety

Cast All Your Cares Upon Him

A few thoughts today on what it means to cast all our cares on the Lord ...

What *are* we giving to the Lord when we give him our burdens?

- Our worry and anxiety about the situation
- Our obsessive desire to think about the situation
- Our need to control the situation
- Our helplessness because we can't control the situation

What are we *not* giving to the Lord when we give him our burdens?

- Our concern for the situation
- Our grief and hurt caused by the situation
- Our responsibility toward the situation

What do we *receive* from the Lord when we give him our burdens?

- The internal, spiritual resources we need to deal with the situation
- The wisdom to identify our responsibilities within the situation
- The ability to rest despite the situation
- The peace of knowing that God is sovereign over the situation

Resignation vs. Acceptance

It had never occurred to me how much certain attitudes add to or subtract from your stress. Here was a key one: resignation vs. acceptance.

- Resignation is passive, leading to trapped feelings.
"This is the way it is, I cannot change it, I am trapped, life is hopeless."
- Acceptance is active, leading to positive actions.
"This is the way it is, I can change myself and/or my circumstances, I am not trapped, I can move forward with hope."

Resignation brings anxiety. Acceptance brings hope.

Great Expectations

A very good friend of mine taught me a piece of important advice:

“Satisfaction is based on expectations.”

Put simply, if we expect too much, we are setting ourselves up to be dissatisfied. If we have realistic expectations, we are much more likely to feel fulfilled, happy, and contented, because our expectations can be, and often are, met.

Unrealistic expectations play a large role in my struggle with anxiety. Namely:

- I expect too much from myself – expecting to feel good all the time, achieve success at everything I put my hand to, and be liked by everybody.
- I expect too much from life – expecting that things will always go my way, from sunny weather on the weekends to having financial security handed to me on a silver platter.

And yes ...

- I expect too much from God – expecting that he will smooth the way before me at all times, flood my life with happiness, and always comfort me with an all-but-tangible sense of his presence.

Such expectations are setting me up to be disappointed ... and stressed. And that’s because I *can’t* always deliver on what I expect from myself, much of life is *outside* of my control, and God isn’t a genie in a lamp waiting to fulfill my every wish.

In order to control my anxiety – and, incidentally, live a much more peaceful, contented, and fulfilled life – I have had to re-form my expectations. Not *lower* them – that is important to understand. That is, I’m not allowing myself to become a slouch, or taking a fatalistic attitude toward life, or acting like the deists, who figured that God set everything in motion and then said good-bye.

No, I am *changing* my expectations – making them more realistic, putting them back into the real pulse of life:

- I am expecting great things of myself – namely, that I will be and do my best. I don’t worry anymore about whether I will fail, because I know already that I will.

- I am expecting great things from life – so I am looking for opportunities to be thankful and to serve God. But I also recognize that we live in a fallen world where bad things happen.
- And I am decidedly expecting great things from God, because he is a God who has promised great things and delivers on every promise.

Such great expectations set me up for great satisfaction – because they are grounded firmly in reality.

A Smooth White Seashell

My calendar has a beautiful quote on it by an unknown author:

“Today is a smooth white seashell; hold it close and listen to the beauty of the hours.”

It reminds me to slow down. To live in the present. To stop the rush, the hurry, the worry, the freneticism.

The only day you have is today.

The only time you have is now.

Slow down. Treasure the moment. “Listen to the beauty of the hours.”



Church

SWOT Analysis in the Church

SWOT: it stands for Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses, Threats. It's a great way to engage in strategic planning to ensure that you've examined the big picture before deciding whether or how to move forward on a project.

But in the church, I'm afraid I'm afraid we don't always follow this sound strategy. You see, people who bring out the Ss and Os – the Strengths and Opportunities – are looked at as faith-filled, visionary leaders.

And those of us who bring out the Ws and Ts – those annoying Weaknesses and Threats? Well, all too often, we're looked at as faith-lacking nay-sayers standing in the way of the progress of the Kingdom of God.

Now, do we serve a God who is sovereign over all creation? Does Jesus still work miracles? Is not God also named Jehovah Jireh, the God who provides?

Yes, absolutely to all three. But we also live in a fallen world, we are in a serious battle against the enemy, and God gave us the gift of reason ... and he expects us to use it.

Therefore, I think it is not just *important* but *essential* to perform SWOT analyses whenever we are exploring new ventures within the church. We need to be aware not only of the potential we have to do good, but the possibilities that may bring our efforts tumbling down around our ears.

Don't look down on us WTs. We don't lack faith, and we're not trying to be negative. God has simply given us a very practical view of life that allows us to pinpoint trouble before it arises. We help the church take a hard look at things like:

- Where will the money come from for this project?
- Do we have the personnel to make it happen, or will we be putting one more job on already over-burdened people? Or, worse, get half-hearted involvement?
- Will we get the prayer support we need on a consistent and long-term basis?
- Do we have parties in the church that will stand in the way? Do they have valid concerns?
- Is there any area of sin that we are not addressing that could hinder our progress?

Then comes the decision itself: actually weighing whether or not to move forward, and, if the decision is made to move forward – how to do so effectively.

Because here's the truth, folk: *not every idea should become a reality, even if the end goal is good*. Why? Because the goal will never be reached if the idea on how to get there isn't sound. Some ideas aren't well thought out. Some ideas don't have the support they need at the present time. Some ideas need a little or a lot of modification before they can be actualized. A prayer-filled SWOT analysis can help determine which path God is calling you on.

Remember, we're supposed to act as a body within the church. Typically, SO-type people provide the "go juice" – the momentum. WT-type people put the brakes on so that the "go" is controlled.

Working together, we can really make things work!

Flagrant Sin

I recently encountered the question: How should we respond to people who come to the church with flagrant sins in their background (i.e., sodomy, sexual crimes, murder, etc.)? Here are three recommendations:

- **First, don't sugarcoat sin.** Don't pass off what people did lightly and say "Oh, it's okay!" Don't make excuses for it. Call it for what it is and look at it in the revealing light of the Word of God.
- **Second, emphasize, encourage, and expect transformation of character through the grace of God.** It's not enough to preach it – the church needs to put accountability and discipleship relationships in place to help people grow and change.
- **Third, let the past be the past.** Don't deny the past (that is why accountability relationships are important), but don't focus on it either. The past is a done deal, and the old man is in the grave. Focus on who people are now - not what they were - and who they can become through God's grace. Give people a fresh start.

Oh ... and one more thing, just as a reminder: we *all* come to the church with flagrant sins in our background. They might be the sins of envy, greed, or gossip rather than abuse, adultery, or theft, but they are still sins that separate us from God, fester as a cancer in our soul, and destroy the vitality of our life.

So the fact is, *all of us need to put into practice the above recommendations.* When we realize that – and practice that – the humility of our hearts and the grace of our God will so shine in our lives that the world will be drawn to the saving Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Should Church Membership Ever Be Denied?

I wonder if we sometimes err on the side of being too nice. Too trusting.

Too gullible.

Let's take a hypothetical example. Suppose that an individual, we'll call him Bob, applies for membership at a local church. But a current member in good standing at that church, we'll call her Susan, knows Bob personally, and is an eyewitness to the fact that Bob is a trouble-monger who delights in tearing down church leadership.

Susan, in genuine concern, lays the facts of her personal experience with Bob before the pastor of the church. The question is: *what should the pastor and church leadership do?*

Now, I am fully convinced that people can change, and that Bob may have turned over a new leaf. After all, that is the core of Christianity! However, that being said, I don't necessarily think the pastor should just accept Bob's application for membership without discussing the issue with him.

What if Bob claims he has confessed and repented of his sin? Even then, discretion would be wise. For instance, the church leadership could require a probationary period before membership could be accepted – but it would have to be a long enough period where Bob's true character traits would have ample opportunity to manifest themselves ... for better or for worse. I believe that a truly repentant Christian brother or sister will honor and respect any conditions placed upon acceptance of membership.

Matthew 7:17-18 remind us that "Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit." When the health of the church is at stake, I believe that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." If there is a reasonable cause for concern, use discretion. Wait to see what fruit is produced.

Intelligent Risk

Much of the Christian life is about maintaining a healthy balance. One area where this applies is when the question arises as to whether to move forward with a new venture in the church or in our life.

Here are the two extreme ends of the see-saw:

- **“Safety at all costs.”** We don’t want to move forward unless and until God has spelled out complete success for us. And so we wait, and wait, and wait ... and nothing ever gets done
- **“Foolhardy risk.”** We go forward full of faith, but without thinking things through carefully. And so we fall on our face and our adventure ends in ignominy.

Where is the balance point, then? I believe it is in “intelligent risk.”

Faith does indeed call us to take risks. Just ask David, Gideon, Nehemiah, Paul, and others through the ages.

But faith also calls us to be intelligent. None of these people leaped before they looked – they knew what they were getting into, they had counted the costs, and they had taken appropriate precautions.

Don’t idolize either safety or risk. Live a life of real faith – a faith that embraces “intelligent risk.”

Putting God on a Time Clock

I'm concerned about a situation I've come across multiple times in the past, and recently came across again. It is this: members of a congregation complain because the pastor's sermon is "running too long."

Now, this is not a case where the service usually lets out at 12:00 and the pastor is expounding in the pulpit until 2:30. I mean cases where the pastor may be preaching for 30 minutes when he is allotted 20.

My concern here is not with the pastor.

It's with the complaining members of the congregation.

Is 10 minutes of your time really so important that it is worth disrupting church life, causing a division in the church, or embarrassing or hurting the pastor?

Is 10 minutes of your time really better spent watching football than learning the Word of God?

Is 10 minutes of your time really a make-or-break reason to stay or leave a church?

Are you putting the pastor on a time clock?

Or are you putting God on a time clock?

Think carefully before you answer.

How to Destroy Your Church: Zip Your Lips

"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

– Edmund Burke

If you really want to destroy your church quickly, here is the number one rule: zip your lips when you see something wrong.

Got that? Don't say anything. Don't speak up. Don't voice your concerns. Don't make waves.

Instead, when you see something wrong – when you observe sin, when you become aware of division, when you discern that people are dividing into camps, when you hear the whisper of rumor and slander – keep your mouth shut. Just ignore everything and pretend a) it will all go away on its own, or b) someone else will deal with it. But you, just keep your lips zipped and mind your own business.

Definitely don't take seriously the words of Hebrews 5:14, which command each and every individual to "have their senses trained to discern good and evil." And don't read Galatians 6:1 where Paul states clearly "if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness."

In fact, you should ignore the example of Paul entirely, since he made a habit of confronting churches – from the person in the pew to the leaders at the top – when they were stepping off the narrow way. Oh – and don't read the first three chapters of Revelation, or you might find Jesus himself, the Alpha and Omega, calling churches to task for condoning sin, being comfortable in complacency, and putting their noses in the air with pride.

Just keep quiet and pretend that everything is okay.

Of course, if you see something wrong and you don't want your church to go down the tubes, then you'll have to speak up. It's a dangerous course – you could offend the people in power, you could find yourself on the bad end of a slander campaign, and you could start some serious fire. But if the fire is the Spirit of God, that's a good thing: even if some people get burned in the purifying process.

If you choose to go that dangerous route, then keep two words foremost on your mind, in your heart, and on your lips: kindness and truth. Proverbs 3:3 is the best advice on this topic ever written: "Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart."

Without kindness, truth is a harsh sword that cuts and kills. We've all known people who spoke the truth without love – and left only broken bodies in their wake. But without truth, kindness is nothing more than a pat on the head and a platitude in the ear. Kindness by itself doesn't have the iron to effect real change.

But kindness and truth working together ... that is where transformation begins. When bold and humble saints of God are willing to risk "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15), then the Word of God is released to "pierce as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow" and will "judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12) ... and love will gently call the sinner home.

How to Destroy Your Church: No Pruning Allowed

One of the simplest ways to destroy a church is to put up a sign that says, “No Pruning Allowed!”

When you see slight deviations from the Word of God, little sins here and there – just let them alone. After all, they’re small. No big deal. Nothing to get up in arms about.

Ignore the words of James where he writes, “when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (James 1:15). Surely, that is an overstatement, even though he follows it up in the next verse with the warning, “Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren!”

The fact is, sin never stays the same size. Like a hardy vine, it grows, spreading its tendrils into all areas of life:

- A little gossip here, a little whisper there, and suddenly people’s reputations are destroyed, lies are spread, and relationships severed.
- A little pride here, a little conceit there, and suddenly preaching becomes a stage where the pastor is the celebrity.
- A little coveting here, a little greed there, and suddenly the church is sporting a new gymnasium while children go homeless on the streets outside.

There is a cure for that, of course. And that is to nip sin in the bud.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about the seriousness of sin – even sins that look small to us. He said that anger was akin to murder. That lust was the same as adultery. Why? Because the big sins are inextricably linked to the small sins. No one ever murdered unless he was first angry. No one ever committed adultery before he first lusted in his heart. The cure? Nip sin in the bud – stop it before it has a chance to grow strong and bear its evil fruit in your life.

Jesus commanded sheer ruthlessness when it comes to dealing with sin. His words shake us to the core in Matthew 5:29-30:

“If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.”

Are we willing to nip sin in the bud? Will we take whatever steps are necessary to root up evil and cast it out of our lives?

Until we are, our churches remain at risk. "Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren ... when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." Nip sin in the bud. Now.

How to Destroy Your Church: My Way or the Highway

Destroying a church is easy, particularly if you are in a position of leadership. Simply insist on “my way or the highway.” It’s a very equestrian position: dig in your heels like a mule, and get on your high-horse at the slightest provocation.

If you want to take this position, remember these simple principles:

- If anyone disagrees with me, they are *de facto* in the wrong.
- My way is God’s way, so he is on my side.
- There are no grey matters, ever. Everything is black-and-white, and I call the color scheme.

Now, in order to hold to this position, you will probably have to ignore principles like grace, tolerance, kindness, gentleness, and love. It is imperative that you remain true to your convictions, no matter who gets hurt or what gets said.

Above all, don’t ever attempt to walk in someone else’s shoes, understand their opinion, or consider their interpretation of Scripture. That could very well upset the whole applecart, because you might see that I Corinthians 12 talks about the importance of every member of the body of Christ; that in Joshua 5, God says clearly that it’s not so much about his being on our side as about us being on his side; and that in Romans 14 Paul reminds us that there are grey matters in life, and we are to be gentle and tolerant with one another.

Now, if you would prefer to preserve the health and life of your church, then I have one simple word for you: **humility**. In Philippians 2, Paul writes, “make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”

Ironically, people with a “my way or the highway attitude” are actually trying to attain exactly what the above verses call for: one mind, unity of spirit, singleness of purpose. The problem is that they assume that *their mind* is the one that everyone should emulate, *their spirit* is the one everyone should follow, and *their purpose* is the one everyone should embrace. And that, at its most basic level, is **pride**.

Scripture is very clear about what pride precedes: **destruction** (Proverbs 16:18). And the church is not exempt from that warning.

Humility, on the other hand, seeks the mind of Christ instead of self. It demonstrates love, regardless of differences. Discovers unity within diversity. Establishes purpose that embraces everyone's unique contributions. Humility not only looks out for the interests of others, but it honors others above self. No mule heels digging into the rocky soil. No high-horses from which you can look down your nose at others.

When we live in humility, dialogue about differences becomes the fertile ground from which good fruit is grown. We discover anew the wealth of God's grace at work in the lives of others. We rejoice at the Word of God, "living and active" in each of our lives (Hebrews 4:12). And we affirm with every breath, "Not *my* will, but *Yours* be done" (Matthew 26:39).

How to Destroy Your Church: Don't Look in the Mirror

Mirrors are useful things. They show us when we need to comb our hair, reveal the ketchup stain just out of sight on our shirt, and help us to get the specks out of our eyes. And because of that last item, if you want to destroy your church, you should never – figuratively speaking – “look in the mirror.”

Don't spend time examining yourself for sin. Don't put your words, actions, attitudes, and thoughts to the test. Don't do group evaluations to see whether the church, the leadership team, the committees, etc. are on target scripturally, or are perhaps heading off the straight and narrow down the path of sin.

Just assume that everything you do, say, think, and believe is 100% accurate, and does not require further analysis. No need for a mirror here, thank you. Every hair is in place and there are no specks in my eyes – I'm sure of it.

The fact is, that attitude tends to spawn a second attitude ... a tendency to point out specks in other people's eyes. You remember Jesus' warning in Matthew 7:3-5?

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

You can see the progression: sin (the speck in my eye) covered by pride (the conviction that I could not possibly be wrong) leads to **hypocrisy** (telling other people what's wrong with them, while ignoring what's wrong with me). The final result? Instead of helping others, you alienate them.

Hypocrisy can be a very subtle sin, because the hypocrite may truly believe he or she is trying to help another person. And may very well have found a speck in the other person's eye that needs removing. And may know all the right Scripture verses. But with a hypocritical attitude – an unwillingness to see the plank in his or her own eye – positive change will never result. **People resist, ignore, or are offended by hypocrites.** That is why hypocrisy can often be found at the root of church dissension and splits: hypocrisy polarizes people into separate camps.

The antidote? A healthy dose of examination, individually or as a group, in order to take a good look at ourselves and remove the planks out of our own eyes. Here are a few “mirrors” you can look in:

- I Corinthians 13: How do you stack up to this description of love?

- Romans 12:9-21: Are you living out each phrase in this action-packed chapter?
- Galatians 5:19-26: How do you compare to the virtues listed here? How about the sins?
- Matthew 5:1-12: Do you live out the Beatitudes each day?

When we spend time in examination, rooting out our sin, confessing it, and repenting of it, it builds a strong sense of **humility**. Clothed with humility, we can indeed help take the specks out of other people's eyes ... because we admit how many planks we have to deal with ourselves. People can accept help from someone who admits their sin and weakness much more readily than they can accept help from a self-proclaimed supersaint. Humility is the antithesis of hypocrisy. **Humility is the foundation of church unity.**

Take a good look in the mirror. Is there a plank in your eye?

How to Destroy Your Church: Do Not Touch

One surefire way to destroy your church is to hang a placard around the neck of each person in leadership that says “Do Not Touch!” When you do so, the person becomes exempt from the tap of reproof, relieved from the hand of correction, unaccountable to any accountability.

Congregations sometimes grant these placards because they revere their leadership or because they are conditioned to obey those in authority. But many times, leaders themselves declare that they are “untouchable.” If they say it with enough authority – and wield enough power – chances are that no one will contest them. They then have an open field to do whatever they want in the church, including:

- Pushing through policies that are unpopular with the church as a whole.
- Directing the church as a dictator rather than as a shepherd.
- Hurting others through words and actions.

When questioned, they point to the placard and state, “You can’t touch me – I’m the leader! Because I am in the position of leadership, anything I do is *de facto* right and godly!”

But power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. By making a leader above reproof, you grant him or her license to sin ... and all too often, people take that license and run with it. Pride swells. Judgmental attitudes prevail. Stubbornness sets in. Gossip abounds. Revenge is given free rein. And Satan destroys the church.

Paul knew the only answer to this situation. In Galatians 2:11-14, he reports,

But when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.

But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Peter was the head of the young church: he held serious power and authority. But he fell into hypocrisy – and because of that same power and authority, he led everyone else into the same sin right after him.

Fortunately, Paul came on the scene. Paul didn't believe in "Do Not Touch!" placards, even around the neck of the President and CEO of the infant church. He named Peter's sin for what it was and called him to account not only for his sin, but for leading others astray as well and for damaging the message of the gospel.

We have to use the same boldness when confronting leaders of the church who have fallen into sin. We cannot risk leaving the "Do Not Touch!" placards around their necks, whether we gave them the signs in the first place, or whether they claimed them for their own. Instead, we have to courageously – yet with love – rebuke sin wherever it is found, and call the sinner to confession and repentance.

To do this well, we must be willing to:

- **Think for ourselves.** If we always take what our leaders say as "gospel truth" and never examine it for ourselves, we can be fed lies and never know it. We must each accept our personal responsibility to know the Bible thoroughly and apply its principles to our lives.
- **Confront sin wherever it is found.** Even if that means confronting the person in power, and even if that person decides to strike back and harm you. Courage is required to confront sin, but God will give that courage through his Word and Spirit.
- **Love unconditionally.** If we confront without love, we harm rather than help. To bring healing to a broken situation, we must go forward with love. This means seeking first and foremost the welfare and well-being of the other person through correction, confession, and repentance.

Leaders carry tremendous responsibility in the church. For that reason, they must be more accountable to others – not less – for their words, actions, and attitudes. Instead of "Do Not Touch!" placards, *every* person in the congregation, lay and leadership alike, needs to pick up signs that proclaim "United We Stand!"



Faith

The Nature of Faith

Faith. A small word packed with big meaning. Consider how Hebrews 11 defines faith:

- Faith trusts what God has said. (Hebrews 11:3)
- Faith worships God in an acceptable fashion. (Hebrews 11:4)
- Faith walks with God in the normal, daily activities of life. (Hebrews 11:5)
- Faith acts despite the seeming “unreasonableness” of God’s command. (Hebrews 11:7)
- Faith leaves its comfort zone. (Hebrews 11:8)
- Faith is content with what the Lord gives, even though it may not seem “complete”. (Hebrews 11:9-10)
- Faith believes for the impossible. (Hebrews 11:11-12)
- Faith looks to the eternal. (Hebrews 11:13-16)
- Faith recognizes that we are pilgrims and strangers in this land. (Hebrews 11:13)
- Faith seeks for something beyond and greater than ourselves. (Hebrews 11:14)
- Faith does not turn back from discouragement, doubt, or despair. (Hebrews 11:15)
- Faith seeks for the best, the perfect of God. (Hebrews 11:16)
- Faith is willing to give up even what it loves the best: even what seems to be the promise itself. (Hebrews 11:17-18)
- Faith lets God be God; it doesn’t put God in a box. (Hebrews 11:19)
- Faith takes risks. (Hebrews 11:23)
- Faith takes humility over honor. (Hebrews 11:24-26)
- Faith is obedient. (Hebrews 11:30)
- Faith is willing to suffer and die for God. (Hebrews 11:35-40)

It is by grace that we live this life of faith. Make the above truth your own with this prayer:

By grace, through faith, I will trust in what God has said.

By grace, through faith, I will worship God in an acceptable fashion.

By grace, through faith, I will walk with God in the normal, daily activities of life.

By grace, through faith, I will listen to God and act on what I hear, no matter how “unreasonable” or “irrational” his commands are to me.

By grace, through faith, I will leave my comfort zone when called by God to do so.

By grace, through faith, I will be content with what the Lord gives, even though it may not seem “complete”.

By grace, through faith, I will believe for the impossible.

By grace, through faith, I will keep my eyes focused on the eternal.

By grace, through faith, I will remember that I am a pilgrim in this land, and heaven is my real home.

By grace, through faith, I will seek for something beyond and greater than myself.

By grace, through faith, I will not turn back from discouragement, doubt, or despair.

By grace, through faith, I will seek for the best, and not be content with less.

By grace, through faith, I will give up even what I love the best to God if he asks.

By grace, through faith, I will let God be God.

By grace, through faith, I will take godly risks.

By grace, through faith, I will accept humility over honor.

By grace, through faith, I will be obedient.

By grace, through faith, I will suffer and die for God if he calls me to that end.

Amen, and amen.

A Letter to a Friend Struggling with Doubt

Dear Friend,

I want to encourage you that doubt and questioning are a normal part of maturing in your Christian faith. For many people, it's the "rite of passage" that brings them from believing because they've been *told*, to believing because they *know*. In fact, I would say it's not only normal, but it's healthy.

For my own part, doubt and questioning have been an integral part of my growth in my faith. And I have to tell you this: I still struggle with periods of doubt. They come now and then, shaking me to my core, and making me re-examine what I believe. But through it all, God has proven himself faithful, good, and true – and has used these scary periods of time to strengthen me, increasing my knowledge of Scripture and my understanding of himself.

This is a scary period in your life. It's not a comfortable thing to have the ground ripped out from under you – I know. So let me make bold to give you some anchor points to help you as you feel tossed about:

First, approach your doubt with prayer. This may seem almost a contradiction in terms, because God is the very Person you are doubting. So what? If he's not there, he can't answer. If he is there, he will be pleased to answer the honest seeker's prayer. If he's there and doesn't want to answer an honest prayer, he wouldn't be a God you'd want to serve, anyway. So pray: tell him you're not sure he's even there. *Ask him to show you the truth.* Remember: God can handle your questions. This period in your life comes as no surprise to him. Don't be afraid to pray.

Second, keep reading the Bible. You see, it's very easy in periods of doubt to throw out the Bible and stop praying and cease going to church and all the rest of it – because you're questioning all those things. But that means you are not giving God an honest chance to demonstrate to you that Christianity is true. If you doubt and question, and only feed your mind with philosophies and books and conversations that are anti-Christian, you're going to "load the dice" in favor of a non-Christian decision. Don't kid yourself: we're very easily swayed by what we take in – and if we take in 100% of a certain idea for a long enough time, we're going to believe it's true – simply because we don't have any input presenting an alternative view. If you really want to know the truth, then you have to be fair in your search for it.

Third, journal your thoughts. Keep it private and safe, so that you can be honest in the journal. But it's important to write things down, because when you're feeling tossed about in your thoughts and beliefs, it's hard to think straight. I know that from long experience. But when you

write it down, you can at least look at your questions in black and white, and review what your thoughts are and what you've learned. That helps you think with your mind, rather than with your emotions – which right now are pulling you in every direction.

As a final word of advice: Don't rush this process. This is going to take time. It should. It's serious business, and you are asking serious questions. Take the time you need. If that means months of reading and researching and asking questions, then take those months. God will be with you every step of the way.

I've been where you are. I understand how hard it is. And I've come through it with my feet on solid ground. You will, too.

My Trust IS the Lord

A thought for the day from Jeremiah 17:7:

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD
And whose trust is the LORD.”

As I read this verse this morning, I pondered why Jeremiah put in both phrases: “who trusts in the Lord” and “whose trust is the Lord.” I thought of it this way: sometimes, when we put our trust in the Lord, we subconsciously (or consciously!) expect him to act in a certain way. In essence, we are saying, “I trust in the Lord *to do this certain thing that I want.*” But he doesn’t always do what we want – that’s a fact of life. And if that’s as deep as our trust goes, our trust and faith are going to be shaken quite regularly.

That is why, I think, Jeremiah put in the second phrase: “and whose trust is the Lord.” So that when God does not do the things I want or expect or desire, I need to trust who he is, that is, his character and nature: loving, gentle, kind, just, purposeful, gracious, patient, etc. This is where we find unshakable trust and faith: no matter what happens, no matter what he does or does not do. We know that he works all things together for good, because he is good. We know his actions, whatever they are, are loving because he is love.

Rejecting Fatalism

It is easy to fall into a sense of fatalism ... “Whatever will be, will be.” As a believer, that philosophy has no place in our faith. If you have felt the subtle lure of fatalism, ponder the following:

- Fatalism says, “You are trapped in a maze without a center.” God proclaims, “You are on a journey with a glorious conclusion.”
- Fatalism says, “Whatever you do, it is irrelevant.” God affirms, “*Everything* you do is relevant. *Everything* you do matters. *Everything* you do affects the outcome of your life. That is the meaning of free will.”
- Fatalism says, “Why pray? If there is a God, he’ll just do what he wants anyway.” God states, “Prayer moves my heart. Many times, I choose to act only if you choose to pray. I change the outcomes in life because of prayer.”
- Fatalism says, “Who do you think you are? Do you think anyone cares?” God declares, “I know who you are! I love you – I have proven it, and I will prove it again.”

How Strong Are Your Convictions?

Just a question for you today: *How strong are your Christian convictions?*

In the face of ...

- **Passion.** When the heat of the moment is lighting every fire inside you but you aren't married to the person you're with ... what will you do?
- **Pressure.** When the people around you – perhaps people whom you respect, perhaps people whom you fear, perhaps people whom you love – are encouraging you down a path Scripture forbids ... what will you do?
- **Persecution.** When threatened with ridicule, loss, slander, pain, isolation – even death – because of what you believe ... what will you do?

Be honest. And if you don't like your answer, then answer this:

What will you do about it?

I'm Remembering ...

Some of you reading this may be struggling with your ministry, your purpose, your calling. You are plagued by doubt, exhausted by fatigue, depressed by an incredible lack of results. Take courage today!

- I'm remembering people like **Noah**, who faithfully built the ark over the course of 70 to 100 years ... in the midst of mockery and among a people of wickedness. Surely, he preached repentance during that time, but when the rains came, only his family was saved.
- I'm remembering people like **Joseph**, who knew that God had great things for him, but who first endured betrayal, slavery, slander, and prison. Instead of growing bitter or rejecting God, he remained faithful to his calling to save not only his own family and people, but the entire Egyptian nation.
- I'm remembering people like **David**, who knew he was called to be king, and yet endured 10 years of hiding in the wilderness, being hunted down like a wild animal.
- I'm remembering people like **Jeremiah**, who was so overwhelmed by the scorn of his people, who endured such reproach and derision, that he finally cried out, "I will not remember God or speak his name anymore!" But then he admitted that "In my heart it becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary of holding it in and I cannot endure it" (Jer. 20:9). And so he continued to preach and proclaim the word of God, even though no one would listen.
- I'm remembering people like **Paul**, who stated that he had been subject to "labors ... [and] imprisonments, beaten times without number often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches" (II Corinthians 11:23-28).
- And yes, I'm remembering **Jesus**, whose own family thought him crazy, whose people rejected him, whose disciples deserted him at his greatest hour of need, who was slandered, insulted, mocked, and killed.

What's the thread that binds all these people together? They didn't fear failure, because they knew their purpose. They didn't shy away from pain, because they had their eyes on the prize. They didn't hesitate at sacrifice, because they were pressing on to their eternal reward.

Stand firm – God is with you!

Faith and Hope

Hebrews 11:1 is the classic definition of faith: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

I like that link between faith and hope. “Faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see.” Faith is forward looking. Faith knows that there’s a future, and that it’s a great future.

That forward-lookingness is based, however, on a Person. It’s based on God. We don’t believe things will all work out because we have good karma. We don’t believe everything will be fine because the world is actually maya, an illusion, and so who cares anyway? We don’t believe because we think man is on a steady course of moral progress.

No. We believe and have hope in the future because WE BELIEVE THAT GOD IS IN CONTROL. We believe that God is the Sovereign of the Universe. We believe that he’s good. That he’s loving. That he’s powerful.

Our faith is based on nothing less than the person of God himself.

That’s comforting to me. My faith isn’t based on me. Or on other people. Or on the church. All those things can fail. In fact, when my faith itself is rocky, I can have hope – because God is the Solid Rock. He is my foundation. He is the one who keeps me secure. My security and future and hope are in his hands – and he has wonderfully strong hands. They bear the scars to prove it.

God is Moving

We often say “God is really moving!” when things are happening openly, when excitement is running rampant, when results are pouring in.

But we forget that “still waters run deep.” It is vital to remember that God is often powerfully moving when *nothing* visible is happening ...

... as he works on our character
... as he waits until the timing is perfect
... as he sets all the parts in motion
... as he prepares people’s hearts

His work then is silent, deep, slow ... but oh, so strong!

Think of God’s power like a river. When we “see things happening,” it is like the river rapids: we see the white water, feel the spray, are overwhelmed by the raw power.

But upstream, the same river runs quiet and still. The same power is present – it is just not so readily apparent.

So is our God: he is *always* moving.

Cloud and Fire

We walk by faith, not by sight. But I admit, there are many times when I wish I walked by sight. I wish I could see God – see his face, touch the scars in Jesus’ hands, hear his literal voice in my ear. Surely, I think, that would make my Christian walk easier. I wouldn’t fall so often. Wouldn’t doubt so much. Wouldn’t sin so frequently.

And then I noticed something very interesting: do you remember when Israel was wandering in the desert? Do you remember their constant grumbling, griping, complaining, and rebelling? As much as I hate to admit it, I do recognize myself in those four words.

But then notice something else, mentioned in Numbers 9:16: *“So it was continuously; the cloud would cover [the tabernacle] by day, and the appearance of fire by night.”*

Did you catch it? The *literal, visible, tangible presence of God* was with the Israelites through *all* their wilderness wanderings. The cloud covered the tabernacle by day in the sight of all, and a pillar of fire lit it at night. They could see him. Their nomadic journey was directed entirely by the movement of the cloud and fire.

Now go back to what characterized their journey: Grumbling. Griping. Complaining. Rebelling.

It gave me pause for thought. Perhaps walking by sight isn’t any easier than walking by faith. Perhaps I would respond just the same way, even if I could see Jesus in the room with me.

Here’s the bottom line: seeing God won’t make us holy if we don’t want to be holy. Change has to come from within ... from the desire to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength.

So if you find yourself grumbling, griping, complaining, and rebelling, don’t blame God and rail that “If only I could see you, I wouldn’t be like this!” Put the responsibility where it belongs. This is all about you. It’s all about me. And we have to ask ourselves seriously:

“What am I going to do about it?”

Commendable Faith

Hebrews 11:2 points out something very interesting: “This is what the ancients were commended for.” What were they commended for? Their *faith*.

Isn't that curious? They weren't commended for doing great deeds. For being intelligent or even wise. Yes, elsewhere their good deeds and wisdom are indeed praised, but it is interesting that in Hebrews 11 the focus is solely on one thing: they were commended for their faith.

I like that, because we often get wrapped up in programs or success or money or numbers ... but God says, “No, the root of it all – the thing you have to have before anything else – is faith.”

In fact, we can jump to verse 6: “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” It is impossible to please God without faith. Your good works won't do it. Your programs won't. Your ministering won't. Your giving won't. Your preaching won't. EVERYTHING is empty if we lack faith.

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 7:22-23? “Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” If we don't have a right relationship with God – which is only based on *faith* – then nothing else matters.

Jesus is the Truth

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life...’” John 14:6

When I am doubting, I want answers. I want specific facts to lay to rest my specific questions.

But over time I have learned that facts are not where truth really lies. I know this, because no matter how many facts I have on hand, my doubts never fully disappear. I doubt the new facts as they appear, and new answers only give rise to new questions.

Instead, truth – and its companion, peace – is found in relationship with the One who *is* the Truth: Jesus Christ.

When I am focusing on my relationship with Jesus, I can be content to know that *he* knows the answers to my questions – I don’t have to have all the answers myself. I am comforted to know that he loves me and cares for me and protects me – in and through my doubts. I am perfectly safe from the storm of doubt when I know and have confidence in the Captain who stands at the helm of my ship. The storm may still rage, but I know that he will see me safely to shore.

- When you are struck with doubt, be sure to spend time reading the Word. Not reading to “find an answer” to your questions, but reading to understand God better.
- It can be hard to pray when you are doubting, especially if you are doubting the existence or love of God himself. Write out a series of verses that talk about God, Jesus, and his love for you. Read the verses aloud before you enter a time of prayer, and use them as a springboard for praying. For instance, John 3:16 might unfold into a prayer like this:

“God, I affirm that you loved this fallen world so much – and that includes me – that you sent your very best to save it. That very best was your Son, Jesus. Thank you for giving your very best, even when you knew I would doubt him and you. Jesus, thank you for coming and dying on the cross to save me, even though you knew that I would doubt you now. Your love encompasses and transcends my doubts. You have given eternal life to me because I truly believe in you, regardless of what my doubts are now whispering inside me. Help me to know you better through this period of doubting, so that my faith in you and my love for you would grow even stronger.”

Doubting is Human

“Why has my pain been perpetual and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will You indeed be to me like a deceptive stream with water that is unreliable?” Jeremiah 15:18

You need not be ashamed of your doubts. Doubting is very human. Even great prophets like Jeremiah, whose lips had been touched by God himself, doubted.

Here, Jeremiah was doubting God’s goodness and reliability. He knew God existed and had called him, but God seemed to have let him down. God didn’t appear to be providing either the resources or the results his prophet expected.

In your struggles in life, you are very likely to have the same doubts at some point – perhaps at many points: “Where are you, God? Do you care? Where are your resources? What happened to your promises? Where is your presence? I feel so alone – so abandoned.”

When you have these doubts, take this for comfort: even the great prophets of old had those questions. You don’t need to be ashamed because of your doubts. Acknowledge them. Admit them.

And remember this: ultimately, God never let them down. The same will be true for you.

- What kind of doubts do you struggle with most frequently?
- What does it mean to you to realize that men and women of great faith through all the millennia have doubted as you are doubting now?

Move Forward Despite Doubt

“Therefore, thus says the LORD, ‘If you return, then I will restore you – before Me you will stand; and if you extract the precious from the worthless, you will become My spokesman. They for their part may turn to you, but as for you, you must not turn to them.’” Jeremiah 15:19

When I first studied this passage – and even since then – I have struggled with God’s response to Jeremiah’s doubt and despair. In the previous verses, his prophet poured out his heart to God, asking if God was really with him, if he cared, if was going to act. And God’s answer is almost brusque: “Get your relationship with me right, do your job, and stand up.”

Not exactly comforting. But sometimes, the fact is that we don’t need comfort. We need a kick in the pants. Doubt can mire us down – as it evidently was doing for Jeremiah. Plus, he had apparently let his doubts draw him away from God. On all fronts, he was stuck.

God knew that this was a time for tough love, so he pointed out the problem, and commanded his prophet to get his act together and do his job. Likewise, we sometimes need this tough love. It’s as if God is saying to us, “Yes, you’re doubting. Yes, things are hard. Here’s my answer: get back on your knees and start praying, then stand up and do your job, doubts or no doubts. It’s time to get your priorities straight.”

No pity parties allowed. Stand up, and move forward.

- How do you tend to respond when someone rebukes or reproves you? Why?
- What happens to your faith if you focus on your doubts?
- What do you need to do right now to move forward despite your doubts?



God

God Is Still Holy

As I was reading through Exodus and Numbers, I was struck by how many times God came close to wiping out Israel in his wrath and judgment. Consider these passages:

- “Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.” (Exodus 32:10)
- “When the LORD heard it, His anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.” (Numbers 11:1)
- “The anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck the people with a very severe plague.” (Numbers 11:33)
- “I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess them.” (Numbers 14:12)
- “Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them instantly.” (Numbers 16:21)
- “Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them instantly.” (Numbers 16:45)
- “The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.” (Numbers 21:6)

In each case, Israel had provoked the Lord to anger through sin, rebellion, and never-ending complaints. They had offended God’s *holiness*. As a result, God responded with wrath. Due to Moses’ humility and intervention, that judgment was turned aside or mitigated each time.

I don’t want us to lose sight of something very important here: God is still holy. He still hates sin. He still experiences wrath. Now, for us, Jesus’ humility and intervention at the cross turns aside or mitigates God’s righteous judgment against us.

We should never take that indescribable grace and love for granted.

We should never forget the holiness of God.

God is a God of Hope

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13

With hope, we can get up one more time, no matter how exhausted we are. Hope brings determination, courage, and confidence. And the good news is: *God is a God of hope.*

Where do we find hope to carry on when we are exhausted? Here are four sources of hope that God provides:

Hope from the Word. As we study the Bible, we learn to trust in the character and promises of God, giving us a solid foundation of hope (Romans 15:4).

Hope from the resurrection. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we can be confident that God is at work in our lives now (Romans 8:11).

Hope from the Spirit. God has set his Spirit in us! One of the activities of the Spirit is to fill us with hope (Romans 15:13).

Hope from the future. Can the future be a source of hope? Absolutely! Romans 8:23-25 reminds us that we will one day be completely redeemed: body, soul, and spirit. In that day, anxiety will be no more!

- We often think of hope as a feeling, but the actual definition of hope is “a desire accompanied by some confident expectation” (American Heritage Dictionary). Therefore, we may *feel* terrible or exhausted or anxious, but still *live* in hope. Compare your understanding of hope with this definition: do you need to adjust your thinking about hope?
- What aspects of your life are most troubling to you right now? What hope does the Bible provide you with regard to those specific matters?
- Spend time in prayer, asking God to fill you with hope through his Spirit.

God is Compassionate

“And Elijah was afraid and arose and ran for his life He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, ‘Arise, eat.’ Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, ‘Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you.’ So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.” I Kings 19:3-8

This passage is, to me, one of the most tender images we have of God. We see Elijah – the strong, courageous, faithful prophet – exhausted. Completely done in physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. He actually begged God to let him die in the wilderness.

Does God rebuke his prophet? Get irritated and demand that Elijah stand up and get with the program? Tell him to snap out of it?

No. God comes to him. In person. This is “the angel of the LORD” – the preincarnate Christ. And God makes him a meal, bids him eat, and tells him to go back to sleep. And when Elijah wakes up, God has again been in the kitchen, and has made him a second meal. And as he eats, God says softly, “I know how hard this is. I know this is a tough journey. Take your time. Regain your strength. I’m here.”

- Imagine God coming to you in your pain and exhaustion and comforting you as he did Elijah. Take the time to imagine in the scene in detail. How does it make you feel?
- One of the places that God meets with us to extend us his comfort and his strength is during our quiet time: time we spend reading his Word and talking with him. How is your quiet time right now? What do you tend to do during your quiet time? How long do you spend? Are you spending enough time to actually be able to quiet your heart to hear God speak?



Growth

5 Keys to Spiritual Maturity

Spiritual maturity, or spiritual formation, is God's call to every believer (Ephesians 4:11-16). We are "no longer to be children," but are to "grow up in all aspects into him who is the head, even Christ" (Ephesians 4:14-15).

Five key areas are essential to the development of spiritual maturity:

First, **biblical knowledge**. No verse better sums up the reason we need to know Scripture than II Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work". Based upon that verse, we find our charge as Christians in II Timothy 2:15: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth."

Second, **godly character**. In chapters such as Matthew 5-7, I Corinthians 13, and Romans 12, we find entire dissertations on the nature of a godly life. Yet Galatians 5:22-23 captures the whole: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

Third, **sanctified mind**. As we work out our salvation, it touches all parts of us, and the mind is key. Colossians 3:2 states simply, "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth." And Romans 12:2 exhorts us to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

Fourth, **spiritual discernment**. In I Thessalonians 5:21-22, we find these closing words: "Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil." And again in Hebrews 5:14, we find spiritual maturity linked to discernment: "But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil."

Fifth, **willing obedience**. Jesus stated simply in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

These points can be summed up further: spiritual maturity is living a life characterized by right teaching and right living. The truth of the Bible should be demonstrated in every area of our lives: in our thoughts, our speech, our hearts, and our actions. When we do so, we will truly achieve "the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

Does God Really Have a Roadmap for Your Life?

How to know God's will is probably one of the most-studied topics for Christians of all ages. It takes the form of the question: "How do I know God's will?" Whether we're talking about the broad scope of "God's will for my life," or the smaller scale of "God's will for me in this situation," the question is asked constantly. And, like all questions, it has innumerable wrong answers, misunderstandings, and skewed viewpoints attached to it.

One of the biggest myths about how to know God's will is the belief that the will of God is a roadmap. Here's how this looks in someone's thoughts: "In this situation, God's will is either A or B. If his will is A, and I choose A, then everything is fine. If I choose B, then I'm outside of his will."

We run into problems with this point of view, not on the little scale, but on the big scale. For example, let's say someone holds this point of view. The logical argument looks like this:

- God's will is a roadmap.
- Since God's will is a roadmap, I am supposed to get from point A to point B. The destination is the most important point.
- At every decision point in life, I have to make the right choice in order to stay on the road.
- If I make a mistake, I get off the road.

The problem with this myth is found right here: if some mistakes are uncorrectable and irreversible (i.e., they leave lasting consequences and permanently alter the choices you will have in the future), then you could make a mistake that could cause you to miss out on ever arriving at "point B" on God's roadmap for your life. Therefore, if you assume that God's will is a roadmap, you'd better make sure you never make a mistake.

However, God knows that – whether through outright disobedience or honest ignorance – we are going to blow it. We will make mistakes, we will sin, and we will royally screw things up. Therefore, we can make a deduction: *since God knows we will blow it, yet he does call us to know and do his will, his will has to be big enough and full of enough grace to cope with the fact that we are going to make some whopping sins and mistakes.*

Where can we go with this? We see that the roadmap point of view is insufficient. If it were true, we could never hope to "do God's will." We'd step out of line, not once, but many times, and lose the possibility forever.

But we know that we can do God's will. We can live in his will:

- Ephesians 5:17 says, "So then, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is."
- Romans 12:2 reminds us to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."
- Jesus himself summed it up when he said in Matthew 5:48, "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

These verses give us a hint as to what God's will is really about – how we can transform the roadmap myth into something true and right and good.

If we paraphrase the above verses, they would say, "To know and do God's will be wise ... sanctify your mind ... seek good, acceptable, and perfect things ... be yourself sanctified and holy ... live your life in imitation of Christ."

Do you notice a word that's missing? The word "choice." It's not there. Instead, all the words are about who we are inside. And that tells us something very key: *God's will is not so much about choice as it is about character.* What God wants most is not that you "arrive" at point B (whether that is a certain career, accomplishment, destination, etc.), but that you *become* who he has called you to *be*.

So let's destroy the myth that God's will is a roadmap. God's will is not primarily about getting us from point A to point B. It's about becoming Christ-like. And that, at its core, is a process. It's daily life – step by step, and day by day. We can therefore transform the myth into the truth: *the will of God is a journey.*

As a journey, the will of God can cope with all the twists and turns of life – good and bad, holy and sinful, wise and foolish. Why? Because God has promised that he can use everything in our lives for our good (Romans 8:28). *Everything* – nothing is excluded. The person who loves God can be assured that he can know and live God's will – no matter what his past is, no matter what sins he has to overcome, no matter how long the process takes – because the will of God at its most basic level is about becoming more like Christ every day.

Do We Insult God?

“Oh, I’m nothing.”

“I have no spiritual gifts.”

“God could never use me to do that.”

You know, humility is good and right in its place. But Paul calls us to “sober judgment” about ourselves (Romans 12:3). He then goes on to talk about the spiritual gifts God has given to each of us in the church – gifts, as he says in Ephesians 4:12-13, that are to be used “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” Hardly an inconsequential task!

So I have a simple question today:

Do we insult God by calling ourselves “nothing” and thinking we are worthless when he has redeemed us by his blood, sealed us by his Spirit, called us to his purpose, granted us his gifts, and destined us for his kingdom?

Learning is an Active Verb

In order to reach our goal of spiritual maturity, we must take the task of learning about God and studying the Bible seriously.

Learning is not passive. We cannot be handed biblical knowledge and godly character on a silver platter. We have to work at it and strive for it. Every individual must be committed to learning, if personal and corporate spiritual maturity is to be attained.

First, we must have a **desire to learn**. Without a passion for learning, the best teaching in the world will be stale, dry, and boring. We must love knowledge and wisdom and growth for its own sake and God's sake ... completely apart from whomever happens to be teaching, or whether they are "interesting" or not. If we only want to learn from a certain person or set of people, we cannot say that we love learning. People come and go in our lives. Learning is eternal.

Second, we must **expect to learn**. If we come to church or to a class with a blasé attitude, we will get exactly that out of it. If we come expecting to learn, we will be searching for understanding, for new insights, for truths we were not aware of, and for how to apply the lessons to our lives.

Third, we must **make time to learn**. Learning cannot be an afterthought, or treated with a "I'll see if I can squeeze it in" attitude. Otherwise, we will treat it casually, or be looking at our watch rather than focusing on the topic.

Fourth, we must **put forth effort to learn**. Pay attention. Listen purposefully. Take notes. Do extra study. Apply the truths learned.

Fifth, we must **become self-motivated to learn**. If we rely solely on external stimuli for our spiritual maturity, we will not grow as God intends. We must seek after wisdom and knowledge of our own will, wherever it lies. Books, tapes, videos, teachers, counselors, mentors, friends ... we must search out every opportunity for growth and seize it with both hands.

Put simply, learning is an active verb. If we are to mature in Christ, we must be completely committed to pursuing wisdom and knowledge and godly character – every hour of our lives.

The Power of Obedience

We're very big about control in our culture ... namely, we want to be in control of our lives. Master of our fate. Captain of the ship. But true power comes from handing over that control to God and becoming obedient.

It's interesting to think of obedience as a powerful position. Typically, we think of it in terms of subordination or even as inferiority. Slaves obey. Servants obey. Employees obey. But God says that obedience is the key to victory and power over sin. And that is because we are obeying the one who has a divine strategy for winning – and who has the power to back it up.

Perhaps if we thought of obedience in military terms, it could help. If each soldier did his own thing and what he thought was best, the battlefield would be chaotic. Ammunition would be spent uselessly. Soldiers would be out-flanked. Dangers that would be apparent from a higher vantage point would be walked into blindly. They would lose their lives and the war.

However, if each soldier in the army obeys his commanding officer, the army will win as long as the commander knows what is best to do and has the firepower to rout the enemy. And that is what our Commander has – knowledge and power. In that context, obedience makes perfect sense if we want to win. Obedience puts us in a position of power over the enemy.

Christian Discernment: A Practical Definition

What is really involved in Christian discernment? Is it something mystical? An inner sense? Or is it more practical than that?

Hebrews 5:14 notes that discernment is the ability to recognize good and evil: “Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” But you might say that recognizing good and evil is the end *product* of discernment. What about the actual *process* of discernment: how do we get to the point of recognizing good from evil? How do we gain that ability? What is involved in discernment? If we know the *process*, we will get the product.

The process begins with establishing a solid definition. The American Heritage Dictionary defines discernment as: “To detect or perceive with the eye or the mind; to perceive the distinctions of [which can be considered “to define”]; to discriminate.”

To detect. To define. To discriminate. Three “D’s” that define “discernment.”

To detect. The first aspect of discernment is detection. Put simply: open your eyes! Be observant. Pay attention. Scripture commands us to “be sober” (I Thess. 5:8), and to be “on the alert” (I Peter 5:8).

Remember what the Bible says about Satan and sin and evil: that people fall prey to “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life” (I John 2:16). That “each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust” (James 1:13). That there are people who “hold fast to themselves for an evil purpose; they talk of laying snares secretly; they ... devise injustices ... for the inward thought and the heart of a man are deep” (Psalm 64:5-6).

The implication is that evil is often disguised, camouflaged, or hidden. You have to be watching out for it. Satan doesn’t walk around with a sign around his neck that says, “Satan: Watch Out!” In fact, the Bible teaches that he often appears as an “angel of light” (II Cor. 11:14). He is a deceiver – “a liar, and the father of lies” (John 8:44). You have to keep your eyes open, or you will lose the battle before you ever knew there was a fight.

To define. The second aspect of discernment is to define what you see. First, you have to see what’s around you. Then, you have to think about what defines it. What are the characteristics of this thing, this thought, this situation? Why do I want this thing, this goal? How is this the same or different from other good or evil things I am familiar with?

To discriminate. First, you detect something. Then, you define it. Finally, you have to decide about it. “I’ve thought about this thing, this thought, this situation, this decision in my mind. These are its characteristics. Now, what does the Bible say about this? What does my reason tell me about this? What do trustworthy Christians think about this? What is God’s Spirit telling me about this?”

This is where you are deciding if something is good or evil. After that, it is up to you to obey God, or to disobey him. Remember, the spiritual discipline of discernment – like all spiritual disciplines – is meant to bring us closer to God. Discernment helps us to recognize good and evil, and therefore, if we choose the good, to live a holy life. In doing so, it strengthens and deepens our relationship to God.

Detecting, defining, and discriminating: three very practical “D’s” that define the art of Christian discernment.

God is Not Afraid of Process

Sanctification. A long word for a long process.

Once, a friend I was discipling asked me, “What does it mean to be sanctified?” I took a deep breath, and said, “Well . . . !”

You can talk about positional sanctification, that the moment you accept Christ as your Savior, you are sanctified: set apart in the family of God. You can go on to experiential sanctification, that is, growing as a Christian to become more and more like Christ in our daily lives. You can finish up with future sanctification, that wondrous moment when “We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (I John 3:2, NAS).

I did talk about those things. But when it came to the question of turning orthodoxy into orthopraxy (right teaching into right practice), it seemed to boil down to one thing: God is not afraid of process.

The problem for us as Christians is that sanctification is a frightening word. It conjures images of golden lampstands and the ark of the covenant, set apart as “Holy to the Lord” in the tabernacle and in the Temple. We know that the root of the word is “holy,” and that as saints (also derived from the same root in the Greek), we are to be holy, too.

But holiness seems ungraspable. As out of reach as the cherubim who flew before the throne of the Most High, crying, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty! The whole earth is full of His glory!” (Isaiah 6:3, NAS). We cringe before a holy God, staring in despair at our feeble hold on His Word, at the sins that riddle our lives, at the weakness that drags us down even when we try to do right. We read the simple words, “Be holy, because I am holy” (I Peter 1:16, NAS), and we feel defeated before we have even begun.

The good news is that God is not afraid of process. We stare at the standard of holiness and feel the weight of all our sins. God looks at our sins, and encourages us to work on them – one at a time. We look at the end result, and the journey seems impossible. God looks at the journey, and reminds us that it begins with one small step. We look at the prize and are defeated by our weakness. God looks at our weakness and reminds us that He will supply all our needs.

God is not afraid of process. He is not afraid to take you as you are, and work with you day by day. He knows you will fail. He knows you will fall. What he wants is for you to know that He will always be there to pick you up when you do.

God is a loving Father. He does not ask that we tackle every area of sin and weakness in our lives at once. He gives us one battle at a time, and the strength to conquer.

God is faithful. He is mindful of our frail humanity. He created us. He loves us. When he called us to sanctification, to be holy to him, he did so not to discourage us or to give us an impossible command. He called us to be like him so that we could experience his joy to the fullest, his grace to the utmost, his love for all the ages of eternity.

Where do we begin, then? On our knees, with His Word open in front of us. And with the reminder that God is not afraid of process.

“Just As I Am”?

“I’m not going to change – this is the way I am. Take it or leave it.”

You’ve heard that before? Perhaps you’ve said that before?

A few thoughts:

No, we cannot change another person. People are *people* – self-determining individuals – not *projects*.

And yes, God accepts us “just as I am, without one plea.”

But here’s the kicker: God doesn’t expect me to stay “just as I am.” He expects, demands, and requires change. It’s called “sanctification.”

And likewise, while those around us do not have the right to try to change us, they do have the right to expect that we will take action to change ourselves when we are living an unhealthy lifestyle, have a serious area of weakness, or are acting outside of God’s will.

Don’t change the words of the song: it’s “Just as I am, without one plea.” Not “Just as I am, now leave me be.”

A Theology of Everything

Does your theology take everything into account?

Now, let me be clear here: the *Bible's* theology takes everything into account ... but what we *believe* and what the Bible *says* don't always completely tally. We, quite frankly, often believe what we want to believe, regardless of what God has revealed in his Word.

For instance, many people believe that everything in life should be good because they are Christians. After all, aren't Christians supposed to live blessed lives? Then a spouse dies, a child develops cancer, or their finances collapse ... and suddenly their faith goes out the window. Why? Because life no longer correlates to what they believe.

But God's Word says that "God causes all things *to work together for good* to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28, italics mine). Those few words "to work together for good" make quite a difference in meaning. The promise isn't that everything that happens is going to be good, even if we are living completely within the will of God. The promise is that God will redeem the good, the bad, and the ugly and use it for our good and his glory.

Or take this one: I have heard many people say that they believe everyone should have a job that matches the deepest passion of your heart. That if you aren't wildly excited about what you do, if it doesn't make your spirit throb with energy, then you haven't found the right job yet – keep looking.

Nice thought. Let's look at the extreme position for a moment: there are millions if not billions of people scratching out a living in subsistence farming or horrific factory conditions – both in the U.S. and abroad. I really don't think they feel particularly fulfilled or satisfied, but there may literally be no other alternative for them. They may never *be able to* receive the education, the opportunity, or the financing to pursue their deepest goals, dreams, and desires. All they can hope for is to make enough money to survive.

Has God abandoned them? Has he said, "Oops! I forgot about you all ... I guess you're outside of my scope"? Not at all. The fact is, the Bible nowhere promises that we will have fulfilling jobs if we follow God. The closest it comes is in Ecclesiastes 5:18, where it is written "Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward."

Do you notice something about the verse? First, it's not a promise of God – it's an observation of a very wise man. It says that it's great if you can *enjoy and be contented in* what you do ... *not*

that what you do will always be perfectly fulfilling in and of itself. There's a big difference there. Also note the words: "labor" and "toil." That should give us a hint that work is ... well ... work. After all, as my father often said, "If it was fun, they'd call it 'play'!"

Here's the vital takeaway: If (and when!) you come to the place where life isn't meeting up to your expectations, don't take it out on God and make him out to be a liar. Take a good look at yourself instead, and figure out if you've been believing a lie of your own making.

Easy vs. Simple

The older I get, the more I see a peculiar dichotomy:

Life becomes more and more complicated, because:

- Pat answers don't fit anymore.
- People are more complex than I'd ever imagined.
- Situations are more tangled than I could even believe possible.

Yet life also becomes more and more simple, because as my understanding of God expands, I see that:

- His knowledge is deeper than all the pat answers in the world – he is Wisdom.
- His salvation extends to every soul in need – he is Love.
- His power is sovereign over all the mess we make of our lives – he is Grace.

Perhaps a part of maturity is to come to the realization that life will never be easy – but that as we trust God more and more, it can become simple again.

Exploring the Deeps

“Do you read the Bible?”

“Of course I do!”

“Then, what did you learn today?”

The first question is easy. The second leaves us stumped. We could give answers like, “Well, I learned that David killed Goliath,” or, “I read that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.” But we have the feeling that isn’t quite what is meant. We need to make the transition from merely *reading* the Bible to actively *studying* the Bible.

I know the protests: “I don’t have time!” “I don’t know how!” “I’m not a Bible scholar!” “I don’t know Greek!”

The answers to those are equally simple: You have time for what is important. You can learn how. You don’t have to be a Bible scholar. You don’t have to know Greek.

There are many ways of studying the Bible. All of them are beneficial. Some people enjoy using commentaries, historical references, word studies (even Greek!), or study guides. I recommend trying all of these study aids at some point in order to find what you like best and what helps you the most to grow in “the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Which is, after all, the purpose for which we study the Bible.)

But we should also have a plan for studying the Bible with nothing but the Bible in front of us, a piece of paper and a pen, and fifteen minutes.

Step One: Pick a passage.

Step Two: Read it carefully.

Step Three: Explain the passage in your own words. (Even if you may not understand certain specific verses, paraphrase the general gist of the section.)

Step Four: Ask yourself -- What does this passage tell me about God?

Step Five: Ask yourself -- What does this passage tell me about man?

Step Six: Ask yourself -- How can I apply this to my life? Am I in a similar circumstance? Do I really understand this aspect of God’s nature? What can I learn about myself from this passage?

Step Seven: Pray for increased faith and understanding about God -- specifically, about what you have learned about him from the passage. Pray for changes in yourself to become more “a man or woman after God’s own heart” -- specifically, in the ways you have learned from this passage.

Take a quick example: read the story of David and Goliath. If you just read it, you might be able to say that David killed Goliath, the Israelites beat the Philistines, etc. If you study it as above, you might say the following:

How could I re-state this story? David killed Goliath against all odds, with nothing but a stone and a sling and belief that God could do it.

What do I learn about God? God is willing and able to work powerfully (even miraculously) in our lives when we turn to him in faith.

What do I learn about man? David wasn’t a soldier or a hero -- he was a kid who was a shepherd who had been faithful in tending his sheep . . . and he became a hero of Israel with a little faith, a stone, and a sling.

How can I apply this to my life? Do I believe that God is willing and able to work powerfully in my life? Do I have the kind of faith David showed? Have I been faithful in “tending the sheep”? (After all, that was where David learned the courage and skill he showed against Goliath.) Do I dream as big as David did? Or do I settle for defeat and mediocrity?

And pray . . . Lord, I praise you for being an all-powerful God. For being a God who takes shepherds and makes them heroes. For being a God who delights in our faith and pours out his power through our lives in response to our faith. Help me to be more like David: to tend the ordinary things in my life faithfully, yet to dream God-sized dreams, and to develop the faith to believe that you will turn those dreams into a grace-filled reality.

Amen.

Dare to be Decisive

Consider I Kings 17:1:

“Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, ‘As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.’”

We see something about Elijah in this verse that is very important: Elijah was *decisive* ... and that decisiveness was key to all that he accomplished.

Too often as Christians we mistake waffling and indecision for submission. We preface or finish everything we say with “if the Lord wills.” Originally, such a phrase was meant to indicate our recognition of God’s sovereignty over our plans – and that is good and appropriate. But the phrase has now degenerated so that the real effect is a general uncertainty about how to proceed. How can you walk confidently if at every step you are wondering if the Lord is going to change your direction?

Elijah demonstrates true submission: the submission that results in decisive action. He served the Lord every day (“As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve”), indicating that he was in constant prayer, worship, and communion with God. This regular service put him in the place where he could hear God, and God told him to declare judgment on sin through a drought on the land.

Elijah’s submission to the Lord gave him the courage to be decisive when it came time to act. He marched up to King Ahab and delivered the message of judgment. No hesitation. No minced words. No “if the Lord wills” ... the Lord had already willed it. Elijah was confidently carrying out his orders.

Dark Alleys and Christian Discipline

Long ago and far away (longer ago than I care to admit!), I trained in karate. I learned many lessons there that translated to the Christian life. The value of Christian discipline is one of the biggest:

Imagine for a moment that you are walking at night down a New York alley. There are no streetlamps lighting your way, and you get jumped by a dude who not only wants your wallet, but fully intends to beat you to a pulp.

Now, if you are habitually a couch potato, I can pretty much guarantee the result: you will get beaten to a pulp.

But if you regularly trained five or ten hours a week in one of the martial arts, you'd have a really good chance of getting away with all your body parts and fluids intact.

The same is true of the Christian life. Satan jumps us when we are at our most vulnerable. If we haven't been spending time in prayer and in the Word, if we haven't made a habit of confessing our sin and seeking sanctification, if we aren't in fellowship with other believers and engaging in worship ... in fact, all the Christian disciplines ... then we are going to fall, and we're going to fall hard. We're going to get beaten up badly.

But if we *have* been on our knees every day, if we study and meditate on the Word of God, if we consistently seek spiritual growth, if we find our deepest friendships within the Body of Christ, etc., then we are going to 1) recognize Satan's attack when it comes – whether that is in the form of persecution, deception, or temptation; and 2) know how to respond effectively. We're going to "Stand firm" as Paul urges in Ephesians 6.

Don't expect to develop strength and skill *when* trouble arises. By then, it's too late. Spend the time and make the effort *now* ... then you'll always be ready to stand firm, come what may.

A Light Unto My Path

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son . . .”

You can hear the words in your mind. The voices of little children chanting John 3:16. Maybe it was in Sunday School; maybe in Vacation Bible School. Maybe you have reflected with a bit of wistfulness, “I remember when I could quote . . .” Maybe you never had the chance.

That was then. This is now. The childhood years are past. You are an adult: you have a family, a spouse, a job. You have hobbies, recreation, social gatherings, and various board meetings. When someone mentions the word “memorize,” you cringe. You don’t have the time; you don’t have the energy. And, deep down in your heart, you might also be thinking, “It’s not that important, anyway.”

It’s not that important: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105, NAS).

It’s not that important: “Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11, NAS).

It’s not that important: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away” (Matthew 24:35, NAS).

It’s not that important: “Man shall not live on bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4, NAS).

The Bible is called the “sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17, NAS) – the only weapon we are given with which to fight the enemy. It is our comfort, our shelter, and our refuge. It is where we must turn if we are to combat sin, temptation, heresy, and evil. It is for our instruction, encouragement, rebuke, exhortation, and discipline. It is our joy, our song, our meditation, our contemplation. It is food for the soul and a challenge to our minds. It is history, symbol, theme, revelation, story, song, and prophecy.

It is the nearest thing to a physical touch from God that we will have this side of heaven.

Very well, then. So we tack up index cards with a verse or two, read it for a week while shaving or doing our hair, change it, put up another ... and we find we can’t remember what we memorized a month ago, and we have no sense of accomplishment. So, in dejection, we stop entirely. Better not to try, we reason, than to fail so continually.

Better to try again, and try new. The most effective way I have found to memorize Scripture is to apply minimal actual effort, but a maximum amount of long-term time. Theoretically, I could memorize a verse every week if I tried hard enough. I would forget it within a few weeks, too. Therefore, I don't try to memorize verses or passages. Not directly.

Instead, I take a verse each week. I write it down (or type it up). Then I read it once a day. Just read it. Then put it away. I don't try to memorize it. Not at all. The next day I read it again. And put it away. And so on and so forth. Each week, I add another verse. And I keep reading all of them once a day. Adding one by one; reading them over once every day.

It may take me two or three months before I can stumble my way through a verse without looking at it. But it comes. Slowly, it comes.

And it stays. It may take two or three months to learn a verse, but years later, I can effortlessly call them forth from my memory. One of the keys is not to stop reading a verse once a day even after you have learned it completely. Keep reading it. Only "retire" a verse off your list when your list becomes too long to read once a day or once every other day easily. By then (after what – six? eight? months) you will have learned that verse so well that it will be a part of you – body, mind, and soul.

The keys to memorization are simple: repetition, regularity, and reading aloud.

You will find that Scripture wends its way into your prayers without your even realizing it. It becomes the song on your lips. It leaps forth as an instant defense when your faith is attacked. It comforts your sleep, guides your mind, disciplines your life, and draws your thoughts constantly to God alone.

Then it is that you will find the truth of the Psalms:

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

Anger is Part of the Image of God

"His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime." Psalm 30:5

Time and again throughout both the Old and New Testaments, God is revealed as experiencing anger. Therefore, we can state with sureness that anger is an appropriate part of God's character.

But now we need to move one step further: because we are made in God's image, *anger is an appropriate part of our character.*

God's anger is against sin and unrighteousness. Our anger, unfortunately, tends to be a lot more wide-ranging, and often includes things we have no right to be angry about. Another problem is that, while God always demonstrates his anger in appropriate ways, we often do not.

Because we are often angry at inappropriate things or act our anger out in inappropriate ways, people sometimes tell us (or we tell ourselves) that "we should *never* be angry." "Never"? No, that is a lie of the devil. We have every right to be angry at the things that make God angry. We have every right to demonstrate and act on our anger as long as we do not sin in doing so.

Rather than being ashamed of your anger, it is time to hold it up to the light, examine it, reject what is sinful, and embrace what is good.

- What does it mean to you to realize that anger, in and of itself, is part of the image of God within you?
- What parts of your anger at your anxiety are justifiable? What parts are not?
- What is an appropriate way of addressing or demonstrating your anger? What is not?

Express Anger Appropriately

“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink.’ So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, ‘Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?’ Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank. But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.’” Numbers 20:7-12

Moses was rightfully angry at the Hebrew people. They griped and complained at every turn, and continually turned away from the Lord. Yet again they needed water, and yet again they didn't trust God for it. Nevertheless, God was willing to meet their needs one more time, and he gave specific instructions to Moses.

Moses, however, let his anger control him, instead of the other way around. And as a result, he himself would never see the Promised Land. From Moses' example, we see that when we are angry, we should:

Honor the LORD. Anger tends to make us very self-focused. Even if you have “righteous indignation,” keep your eyes off yourself and on God.

Watch your tongue. You can positively hear Moses' scathing voice, “Listen now, you rebels!” Regardless of how angry you are, don't throw around insults and epithets.

Control your actions. When you are fit to bursting, you want to lash out. Sometimes a physical expression of anger may be appropriate, but most of the time it isn't. While you should not internalize your anger, you should control your outward expressions of it.

- How do you express anger? Are you in line with Scripture with what you do and say?
- Looking back at times when you were angry, what words or actions fed your anger so that it increased, and what words or actions addressed your anger so that it decreased?

Follow Jesus' Example

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. And the tempter came ..." Matthew 4:1-3

The reason Jesus can be our merciful and faithful high priest (Hebrews 4:14-15) is because he suffered as we suffer, and he was tempted as we are tempted.

Consider: Jesus wasn't tempted by Satan right after coming up out of the water of baptism, right after being announced as the Lamb of God, right after hearing the voice from heaven and seeing the Spirit descend as a dove. Temptation then would have been easy to overcome: Jesus would have been feeling great.

No. Instead, Satan waited. Waited until the Son of Man had become exhausted in the wilderness. Waited until forty days and nights of fasting had taken their toll. Waited until the pain, the sunburn, the blisters, the dirt, and the fatigue had accomplished their dreadful work on the body of the incarnate Word.

Then, Satan struck.

"Why don't you take the easy way out?"

"Why don't you give in to pride?"

"Why don't you forget about God?"

Satan whispers such dreadful temptations to us when we are exhausted, too. But we have an example we can follow: our Savior, Jesus Christ. The same Word that he turned to is available for us, every day.

- What temptations do you most commonly face when you are exhausted?
- What Scriptures can you turn to to resist these temptations?
- Who can you turn to to help you resist these temptations?

Nothing Had Changed - Or Had It?

In I Kings 19, we read the story of Elijah running for his life from Queen Jezebel. Seeking refuge on Horeb. The wind, the earthquake, the fire. Then the still, small voice of God.

And when Elijah went forth from Horeb, he did so in strength.

Yet think on it – *nothing had actually changed*: Jezebel was still after him. The Israelites had declared their allegiance to Yahweh on Mount Carmel, but you don't see much evidence of actual repentance. Ahab was still a louse.

But *something had changed*: Elijah's perspective. His faith. His confidence.

What had happened? Elijah had listened to the still, small voice of God. He had re-established his relationship with his King. He had communed with the great I AM. Therefore, even though nothing had changed, *everything had changed*: Elijah knew that God would walk with him through the problems, and would resolve them in his own way and in his own time.

How often do I complain to God about all that's going wrong in my life, and fuss and fume because "God isn't answering"? The fact is, I want God to fix my problems the way I tell him, and I want him to do it *now*. But God calls me with his still, small voice. And this is what he says:

"I am with you. I am sovereign over all creation. I love you. I am acting on your behalf. Will you trust me?"

If I refuse his answer, I go forth from my own Horeb a broken, embittered soul; devastated because nothing has changed.

If I respond to his promise, I go forth renewed and restored, and – in his own time and in his own way, starting with me – *everything changes*.

Open Your Eyes!

Just a short comment today: sometimes I hear people talk dreamily about how wonderful heaven will be, and how amazing it will be to see all that God has for us there. But all too often, those same people never stop to admire the flowers or pause to drink in a sunset.

You know, the creation we are living in is not God's "factory second." It's not like God made this universe as a trial run. Genesis 1 doesn't read, "And God said, 'Oops! I'll do better the next time around!'"

God said this creation was very, very good. Have you stopped lately to really see it? Considered the beauties of the trees and flowers, the wonder of the night sky, the miracles of modern technology (remember, God made everything that makes your computer, iPhone, and iPod work!), the intricacies of the human body, the splendor of the sciences like mathematics or chemistry?

Will heaven be even better? Yes – because it will be without sin.

But the best way to prepare yourself to appreciate the new heaven and new earth is to fall in love with all he has given us – right here.

What Are You Doing Here?

Elijah had beaten the priests of Baal at Mount Carmel and outrun Ahab to Jezreel – but when Jezebel tacked up a “Most Wanted” poster, he tucked his tail between his legs and ran.

You know the story – the wind, the fire, the earthquake. Then the still, small voice of God.

Remember what God said first?

He asked a question (I Kings 19:13):

“What are you doing here, Elijah?”

I don’t think the question was reproachful or demanding. In the previous verses, God had provided angelic cookery for his weary prophet, and comforted him with gentle words. Perhaps God even asked his question with a hint of a smile:

“Elijah, you’ve seen me stop the rain for three years, provide for you by the stream at Cherith, supply flour and oil for you and the widow and her son, raise the boy from the dead, bring down fire from heaven, and restore water to the earth. Yet here you are, living in a place of fear and doubt and depression. What are you doing here?”

Does God sometimes ask that of us? I think so. When I consider everything God has done for me over the decades in which I have trusted him, I am astonished and overwhelmed. He has never failed me. Never forsaken me. Yet all too easily, I fall into fear and doubt and depression. It is then that I hear his still, small voice asking me the same question: *“What are you doing here?”*

And here’s the key: *I have a choice about where I am going to live.* I can live in fear and doubt and depression, looking only at the problems that surround me. Or, I can live in confidence and faith and strength, looking only at my God who is sovereign over all.

Where are you living today? And is God perhaps asking you, gently inquiring,

“What are you doing here?”

Thy Will Be Done

Jesus did not teach us to pray, "Thy will *happen*." He taught us to pray, "Thy will be *done*."

Go *do* it!



Ministry

Restoring Our Love for the Lost

Evangelism. We're all supposed to share the Good News with the people around us, but we often fail to do so. We're afraid of rocking the boat, afraid of being inadequate to the task, afraid of rupturing the relationships we have with others.

But I wonder ... is the real problem on occasion actually a matter of the heart? That we have lost our love for the lost?

If we really love someone and want to see them saved from an eternity in hell, isn't it a measure of that love that we are willing to rock the boat to give them the opportunity to gain that infinite reward? Isn't it worth stumbling for the right words, even opening our mouth and putting our foot in it, if it will give the true Word of God the chance to be heard? If our relationship with someone is really of value to us, don't we want it to continue – forever?

Have we lost our love for the lost? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son..." (John 3:16).

What are we willing to give?

How much do we truly love?

Love Must Be Sincere

In Romans 12:9, Paul states that “Love must be sincere.” Now comes the hard question ... do we love with sincerity in the church?

We certainly preach love in the church. I’m sure of that. I’m equally sure that many non-churched folk accuse church folk of being hypocrites ... so something isn’t connecting somewhere, and chances are it has something to do with love and not walking the talk.

It’s easy to point the finger elsewhere. It’s harder to look in the mirror. But let’s do it anyway. Consider the following questions; you get a point for each time you answer “Yes”:

1. Did you ever say, “I’ll pray for you” then didn’t?
2. Did you ever resent someone else’s success or prosperity or blessing?
3. Did you ever say, “We must get together sometime!” and be glad it never happened?
4. Were you ever in a situation where you should have confronted sin, and didn’t?
5. Did you ever avoid saying hello to a new person in the church?
6. Did you ever gossip about people in the church ... or outside of it?
7. Did you ever say, “How are you?” and not listen for the answer?
8. Have you ever been too proud to say, “I’m sorry”?
9. Did you ever refuse to give when you could have done so?
10. Did you ever turn a blind eye to someone else’s suffering?

The list of questions could go on and on, but we’ll stop at ten. How many times did you answer “Yes”? For each “Yes,” you are admitting that you lacked sincerity. You claimed to love ... but you didn’t act it out.

Love is an action verb. We treat it like a piece of cotton candy fluff ... “I love you!” “I care about you!” “I’ll be there for you!” ... but it goes no farther than the words on the air.

God’s love is active. It is passionate. It goes the extra mile ... right to Calvary. There’s nothing fluffy about God’s love. Nothing vague when he says, “I love you.”

Since we are to imitate God’s love, Paul states that “love must be sincere.” It’s got to be honest. True. Pure. Genuine. Which means it’s got to take action. In II Corinthians 5:14, Paul says, “the love of Christ compels us.” Do you feel compelled by love?

Poverty and the Value of a Cup of Water

I recently read Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. It's an excellent resource on the nature of poverty in America, and I recommend it. It made me want to run out and save the world ... but I was instantly checked, because I don't have the untold billions of dollars it would take to help all the poverty-stricken people in the world. A feeling of helplessness washed over me.

Fortunately, the words of Jesus recorded in Mathew 10:42 came to mind: "Whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward."

A cup of water. Now that, I can give. That might be a \$20.00 bill from my wallet, a regular donation of groceries to the local food pantry, or an offer to provide childcare free of charge to a single mother. I can't change the world. But I can change the world for a few people.

Too often, because we can't do everything, we do nothing. Don't fall into that trap. Remember the value of a cup of water to someone dying of thirst.

Comfort Others

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” II Corinthians 1:3-4

“So that.” Those two little words in the above verses pack a powerful punch. When we have been the recipients of God’s comfort, we have a responsibility: a responsibility to pass on what we have received.

That means we cannot sweep our struggles under the rug and hope no one goes poking around and discovers them. Be honest: it’s often what we want to do. We want to pretend like nothing is wrong; pretend like nothing has ever been wrong. But that is actually one of the many faces of pride. We are, in essence, being too proud to admit that we have had a problem; that we have been in need of God’s grace.

On the other hand, when we obey God’s command to pass on his comfort, it takes humility. We have to admit our humanity. Our weakness. Our struggle. Our doubts. Our fears.

But by the amazing grace of God, our very humility and humanity become the source of comfort, wisdom, strength, faith, and courage for others.

So reach out. You have been given great gifts by God during the course of your struggles. Don’t hold those gifts to yourself. Pass them on.

- How has God comforted you in your struggles?
- How has God provided for you in the midst of your struggles?
- What wisdom have you gained from your struggles?
- How can you pass on what you have received to help others?

A Plan and a Purpose

The Bible teaches that God has a plan and purpose for us – here are some of its highpoints:

- **God calls us to become like Christ.** We see that in verses like Romans 8:29: “For whom [God] foreknew, he also predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son.”
- **God calls us to spread the Gospel.** The Great Commission states it clearly in Matthew 28:19-20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.”
- **God calls us to love the world.** I Corinthians 13 describes that love, declaring in verses 7-8, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.”
- **God calls us to serve the church.** In Ephesians 4:12 we are told that we have received spiritual gifts “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”
- **God calls us to stand firm against the devil.** Ephesians 6:10-12 exhorts us to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

Consider it: Our *goal* is to become like Christ. Our *commission* is to spread the Gospel. Our *command* is to love the world. Our *privilege* is to serve the church. Our *battle* is to fight the devil.

This is a great calling. This describes a life filled with purpose!

The Heart of the Gospel

Many Christians freeze up when they hear the word “evangelism.” They say things like, “I can’t share my faith!” “I don’t know what to say!” “Where do you begin?” “It’s so complicated!”

But in fact, it’s not complicated at all. It begins and ends with a **Person** ... the Person who is at the heart of the gospel and the core of our faith: Jesus Christ.

Consider the first verses of the book of Romans: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”

In these few short verses, Paul lays out everything you really need to know to “show and tell” the plan of salvation. That is, he lays out everything you need to know about Jesus.

Let’s break it apart:

First, it’s **good news**. That’s what “gospel” means. Many of the people you are going to meet are convinced that God, if there is a God, is the guy upstairs with the baseball bat. “God must hate me!” “I’m a miserable sinner – God wouldn’t want me!” “I deserve to go to hell.”

So the first thing to tell people is that you have GOOD NEWS for them! You’re not out there preaching hellfire and brimstone and trying to scare people with a judgmental God. Though remember, there’s a place to talk about hell, and a place to talk about judgment. But the only reason you bring up hell and judgment is to share the good news: that they don’t have to experience either! Whew! What a relief! What a burden to be rolled away! You don’t have to go to hell! You don’t have to experience the wrath and judgment of an angry God. I have GOOD NEWS for you!

Second, this **good news was promised from the very beginning**. You can see it throughout the Bible: God has been reaching out to man and planning for his salvation from the very first moment he sinned. This is important to know, because there are a thousand and one fad solutions on the market each week. And each one is forgotten just as quickly. Our good news has remained unchanged since the beginning of time! It’s a classic ... it’s been on the best seller list since there was a best seller list. It has worked for thousands of years, and it will work for you.

Third, the whole center and focus of the good news is **Jesus**. Not Jesus and works, or Jesus and enlightenment, or Jesus and your nationality, or Jesus and your past ... it's just about Jesus. He did it all. It's not about you – it's about him. The only thing you have to do is say "Yes."

Fourth, Jesus is the center of the good news because he is **God and man** – both, in perfect harmony. If he wasn't man, he wouldn't have been able to die for the sins of men. If he wasn't God, he wouldn't have been perfect or a big enough sacrifice to die for everyone's sins. He had to be both, and he was both. Perfect divinity, and perfect humanity.

Finally, it is good news because of what Jesus did: he rose from the dead after dying for our sins. His sacrifice was accepted, proven in the **resurrection**. We serve a living Savior, not a dead hero. He successfully paid the penalty for our sins and rose victorious over sin and death.

And that's the gospel: I have good news! From the beginning of time, God has wanted to forgive you and save you! He did it by sending Jesus – his Son, perfect God and perfect man. Jesus died on the cross for your sins and rose victorious from the dead so that you could serve a living Savior!

Our appropriate response to the good news is also found in these verses: Paul refers to himself as a servant of Christ Jesus, his Lord. **The** good news will become **your** good news when you accept Jesus as Lord! That's all there is to it!

Why Do We Think It Should Be Easy?

I want life to be easy. I want following God to be easy. At my core, I think that if I'm obeying God and working for his kingdom, then obstacles should fall away in front of me.

However, that's not what the Bible and what history teaches. This morning, I was reminded of that fact when I read these words from Jeremiah 1:17-19:

"Now, gird up your loins and arise, and speak to them all which I command you. Do not be dismayed before them, or I will dismay you before them. Now behold, I have made you today as a fortified city and as a pillar of iron and as walls of bronze against the whole land, to the kings of Judah, to its princes, to its priests and to the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they will not overcome you, for I am with you to deliver you," declares the LORD."

Jeremiah was called as a prophet to speak the words of God to a rebellious nation. And God promised him right up front that it wasn't going to be easy. That everyone – the king, the princes, the priests, and the people – would fight against him.

I then thought of the apostles: all martyred except for John, who was tortured and exiled to the island of Patmos.

And then the memory came to me of standing in one of the porticoes of Chartres cathedral, where bas-relief carvings on the pillars depict in gruesome detail the sufferings of the saints who had gone before.

Will many obstacles fall away in front of us when we follow God's will? Absolutely. God will clear the path for his Word to go forth in power. But it is also true that all the armies of hell will rise against us when we seek to humbly obey the voice of our Lord.

He never promised it would be easy. He promised we would be victorious.

What If You Knew You Were Going To Fail?

A popular question today in goal-setting seminars is “What would you do if you knew you could not fail?” And while that is an incredibly useful question, I have a harder one ... and one that may be even more telling:

What would you do if you knew you were going to fail?

Or, put another way, what is so important to you that failure is no obstacle? What is the one thing you will seek to accomplish no matter how many times you fall down? What would still be worth the attempt, even if you knew beforehand you would never see the results you want?

Do you think those questions farfetched? Unreasonable? Consider for a moment ...

... the prophets of God, who became laughingstocks, outcasts, and even prisoners because they dared to speak the Word of the Lord.

... the missionaries spending their lives on the field and never seeing the conversions they earnestly pray for, little knowing that they are sowing the seed and the next generation of missionaries will reap the harvest.

... the parents who pray nightly for their prodigal child, year after year after year.

I’m not saying that your dearest desires and deepest calling will end in failure. Far from it. In fact, if it is God’s calling, you actually *cannot* fail, regardless of the outcome here on earth. God brings an eternal perspective to the word “success.”

But the fact is, sometimes things don’t turn out the way we want on this side of heaven. Therefore, it’s important to ask yourself the question: Would I do this, even if it never turns out? Even if I never see any “success”? Would it still be worth it? If the answer is “Yes,” then that, more than anything else, is your purpose, your calling, your mission, your vision.

The Case of the Open and Shut Mouth

Okay, I admit it – I really enjoy the Perry Mason novels by Erle Stanley Gardner. Hence the title of this post. (Some of Gardner’s Mason novels were *The Case of the Lucky Loser*, *The Case of the Terrified Typist*, *The Case of the Waylaid Wolf* ... you get the point!)

I always thought it sounded so leveling when Mason would object in court that his opponent was presenting evidence that was “Incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial!” And then I wondered – does God ever deliver that divine objection to us? For instance ...

- ... when Abraham protested that he was 100 years old?
- ... when Moses complained that he couldn’t speak eloquently?
- ... when Isaiah confessed his sinfulness?
- ... when Jeremiah claimed that he was too young to be a prophet?
- ... when Mary pointed out her virginity?
- ... when Peter denied Jesus?
- ... when Paul persecuted the church?

In every case, we as humans would say, “Yes, that is a good argument as to why you can’t succeed/God can’t work/it can’t happen!”

But God stands up in the court of human affairs and thunders, “Incompetent, irrelevant, immaterial!”

He is the God of the Universe:

- No excuse is acceptable to him,
- No problem is insurmountable to him,
- No sin is unforgivable by him, and
- No person is unusable by him!

So if you find yourself opening your mouth to say, “But, God ...!” shut it immediately. All “buts” are “incompetent, irrelevant, and immaterial” when God is at work!

Temptation: A Necessary Preparation for Ministry?

This morning, I read of Jesus' temptation, as recorded in Luke 4. Consider these verses (1-2, 13-14):

"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time. And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit ..."

Sometimes, I think we forget that Jesus wasn't tempted with just the specific temptations recorded in the gospels. Those three trials were the culmination of over a month of hellish whispers. He was tempted *continuously* for forty days – Satan tried *everything*, the above passage notes. And in Hebrews 4:15, it affirms that Jesus was "tempted in all things."

But the Holy Spirit brackets the temptation – Jesus was led by the Spirit into this time of testing, and he was filled with the Spirit upon his successful completion of it. And I paused to consider: does God often, or perhaps even always, allow this period of extreme temptation prior to launching a new ministry?

It does make sense. Temptation is a test – not of the mind, but of the heart. It reveals our answers to questions such as:

- Do I trust God even when life seems to be falling apart?
- Will I obey God even when nobody is watching?
- Am I engaging in this ministry for fame and fortune, or for grace and goodness?
- Do I have the determination to persevere through difficulties?
- What or who am I relying on to see me through life?

If you are trying to launch a new ministry, don't be surprised if you experience delay, doubt, temptation, trial, despair ... in fact, a spiritual desert. I know what the wasteland looks like. I know it seems endless, and that you're hungry for God, thirsty for his Spirit, longing for the touch of Jesus.

The Spirit of God may have led you to this very place, and done so for a very distinct purpose. Trust him. Persevere. Purge your life of sin. Pray without ceasing. Rely entirely upon God and his Word. When you are led out into the place of ministry, it will be "in the power of the Spirit."

Heroes are Real People, Too

It is easy – and understandable – to feel overwhelmed when confronted with evil on a huge scale. We tend to think, “What difference can I make? I can’t change the tide of what’s happening. This is too big for me. Maybe if I was ((*name your favorite Christian leader, past or present*)), then I could do something about this. But I’m not. I’m just me.”

Now consider Elijah, the prophet of God. He faced down King Ahab, stopped the rain for three and a half years, took on 950 prophets of Baal and Asherah, raised a boy from the dead, and called Israel back to Yahweh, the one true God. And yet James 5:17-18 states clearly and simply:

“Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”

Did you hear that? *“Elijah was a man just like us.”* He may have been a hero, but he was – at the core – just a regular man, with all that that entailed:

- He struggled with sin.
- He fought against depression.
- He battled with fear.

He wasn’t perfect, he wasn’t omniscient, he wasn’t always fearless. He was a man – just like us.

Training the Next Generation

Sometimes I wonder if we are failing to give the next generation – particularly our teens and young adults – all they need in order to accomplish God’s calling in their life. Here are some of the lessons I fear that we aren’t passing down:

- How to recognize God’s purpose and calling.
- How to hold even God-given dreams and aspirations and goals with an open hand, allowing those dreams and aspirations and goals to mature and change over time.
- How to distinguish between their identity (who they are) and their gift or purpose or calling (what they do).
- How to trust God entirely, even if he calls them to “give up their Isaac.”
- How to persevere when God seems silent and everything in life comes crashing down around them.
- How to endure rejection, scorn, and persecution.
- How to sacrifice for a greater good.
- How to get up one more time than you fall down.

If we want to raise a generation of men and women who will stand firm in their faith and accomplish great things for the kingdom of God, these lessons aren’t optional – they’re *essential*.

Get Out of Your Comfort Zone

It's so easy to remain where we are comfortable. Our rounds of church, work, friends, and family are reassuring, pleasant, and peaceful.

But Paul urges us in Romans 12:16 to get out of the comfort zone where we talk and interact with people "just like us" day after day. He urges us to "associate with the lowly."

Associate with the lowly. Why would Paul find this point important enough to include in the magnificent litany that makes up Romans 12? Consider these seven powerful reasons:

- First, Jesus named this as one of the criteria for divine judgment. He said, "inasmuch as you have done so to the least of my brethren, you have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). Visiting the sick. The poor. The prisoners.
- Second, because associating with people of low position helps us become like Christ ... who was willing to associate with us.
- Third, it breaks down pride where it secretly lurks in our heart. It reveals and confronts prejudices we may not have been willing to admit to ourselves.
- Fourth, it lets us serve when there is basically no chance of reward or recognition – and that is the test of true service: are we serving to be noticed, or are we serving to minister to the needs of others?
- Fifth, it confronts the world's value system that follows after fame and fortune. It proclaims a new direction in which to pour your energy: into the hurting, into the needy, into people whom the world says are nameless and faceless.
- Sixth, it restores dignity to the people "of low position." Serving others lets them know they are important – to you and to God. And that will draw them into the kingdom of heaven.
- Seventh, it brings the kingdom of God on earth. It reverses some of the evil in the world, challenging it and vanquishing it.

So get out of your comfort zone. Serve the people whom the world ignores and debases. Why? Because Jesus himself did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Following the Call

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. – Matthew 4:18-20

Did you ever pause to consider that Peter and Andrew really didn't know what they were getting themselves into? They knew what they were leaving – a known, solid profession – but they had no idea what Jesus was calling them to exchange it for. "I will make you fishers of men"? What did that mean?

But they left their nets and followed him. No questions. No hesitation. No caveats.

Over the next three years, what was involved in Jesus' call became clearer and clearer. They began to understand the gospel, got used to preaching, and saw lives changed.

Then came Calvary, the empty tomb, the ascension, and Pentecost. That's when the call finally came into true focus.

I believe God often calls us into ministry (whether professional or lay ministry) the same way today. His voice is unmistakable, his command to follow doesn't allow for misunderstanding, but he usually leaves the details vague at first. Why? Because he wants us to follow *him* ... not chase after some personal ambition or dream or desire. And because he wants us to *follow* him ... not run ahead of his plan and his timing.

But we frequently resist:

"What, exactly, are you calling me to, God?"

"Can you give me some details here?"

"I need to weigh the pros and cons."

"I can go, but I have some qualifiers to attach to the contract."

We want to know how things will work out. What we will be required to do. What the cost will involve. How the future will unfold. Will we be successful? Will we be happy? Will we be fulfilled?

Did you ever stop to think that by asking questions like that, you are placing yourself above God? You're treating him like a vacuum-cleaner salesman on your front doorstep: "*Show me what you're selling and I'll tell you if I'm buying.*"

We forget that he delivers a call – not a request. He didn't *ask* Peter and Andrew if they would consider coming with him. He *called* them: "Come, follow me."

Put aside your questions. Your hesitations. Your caveats.

Forget asking God for guarantees or security.

Follow the call. He'll make everything clear to you in his time.

Infinite Value

We live in a world where success is determined by numbers. The more people, the more results, the more sales, the more fans ... more is better. More is successful. The corollary? Less means failure.

Unfortunately, we bring that yardstick right into our Christian ministry. We evaluate our "success" on the basis of how many lives we touch, how many people we preach to, how many books we sell, how many listeners we have for our radio show until we achieve ... success.

More is better. Less is failure.

But let's face it. Only a small percentage of Christians alive today preach to crowds or write books or talk on radio shows. Only a handful will reach hundreds or thousands or millions of people. Most of us live, serve, and minister quietly within a small circle of work, church, family, and friends. Does that mean that the vast majority of Christians cannot experience "success" in Christian ministry?

Well, if "more is better" and numbers define success, then I guess the kingdom of God is doomed to failure. Fortunately, that is *not* the case! Here's why, in six short words:

Every soul is of infinite value.

That's right. Every soul. Every person you meet. Every woman you speak to. Every man you work with. Every child you know. *Every soul is of infinite value.*

That means that if you touch just *one life* with God's truth, God's love, and God's Spirit, your "success" rate jumps from zero to infinity. Just like that. Think of it like this: *everything you do has infinite worth, because it impacts people of infinite value.*

Suddenly, the playing field is level. All of us who serve the Lord are working toward one end: furthering the kingdom of God. We all have gifts, and the gifts all differ. What is required is that we use our gifts as he gives us opportunity. There is no such thing as one person having "more success" than another just because they have a ministry that reaches a greater number of people. What matters is that we are reaching the people God has given us the responsibility to reach. That is why Jesus taught us so clearly:

"And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward" (Matthew 10:42).

Remember: Every soul is of infinite value. Therefore, everything you do has infinite worth.



Prayer

Praying the Scriptures

You read the Bible. You study its passages. But you want more. You crave for it to become in your life the “living Word.” A Word alive, a song on your lips, the voice in your heart.

For the Word to live in you, you must make it a part of your life—more than simply a part of your routine or a part of your knowledge. One way (only one of many—like one facet on a brilliant-cut diamond) is to pray the Scriptures.

“Pray the Scriptures.” What does it mean? Saying the “Our Father”? That is included, of course, but there are over a thousand other pages of the Bible as well, and all (yes, all!) can become part of your prayers.

Begin with the Psalms. They are the easiest place to begin this discipline. Are you joyful? Read Psalm 100. Read it—and pray it. Let the words of the Psalmist become your own words. Let the verses flow through you as if they were being spoken for the first time in God’s creation.

Have you sinned? Pray Psalm 51. Be in agony as David was when he wrote the words—recognize the depths of your sin, the distance it has brought you from God . . . and the all-forgiving love of God that would take you back, cleanse you, be merciful to you, and (the greatest of miracles!) continue to work through you.

Are you in sorrow? Pray Psalm 77. Ask your true, honest questions of God—tell him that you feel rejected, abandoned, cast off. And seek anew the remembrance of his mercies with the psalmist.

But what of the rest of Scripture? Do you need wisdom? Pray through Proverbs 3 or James 1. Has there been a death in the family? Pray John 11 where Jesus raises Lazarus, or I Corinthians 15, that speaks of our heavenly home and bodies. Are you in doubt? Pray Colossians 1 that describes Christ our Lord, using the words as a declaration of faith, and as a prayer for more faith. Are you in persecution? Pray Ephesians 6, asking anew for the armor God has provided us in the Spirit.

Let the Scriptures become the place you turn to when you don’t have the words to express the joy or sorrow of your soul. Let it become your offering to the Most High God. Let the words truly “dwell within you,” becoming the fruit of your lips and the sweet incense of your prayers.

Then, let this prayer life spiral out, to include your family, friends, enemies, and community. Is your spouse facing a lay-off that is looming above him? Pray the story of David and Goliath, asking that your spouse have David’s faith and confidence, and that God pour out his power mightily. Are there factions within the church? Pray I Corinthians 1 or 12, where Paul speaks

against such divisions. Are you the head of the teen ministry? Pray Romans 12 for them, and ask that God reveal to them the gifts he has given to each one of them. Are you a parent? Pray the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 for your children, and ask that they grow up to live such a blessed life.

Through prayer and in prayer, the Scriptures will begin to beat through your veins like your life-blood. No longer will the Bible be the book on your nightstand. It will be your refuge and comfort, your wisdom and direction. In searching its pages, you will find passages for every need, every trouble, every joy, and every sorrow.

Open its pages—and kneel and pray.

Seek the Lord

"I sought the LORD, and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears." Psalm 34:4

I am ashamed to admit it, but the fact is that when I am afraid, I often forget to pray.

God's name should be first on my lips when fear hits. He should be the One I turn to immediately. But instead, all too regularly, I forget. Instead of calling on him, I try to rely on myself. Instead of turning to him, I turn my whole gaze inward, focusing on the fear, focusing on my lack of strength, focusing on me, me, me, me, me. No wonder fear gets such a strong grip on my soul!

The psalmist knew better: "When I was afraid, I sought the Lord. He's the one I turned to. He answered. He delivered."

Now, a word of caution here: relief is not always immediate. God's answer and deliverance may unfold over months or years. God will definitely call you to give it your 100%. God may require that you make changes to your lifestyle and behaviors and thought patterns. God might ask you to look certain fears dead in the eye that you have avoided for years.

God doesn't promise a timeframe around deliverance. He just promises that it is a sure thing.

So seek the Lord. Pour out your needs before him. Ask him for his help. For his strength. For his resources. For his deliverance. "For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened" (Luke 11:10).

- What is your first response when fear hits? What do you do? Why?
- Do you truly believe that God is willing and able to deliver you from your fears? Why or why not?
- Have you ever, in essence, demanded or expected God to work a miracle – and when he didn't do so, you became disappointed in him and apathetic about further prayer? If so, address this with God in prayer. Seek counsel if necessary.
- What resources has God given you to help you overcome your fear?
- What further steps might God be calling you to take in order to overcome your fear?

Sentence Prayers

Lord, I pray not for an emotional high, but for steadfastness of soul.

I pray not for happiness, but for joy.

I pray not for forgetfulness, but for the ability to forgive.

I pray not for the end of trials, but for grace in them.

I pray not for pleasure, but for purpose.

I pray not for the cessation of my loved one's struggles, but for their growth through them.

I pray not for a roadmap of my life, but for a light for my path.

I pray not for visions and thunder, but for an ear to hear your still, small voice.

I pray not for the fire to be cooled, but for the crucible to purify.

I pray not for independence, but for brokenness of spirit.

In all these things, I pray not for the quick, nor for the shallow. I pray not for what I want, but for what I need. I will set my eyes beyond my own pain, beyond my own reason, beyond my own understanding, and seek you alone.

And in all these things, I humbly beg your grace, for you alone are the Author and Perfecter of my faith.

Amen.

Be Honest with God

*“Evening and morning and at noon, I will complain and murmur, and He will hear my voice.”
Psalm 55:17*

David was angry. A close friend had betrayed him, with bitter results. So what did he do? I could say that he called upon God and prayed. David himself was more blunt: “Evening and morning and at noon, I will complain and murmur.”

Complaining. Murmuring. David was being devastatingly honest with God: about his situation, about the pain it was causing, about his despair, and about his anger. Without apology, he brought it all before God night and day, complaining and griping about what was happening.

We see two important truths from this psalm:

It is all right to be honest with God. God can handle your anger. Pour it out to him. Let him be the first one you turn to, and hold nothing back.

Honesty with God brings resolution. If you read through Psalm 55, you will see a progression. David pours out his pain and expresses his anger, but then the tumult of his emotions begins to calm down. He reaffirms his trust in God, culminating with the verse, “Cast your burden upon the LORD, and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken” (Psalm 55:22).

If you are honest with God about your anger, you will find that he will help you to think through the situation and to place your trust in him. But he can only work with what you bring him, so bring him everything.

- What were you brought up to think about anger and being angry? Were these ideas true and scriptural or not?
- Do you feel comfortable being completely honest with God about your anger? Why or why not?
- What are you most angry about? Spend time in prayer telling God about the situation, and about your anger.

Asking the Right Questions

The question is not . . .

Do you bow your head before you eat?

but rather,

Do you bow your knees before your Father?

The question is not . . .

Do you curse when you're mad?

but rather,

Do you bless when you're angry?

The question is not . . .

How many times did you go to confession last year?

but rather,

Have you confessed your sin today?

The question is not . . .

Do you go to church on Sunday?

but rather,

Are you the church every day?

The question is not . . .

Do you read your Bible?

but rather,

Do you obey God's Word?

The question is not . . .

Did you take communion this month?

but rather,

Do you have communion with Jesus?

The question is not . . .

What did you do for Christ last year?

but rather,

What are you doing for him today?

The question is not . . .
 What we do not do.
but rather,
 All that we do.

The question is not . . .
 How little we can get by with.
but rather,
 How much we can sacrifice.

The answer is not . . .
 Whenever it is convenient, and whatever is easy.
but rather,
 All that I have, all that I am, every day of my life, with every ounce of my strength.

For we must live for God –
And God alone.

Wisdom and Courage

As I was praying for a friend, the chorus to an old hymn came to mind:

“Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of these days...”

It summed up what I was praying, but it made me think: how often do we pray just the opposite? How often are our prayers really composed of the plea:

“Answer my questions and get me out of this problem!”

Praying for wisdom is not the same as praying for answers. When we pray for wisdom, we are asking God to grant us the discernment to make wise choices. When we pray for answers, we are asking God to simply “tell us what to do.” Children need to be told what to do. Adults understand the necessity and accept the responsibility of making wise choices.

Again, praying for courage is not the same as praying for God to take the problem away. It is certainly appropriate to pray for deliverance (the psalms are full of such prayers), but we have to recognize with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that:

"Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (Daniel 3:17-18).

These three men knew that God *could* deliver, but they also drew on courage, knowing that God might not *choose* to deliver them. And in fact, they needed that courage, because while God did finally deliver them, they were first bound and thrown into the fire!

Let us learn to pray for ourselves and others that God will truly:

“Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of these days...”

Praying through Fear and Doubt

The other day, I was praying and found myself saying urgently, “God, don’t fail me!”

I stopped, caught by my own words.

I was praying to the God of the universe. The God who not only *speaks* truth, but who *is* Truth. What he promises, he will do. What he says, he will accomplish. He is all-powerful, all-loving, and in control. Why then, did I pray, “God, don’t fail me!”

My uttered plea was really the result of *my fear and doubt*. Fear that God would lie or talk in double-speak, like the anthropomorphized gods of Greek and Roman mythology. Doubt that God loved me or had the power to do what he promised he would.

So right there, I flipped the prayer around to the way I really needed to be praying:

“Lord, you know my fear and my doubt. You see my anxious thoughts. You know how frail I am; how easily I fall. But I pledge right now to stand on the truth of your Word – that you are always truthful, always loving, always sovereign. **God, don’t let me fail you!**”

Prayer and Passivity

I'm very concerned that we sometimes use prayer as an excuse for passivity. We hide behind our bed on our knees because ...

- We don't want to put forth the energy to research solutions to a problem we are facing.
- We don't want to use our reason to think through a situation and decide what is the best course of action.
- We don't want to do what needs to be done.

So because "we don't want to," we act very spiritual and say "I'm still praying about that." What we really want is for God to remove us from the situation or remove the situation from us without our lifting a finger to help.

Just a word of warning here: God isn't in the business of delivering answers on silver platters.

- If you have a problem, expend the necessary energy gathering information about it so that you can be knowledgeable.
- God gave you a brain, and he expects you to use it. He will help you make a wise decision if you ask him to, but you have a part in the process.
- There comes a time when you have to get off your knees and do something. God won't take action for you.

Don't make prayer an excuse for passivity. Pray – then stand up in the power and grace of God and take action.

Top 10 Confession Killers

What inhibits us from the effective practice of confession, either privately or corporately? Here are the top 10 confession killers:

1. **Shame.** Often, it seems as if everyone else has their act together ... surely they don't have any problems or struggles with sin! This (very fallacious!) view leads us to shame, and an unwillingness to confess our own faults.
2. **Pride.** Then there is the case for pride. The same pride that changed Lucifer, the angel of light, into Satan, the prince of darkness, threatens us today and every day. When we are unwilling to admit, even to ourselves, that we are sinners, we have allowed pride to cut us off from the forgiveness of our heavenly Father.
3. **Ignorance.** On the other hand, sometimes we actually do not know what is and is not sin. For new Christians, this is understandable. But for the rest of us, it is not only not understandable – it is inexcusable. We are called to know God's Word well so that we will not sin against God (Psalm 119:11).
4. **Sloth.** Sloth was one of the original seven deadly sins, but we tend to ignore it today. We're simply too lazy to truly examine ourselves and see where we went wrong.
5. **Self-abasement.** Humility is good. A worm-of-the-earth mentality is not. Humility drives us to God to confess. Self-abasement makes us think that we're so bad that God couldn't forgive us anyway, so why bother confessing?
6. **Culture.** Our entire culture today focuses on being positive and happy. This has even crept into the Church, where we often focus so much on God's love and goodness that we forget his righteous judgment of sin.
7. **Ambiguity.** Being vague is a great way to avoid reality. We pray, "Lord, please forgive all my sins," but we don't actually go about naming them. Then, we don't feel quite so guilty for continuing to commit them.
8. **Euphemisms.** In our politically correct world, we are surrounded by people who call "evil" "good" by giving it another name, i.e., "alternative lifestyles." When we find better sounding labels for our own sins, it makes us feel justified – instead of judged.
9. **Assumptions.** We make assumptions about God – we may think he's so good and loving that he'll "let it slide" so we don't bother confessing, or we think he's up there with a baseball bat to bash us, and so we're scared to confess.
10. **Belittlement.** We tend to view some sins as "smaller" than others and therefore negligible – forgetting that all sin, great or small, cuts us off from God.

Never forget John's words of warning and hope in I John 1:8-9: "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Don't let these confession killers destroy you!

Placing Responsibility Where It Belongs

I am deeply grieved today as I write. And the reason is this: at this very moment, people are turning away from God and sinking into despair, their faith in shambles, bitterness and grief clutching at their chest, because they don't understand – or perhaps want to accept – two simple words:

Free will.

Two short words. Easily defined. Even the theology behind them can be stated in words of single syllables:

Free will means I can choose what I want to do.

So where does the doubt come in? The despair? The broken faith? The bitterness? The grief?

It comes here:

Suppose you have a friend or family member who is making choices that are wrecking his or her life. Maybe it's drugs. Or alcohol. Promiscuity. Pornography. Wanton spending. Staying in an abusive relationship. The list goes on and on. The bottom line is this: their life is in chaos, they are screaming out in agony, they may actually be on the short road to death and even hell, and you love them with all your heart.

What do you do? You advise, you plead, you intervene, you act. And you pray.

And then ... nothing happens. Nothing changes. The pain in the other person's life just goes on and on and on.

And you pray.

Still nothing happens. Nothing changes. The pain is worse than ever.

And you pray.

And ... nothing ... changes.

Then comes the day when you stop praying. When the despair sets in. When the doubt that was creeping at the edges of your consciousness springs into full bloom.

You find yourself doubting God's love. His power. Even his existence.

You bitterly resign yourself to "whatever he wants."

Your entire spirit collapses within.

And maybe, you even hate God.

Why?

Because God didn't do what you wanted him to do. Because God didn't save your loved one. Because God didn't work a miracle in the other person's life.

And surely, that would have been for God's glory and the other person's good, wouldn't it? Your prayer wasn't selfish. It wasn't focused on you. All you ever wanted was for the other person to be saved, to be happy, and to give God the glory for a beautifully changed life – delivered from all the pain and garbage they had been experiencing.

What was wrong with that?

Here's the answer:

There is nothing wrong with wanting those things. That is, indeed, what God wants, too. He doesn't want your friend or your family member to be caught in the web of pain. He longs to deliver them.

But here's the catch:

We're talking here about a loved one whose pain is ***the direct result of the choices they are making***. This isn't about someone in pain because (for instance) they have cancer and God has not brought healing. A person with cancer didn't *choose* his or her illness in any way. Today, we're talking about people who are making poor, unwise, or sinful *choices* that are directly impacting their lives in a negative way.

And because we are talking about ***choices***, we are talking about ***free will***. And free will is always, forever, and exactly that:

FREE.

That means ... are you ready? ... ***God can't change their life unless they choose to let him do so.***

God ... can't?

Correct. God *can't*. Because that is the nature of the gift of free will. When God gave us free will, he gave it to us with no strings attached: nothing and no one, not God himself, can impose their will on us. We are truly free to choose. All the time. In every circumstance. Period.

But, you say, God is all-powerful!

Correct again. God is all-powerful. But he also obeys his own rules. Because he gave us free will, he limits his power in that respect. He will not use his power to overcome our free will. Otherwise, free will would no longer be free.

Let's bring this home:

When a friend or family member is choosing a destructive path in their life, you can pray that God would do everything that is within his sovereign power to influence, guide, and direct them toward repentance and healing. That might mean that:

- God would pour out his grace on them.
- God would entreat them constantly through his Spirit.
- God would remove the veils of deception from their mind.
- God would give you and others words that would speak to their heart.
- God would order circumstances to influence them.
- God would convict them concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment.
- God would place a yearning for himself in their souls.

And so much more! God is all-powerful – and all these things are well within his power! You can therefore pray for all these things and look for them in the person's life. I am sure you will see God moving in these ways.

But there is one thing that you must remember at all times: God can do and will do all these things when you pray. But he cannot do one thing: he cannot force them to change their life.

God can pour out his grace, his love, his power, and his truth on the person: but they can still choose to refuse his grace, ignore his love, disparage his power, and spit on his truth.

Or, they can choose to respond to his grace, accept his love, delight in his power, and embrace his truth.

It is their choice. It is not God's choice. It has everything to do with them. It has nothing to do with God.

That is the nature of free will. We are truly free. We can freely choose evil and hurt and pain and folly, just as we can freely choose good and healing and joy and wisdom.

So if today you feel like turning away from God, if you are doubting your faith, if you are in despair because God hasn't answered your prayers in saving your loved one from a destructive

path, or if you've already turned your back on God ... remember this. God hasn't failed you, nor them. He is doing everything he can to speak into their lives.

I know it hurts. I know you are grieving and in pain. I know you are anxious for them. It is right to feel all those things, because you love them. And though you may not realize it, God feels all that, too – much more than you ever can. He loves the person you are praying for with all his infinite love ... the love that brought Jesus to Calvary.

But we are free. We are always free to choose our way.

Therefore, the final choice to change is, and must be, their own.

How to Pray for the Complete Person

As children, we prayed, “God bless Mom and God bless Dad. God bless Aunt Susie. God bless my friend Elizabeth ...” But as adults, we need to go farther than that. A lot farther. But sometimes, we just don’t know what to pray.

A large part of our confusion about what to pray for stems from the fact that we rarely look beyond the obvious. When someone is sick, we pray for healing. That’s it. When someone is in financial need, we pray that they get money. Then we stop.

But this kind of praying is shallow at best. We forget that as humans, all aspects of our lives are interrelated. Rarely do we have a need in one area alone: rather, when we have a problem in one part of our lives, everything else is often affected, too. Therefore, to pray wisely for each other, we need to replace our one-sentence prayers with prayers for the complete person.

Here is a checklist of six major areas to pray for when you are considering the people on your prayer list:

Physical. If a person is experiencing difficulties in one area of life, be sure to pray for their physical health, since our bodies react instantly and often severely to stress or trauma. Even if you don’t know for certain that a person is having physical symptoms due to a problem, imagine for a moment what physical effects you might be experiencing if you were in their situation, and pray accordingly.

Emotional. Our emotions are always involved whenever we experience problems in life. Be certain to pray for such things as comfort, steadiness, and hope. If the problem is serious or long-term, you may also want to pray that the person receives quality emotional counseling and the benefit of an emotional support team. Emotions are powerful and volatile. They must be included in our prayers.

Mental. Don’t forget the mind. Everything we do and say in life is the product of our mind and thought. For that reason, be sure to pray that during difficulties people have the grace to think carefully and clearly, that they will have good advice and counsel from others, and that they would be able to make wise decisions.

Relational. Nobody lives in isolation. Pray for the relationships the person is engaged in: for peace where there is conflict, for true and godly friendships, for increased communication skills, for the ability to forgive when hurt, etc.

Financial. Money can cause tremendous anxiety and difficulty. Pray for people's financial situations: that they would be able to earn a good living, spend wisely, invest for the future, and give generously.

Spiritual. Finally, never neglect praying for the person's spiritual well-being. For faith to conquer doubt, for love of God and others, for the fruit of the Spirit to be manifest in the person's life, for a full and complete knowledge of God, and more. The spirit is our ultimate foundation, and requires significant and serious prayer.

Consider this example: suppose a couple is having marriage difficulties. You will probably start by praying for their relational needs: communication skills, conflict resolution, forgiveness, etc.

But don't stop there. Reflect on their finances: could money struggles be contributing to their marital conflict? Are there job issues involved? Spending habits? Debts?

How about their physical health? Could insomnia, muscular tension, migraines, or stomach ulcers be resulting from their continual arguments?

Consider their emotional state: are they suffering from severe anxiety, from anger management problems, or from despair and hopelessness?

What about their mental activities? Are they thinking through the situation clearly? Do major decisions need to be made? Whom are they relying on for advice and counsel?

What of their spiritual health? Are their marriage difficulties the result of spiritual backsliding? Is one partner slipping away from the faith while the other remains strong? Has sin or apathy crept into one or both of their hearts?

When you pray in this way, considering every aspect of a person's life, you will find that your prayer life intensifies. You will gain new insights and understanding into the issues at hand. You will grow in the areas of compassion and love. And, most of all, God will answer.

Giving God Permission?

Yesterday, while talking with a friend, she commented that her pastor had used the following phrase in prayer:

“Lord, we give you permission ...”

She inquired what I thought of the phrase, because, she said, it made her very uncomfortable.

I thought about this quite a bit, and I would like to offer the following for consideration:

First, I suspect that what is meant by the phrase is the following (greatly expanded): “Lord, we recognize that we have free will. And because of our free will, we can quench your Spirit from working in our lives. We don’t want to do that. We want you to act and move in our lives as you desire. We therefore choose, with our free will, to cooperate with your Spirit, rather than to frustrate your Spirit.”

If that is the intention of such a prayer, there is certainly no *theological* issue with it. However, there may be a *semantic* issue with it.

The semantic issue is what my friend was responding to when she said the phrase “we give you permission” made her uncomfortable. And it is this: the term “permission” carries with it certain connotations. Namely, “permission” often indicates *hierarchy*:

- A parent gives permission to a child.
- A teacher gives permission to a student.
- An employer gives permission to an employee.

If the listener brings that connotation to bear on the phrase, then there is a disconnect: the phrase can be construed by the listener to mean that we (humans) are in a hierarchical position *above* God. We give him permission because we’re on top of the heap.

Now, if the phrase is taken with that connotation, there *is* a theological problem, because humans are most emphatically *not* above God – not even when there is a question of free will. God is sovereign, period.

The conclusion? Simply this: when you are speaking, particularly in a public situation, be aware of what connotations your listeners may bring to the words you speak. Be on the lookout for

situations, like the above, where what you say may be misconstrued. If possible, re-phrase to avoid problematical interpretations.

How might we re-phrase the above to avoid this possible misunderstanding? Perhaps this way:

“Lord, we earnestly ask you to ...”

After all, we wouldn't be asking God to do something we didn't want him to do and that we weren't willing to cooperate with him on. And this phrase puts us clearly in the appropriate position as supplicants before the throne of God.

Certainly, we can't be 100% sure that 100% of the people who hear us will understand what we are saying – and what we intend to say – with 100% accuracy. That would be impossible. Just be alert, be aware, and be careful. Do your best.

Answers vs. Wisdom

I often find myself praying, “Lord, tell me what to do!” or “Is this course of action that I’m considering right or wrong? Just tell me!” But I have finally realized that this is not the best kind of prayer, and, in many instances, is not even an appropriate kind of prayer.

You see, when I am asking God to tell me what to do, I am refusing to take responsibility for my life. I am denying the image of God within me which is, in part, my free will.

You might say, “But as a Christian, I am supposed to surrender my will to God’s will.” Agreed. However, surrendering my will does not mean surrendering my mind. Surrendering my will does not mean becoming a puppet on strings. Surrendering my will does mean choosing to walk with God, seeking to live a godly life, and putting God first in all my decisions.

It may be easiest to think of it this way. What would happen if a thirty-year old man were to ask his parents, “Should I take this job or that one? I won’t take any part in this decision – you just tell me what to do and I’ll do it!” The parents of such a thirty-year old man would answer, “I can give you input. I can help you think through the logical consequences of either choice. But the final choice is yours, and should be. A mature person asks for help, advice, and input when making a decision, but the decision-making and the final decision is their own.”

So it is with us and God. Notice that James 1:5 (NAS) states clearly, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God ...” It does not say, “If any of you needs an answer.”

When I pray for wisdom, I am asking God to help me think clearly. To see all the ramifications of my possible choices. To understand the situation. To discern good from evil. I am asking him to help me make a good and right decision.

In so doing, I grow in maturity. I develop my mind and my critical thinking skills. I learn to accept responsibility for my actions. I practice the discipline of listening for God’s voice. I strengthen my relationship with God as I walk with him hand-in-hand through my life.

It takes courage to pray for wisdom. It’s a longer, harder road. It is so much easier to just say, “Tell me what to do!” But God longs for each one of us to grow into maturity in him. He doesn’t want puppets on strings – he wants sons and daughters of the kingdom.

All I Can Do Is Pray

I've heard it a thousand times. I've probably said it a thousand times myself. Someone bares their soul to me, and the situation is terrible, painful, difficult ... far beyond the reach of anything I can do – or anyone can do – to help. And then those six words slip from my lips:

“All I can do is pray.”

Even as I write the words, I can hear the defeat resonating from them. Properly translated, what I far too often mean when I say those six words is, “I’m sorry I can’t do anything to help. I don’t have the resources you need. I wish I did. I’ll pray about it, but I know that’s just a drop in the bucket to what you really need. I don’t expect anything to really happen as a result of my prayers.”

Then one day as I said it, God rocked me back on my heels. I realized how much I was cheapening God by the attitude behind my words. Think about it:

“All I can do is pray. I’m sorry – all I can do is call upon the sovereign Lord of the Universe, the One who holds all resources, all grace, all power, all hope in his hands. All I can do is ask the loving God who sent his Son to die for us and then raised him from the dead to help you out. All I can do is ask God to demonstrate his divine character in your life through his unending providence, generosity, love, miracles, presence, and care. Sorry I can’t do more.”

It comes down to a question of **attitude** and a recognition of **adequacy**. As Paul writes in II Corinthians 3:5 “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.” Our attitude should be one of humility, recognizing that our adequacy to meet any need or act in any situation is from God alone.

Once we assume that attitude and understand that our adequacy comes from God, we will no longer despair when we are faced with situations that are beyond our control or help. We simply turn in the same humility to the God who is more than adequate to meet every need – and call upon him for deliverance.

With the right attitude and an understanding of where our resources always and only ever come from, we can truly reach out and say with confidence and trust, “I can’t help you. I wish I could, but I simply don’t have the resources you need. Fortunately, I know the One who does. **All I can do is pray** – but I know that God will take care of everything else.”



Relationships

When the Road Darkens

This morning I considered two quotes. One is from a movie version of the Agatha Christie novel *Death on the Nile*, where a self-centered and arrogant young woman comments, "Isn't it awful when one's friends fall on hard times? One simply has to drop them!"

The other is a quote from J.R.R. Tolkien. It says, "Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens."

What kind of a friend are you? When your friends are crushed under life's circumstances ... when doubt and depression and grief overtake them ... when the pain seems to go on without end ... what will you do?

Will you immediately wash your hands of them? After all, they don't have anything they can give to you. They can't meet your needs in the middle of their own crisis.

Will you keep the relationship going for a little while, but with less and less energy and initiative on your part until it finally fritters away? Get on with your own life and leave them behind to succeed or fail on their own?

Or will you be faithful when the road darkens? Will you walk the entire length with them, the whole Via Dolorosa? Knowing it's going to cost you. Knowing it's going to hurt. Knowing it's going to be a long, long tunnel before they come out the other side.

What kind of a friend are you?

Be Careful What You Ask!

Proverbs 18:21 reminds us that “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” And that’s true even about the questions we ask.

Too many times, people ask questions thoughtlessly – unaware of the damage the very *question* they are asking can cause to the listener. Questions like:

- “So, when are we going to throw a baby shower for you?”
- “You’re such a nice person – why haven’t you married?”
- “Your boss is really unfair. Why don’t you get a new job?”

Questions like these are hurtful for two reasons. First, the questioner is making an assumption about the other person’s *desires*. In the above examples, the questioner is making the assumption that the other person *wants* children, *wants* to be married, or *wants* to get a new job. It is entirely possible that the person doesn’t want children, or doesn’t want children now; that they are perfectly happy being single; or that despite their boss, they really enjoy what they do. In that case, questions like the above put the person on the *defensive* – they feel that they have to explain or justify their current position to the questioner.

Second, the questioner is making an assumption about the other person’s *actions*. For instance, the person may have tried every infertility process available and still can’t conceive, or they might have longed for marriage all their life and feel horribly lonely because the right person has never come their way; or they may be sending out dozens of resumes every month but haven’t had so much as a nibble in the way of a job interview. In that case, these kind of questions make the person feel *depressed* at best and *inferior* at worst – depressed, because the questions are like pouring salt in an open wound, and inferior because they may feel that their best hasn’t been good enough, so maybe they themselves aren’t good enough, either.

If your relationship with someone gives you the right to ask a question of a personal nature such as those above, then be sure to ask that question in a gentle and respectful fashion. For instance, you may first want to verify what the other person’s *desires* are on the topic, i.e., “You seem very happy being single, but I’ve always wondered – do you or did you ever wish to get married?”

Based upon the person’s answer, it may then be appropriate to ask a question about their actions with regard to the issue, i.e., “I’m sorry that your boss is so unpleasant that you want to move on. Have you taken any steps toward that end yet? Is there anything I can do to help you search for a new position?”

Remember, “death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Be careful what you ask. The smallest question can harm or heal.

Moving Toward Forgiveness

I've been considering forgiveness lately. Not forgiveness of the little slights and sins that come every day from rubbing shoulders with the rest of humanity. But forgiveness of the really egregious sins ... forgiveness when real pain has been inflicted and real harm has been done, perhaps with malice aforethought.

The pain, the hurt, the grief that is caused by such acts as flagrant adultery, peddling drugs, physical abuse, etc. The list is a long one, highly individualized, and added to every day.

As I considered sin and our call to grant forgiveness, I was struck anew at how hard it is to forgive. And I believe that is, actually, appropriate.

After all, in order to offer true forgiveness, we have to come to grips with true evil. If we just flippantly say, "Yes, I forgive you!" but we have not truly understood either the corruption of the human heart or the pain such evil has caused another, our words are devoid of meaning. It is only after we have felt the horror of evil that our offer of forgiveness can be real.

Too often, however, we stop there. We are paralyzed by the evil, and so we cannot offer the balm of forgiveness.

It is vital to take the second step: to grasp the infinite love, grace, and forgiveness of God. Love that is greater than the horror of true evil. Grace that reaches to the unbelievable depths of corruption in the human heart. Forgiveness that calls the foulest sinner into perfect and intimate relationship with a holy God.

Only then – having truly comprehended both the nature of evil and the triumph of the Cross – can we then begin to extend fully the forgiveness of God to a needy world.

Salt Mines and Power Lines

As a single person, I've asked a lot of people about marriage. Over time, I became exceedingly frustrated at the comment I heard most often – and usually first out of their mouths:

“Marriage is a lot of work.”

I finally sat down and analyzed my response to this #1 comment. Why did I resent it so much? Why did it make me so angry? After all, I reasoned, everything I've read and heard about marriage does state clearly that a lot of work is involved. So why did I feel so negative toward this comment? Did I have my head in the clouds? Did I not want to admit that work was involved in making a marriage?

Then I realized what I was responding to. It wasn't the concept of work – it was the way people said it: “Marriage is a lot of work,” said with a sigh, a droop of the shoulders, and a hint of long years of suffering. No mention of the rewards. The benefits. The joys.

It was rather as if they were talking about slaving away in the salt mines.

Now that, I thought, isn't right!

I broached the subject with yet another married friend – one who has a great marriage that I really look up to. She listened, then replied thoughtfully, “I wouldn't describe marriage as a lot of work. It simply requires constant energy and attention – just like anything of value in life.”

What a difference in perspective! *Energy and attention*. Not work. Not slaving away. Not long-suffering. Her attitude seemed to connect her, not with the salt mines, but with high-voltage electrical power lines: infusing her and her marriage with vibrancy and vitality. When she would speak of her marriage in casual conversation, her comments were invariably filled with the joys, fulfillment, and contentment that her marriage brought her and her spouse.

As I thought this over, I found an analogy that made sense to me. I love gardening, and my little yard is full to the brim with flowers from early spring well into fall. Do I consider my garden “work”? No, I don't. Even though every day requires some combination of watering, weeding, dead-heading, checking for pests or disease, cleaning up, etc.

My garden simply requires my constant energy and attention. Otherwise, it will look a mess in no-time flat. I don't give that energy and attention grudgingly: I love to give it, even when I may not be thrilled with a particular activity (like weeding). It's all part of having a garden. Giving energy and attention *increases* my satisfaction; it doesn't diminish it. With a regular flow of care, there is plenty of time to relax and enjoy the beauty of my yard.

But, you know, it would be easy to consider all the tasks of gardening “work,” and resent them or sigh with resignation about them. The tasks wouldn’t have changed ... just my attitude toward them.

So here’s my question: what difference would it make if couples stopped looking at marriage as requiring “a lot of work,” and started thinking in terms of giving “energy and attention”? That simple positive shift in understanding, attitude, and perspective might free them from the salt mines and connect them with the power lines!

Covenant Communication

We covenant together never to raise our voices in anger. Even when we are angry, or hurt, or wronged.

We will respond calmly if the other raises their voice in anger. We will end the discussion and leave the room until the other has controlled their anger.

We will never discuss a problem or situation in anger.

We will never insult the other person with our words. We will not attack their personhood.

We will never bring up issues that have been dealt with.

We will never bring up past faults when dealing with a present problem.

We will address one issue at a time in any given discussion.

We will define goals, work toward them, and hold each other accountable in them.

We will respect one another's personhood, mind, experience, opinions, and emotions. We will never degrade the other in any of these areas.

We will never belittle the seriousness of the concerns the other brings to our attention.

We will seek to build one another up. We will never bring up a problem without also encouraging the other in something that they are doing well.

We will seek every day to express our love for the other in thought, word, and deed.

The Negative Screams and the Good Whispers

I have found it interesting ...

- People are always willing to kvetch about their spouse, but sometimes have to be actually prodded to praise him or her.
- People will tell you about the difficulties their children are causing – like wreaking havoc with their schedules or their budget – much more readily than they will talk about the cute, beautiful, or loving stories of what their kids have done.
- People will complain about the problems in their churches way more often than they will broadcast the church's ministries and the work God is accomplishing in people's lives.

Surprised at that last one? Christians ... complaining? Being negative? Unfortunately – yes. The fact is, I have observed *every one* of the above examples all too often in the Christian environment. And, unfortunately, I have been guilty of such negativity all too often myself, as well.

In this fallen world, the negative screams and the good whispers. It's very, very easy to fall into that complaining, gossiping, pessimistic mode. My friends, we need to turn that around. We need to start promoting the good wherever we see it – in our spouses, in our kids, in our jobs, in our families, in our churches. We need to shout it out when we see God at work.

After all, if we gripe and complain all the time, why would anyone believe us when we say we've got "Good News" for them?

Be Honest When You've Been Hurt

Too often, I think we minimize or brush off our own hurt. Someone offends or wounds us, and even if they ask us about it we say dismissively, "It's okay." But it's not okay. We're bleeding inside, and our relationship with the other person has been damaged.

I believe we do both ourselves and the other person a disservice when we aren't honest about the hurts we receive. Honesty is, in fact, a prerequisite to forgiveness – and forgiveness is the healing balm for both our wounded soul and the wounded relationship.

But being honest can be a tough proposition! So here are four guidelines to help practice healthy honesty:

- First, don't assume the other person realizes that they hurt you. The truth is, we sometimes mis-communicate or are ignorant of the effect of what we said or did.
- Second, don't point fingers. Honesty isn't about lashing out and hurting or condemning the other person. Simply state what happened and how it made you feel.
- Third, keep to the point. Don't bring up past wounds or mask the present problem with specious arguments. Keep to the current issue and deal with it.
- Fourth, don't demand that the other person ask your forgiveness. Forgiveness must be freely asked for and freely given. Just do your part: be honest.



Sin

Why Talk about Sin?

Talking about hell is passe. Fire and brimstone sermons are considered out of fashion. The goal is to find the lost, comfort the broken-hearted, and rescue the perishing. Therefore, God is the faithful Hound of heaven, the gentle Shepherd, and the Lover of our souls.

Sin? Well, yes. But please don't focus on it too much; it really turns people off. They might get offended, and if they feel guilty they won't come back. Confession? Of course confession is an important part of prayer. No, come to think of it, we don't have a time of confession in our worship service. On my own? That's none of your business, thank you.

But sin is where salvation begins. We only need a Savior because we are sinners. The lost need to be found because they are wandering in the fear and deception of sin. The broken-hearted are begging for comfort because they have been victimized by the ravages of sin. The perishing are desperate for rescue because they are dying from the fatal disease of sin.

That is why Ignatius of Loyola (ca. 1500) taught that the first step in a life of spiritual discipline was to come face to face with sin. He instructs that we are to "beg for shame and confusion about myself, as I see how many have been damned because of one mortal sin, and how many times, for how many sins, I have deserved to be damned forever" (Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises, Joseph Tetlow, Crossroad, New York, 1992, page 74).

Are you willing to pray in such fashion? Am I? Ignatius goes on to guide the learner how to meditate: to consider the sin of the angels who fell with Satan, to ponder the sin of Adam and Eve, to focus on how many others have perished eternally for their sins, and finally, to look closely at their own soul, and to see it clearly for what it is. "I remember the seriousness and malice of sin against our Creator and Lord. I apply my understanding, reasoning how by sinning and going against the infinite Goodness, the person truly merited being damned forever" (Tetlow, 75).

But why? Why is this important? Why dwell on the blackness and evil within ourselves and within the world? Is it not better, more holy, more effective, to focus on the light of God's love?

The answer is found in the very next words Ignatius penned following the above exhortations: "Imagine Christ right before you, hanging on the cross . . . How is it that he has come from being Creator to making himself human? How is it that he came from eternal life to death in time, and came so as to die for my sins? Turning it about, I ask of myself: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I do for Christ?" (Tetlow, 75).

In order to truly understand the light, we have to understand the depths of the darkness. In order to treasure the healing, we must understand fully the disease from which we were dying.

In order to understand the Love, we have to understand the horror of why and what he suffered on our behalf.

Generation upon generation of believers have shown the value of coming to grips with sin. Not only at the point of their conversion, but at various times and seasons along their walk with the Lord. Those who gloss over or turn a blind eye to sin, preferring rosier pictures of haloes and heavenly cities, speaking only of light and love, find an emptiness in their lives and a shallowness in their gospel. Those who confront evil for what it is, wrestling with the warning of eternal damnation, recognizing the filth and stench it has left in their own lives: these are the true warriors of light. They go forth understanding the brutality of the Cross, and the crowning victory of the Resurrection. They know intimately the pit they have been pulled out of; they can vividly describe the tomb from which they have been raised. They go forth to preach a glorious message to a dying world: that they know the crushing, asphyxiating power of sin—and the Triumphant Savior.

Right Words, Wrong Hearts

You're probably familiar with the ringing declaration Joshua made at the end of his life: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!" (Joshua 24:15). But do you remember the rest of that conversation?

Joshua was soon going to die. He called all the elders, judges, and officers of Israel to him. He gave them a short recap of their history, right up through their present conquest of Canaan. Then he delivered his challenge: "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve!" (Joshua 24:15). And Israel responded as one, "We also will serve the Lord, for he is our God." (Joshua 24:18).

At this point, I would have thought that Joshua would have leaned back with a glad sigh and died in peace. But no: instead, he challenges the people with these words:

"You will not be able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgression or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you after He has done good to you" (Joshua 24:19-20).

Ouch! Again, the people proclaim their loyalty to God. Is Joshua satisfied now? Evidently not, because he replies, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the LORD, to serve Him" (Joshua 24:22).

Now, at this point, I'm wondering, "Joshua, are you trying to encourage these people, or actually trying to turn them toward other gods? This isn't exactly a half-time pep talk! What's going on here?"

Then the reason for Joshua's harsh words becomes clear. For after Israel affirms for the third time that they will serve God, Joshua confronts them with the following:

"Now therefore, put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel" (Joshua 24:23).

Do you see it? Here are all the people of Israel, including the elders, judges, and officers, all declaring their undying, unswerving allegiance to the Lord. But they were *already falling into idolatry!* They had foreign gods *in their midst!*

Joshua wasn't concerned because someday they *might* turn aside to idols ... he was concerned because they were already waltzing merrily down that path!

They were saying the right words. But they were demonstrating the wrong heart.

We know the end of that story.

What about us? Think of the words of commitment we sing on Sunday morning. The prayers we pray as we stand in church. Our good intentions as we respond to the sermon.

What would Joshua say? Would he nod in approval, lift his hand in benediction, and smile?

Or would he fix his eye on us and start enumerating the sins, the gods, the idols that we thought to hide in our midst?

Remember, it isn't enough to have the right words but the wrong heart.

How Do I Sin Against Thee?

Remember the old declaration? “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways!” Well, I thought of a new twist on it yesterday: “How do I sin against Thee? Let me count the ways!”

You see, I’d been ticked off at something. That’s not necessarily a sin. But then I opened my mouth and spouted off about it. That’s where the trouble began.

When I went to confess the sin of what I had said, I realized that wasn’t all I’d done:

- I had been inappropriately angry. (I actually had no true justification to be angry at all.)
- I had focused on one problem in life, and shown a complete lack of gratitude for my many blessings.
- I had wallowed in resentment and bitterness.
- I had been ... shall we say ... less than edifying to the person I spouted off to.
- I had been judgmental and prejudiced in my attitude.

What an ugly list. But that is often what happens when we sin ... a single sin always invites its friends to the party.

So be sure to ask yourself, next time you kneel in confession: “How do I sin against Thee?”

But be sure to finish the declaration with, “Let me repent of the ways!”

An Open Letter to a Christian Considering Adultery

Dear Friend,

I don't know who you are – man or woman, old or young. But here is where you stand today: you are considering committing adultery with another person. I know no details whatsoever of what has brought this to pass – I don't know whether things happened between you and your spouse that hurt you deeply, whether there is another person involved who influenced your decision, whether you are experiencing what is commonly called a “mid-life crisis,” or whether you have suffered from deep depression or despair.

Regardless of the cause and source, I would encourage you most strongly: do not doubt God, and do not doubt his Word.

Consider God's Word in Malachi 2:13-16:

“You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, ‘Why?’ It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

“Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

“‘I hate divorce,’ says the LORD God of Israel, ‘and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,’ says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.”

The Lord hates divorce, yet that appears to be the path you are deliberately pursuing. Hear the warning: God will not accept your offerings if you continue on this path. He will not hear you. He warns here of judgment, and encourages you twice to guard yourself in your spirit, and not to act treacherously toward your spouse.

“Guard yourself in your spirit.” Where is your spirit now? What are you feeding on? Are you feeding on the Word? Are you seeking the Lord? Or have you allowed other influences, thoughts, and emotions to slip under your guard and infect your spirit? “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith!” (I Peter 5:8-9).

Resist the devil! Resist temptation and sin! “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it” (Genesis 4:6).

“Sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must rule over it.” Consider your sin, I urge you. Take a bold look at it, and awaken your soul again to its horror:

- *Your sin against your spouse.* Matthew 19:6 states clearly that “what God has joined together, let no one separate.” And again in I Corinthians 7:10-11: “To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.”
- *Your sin against your children.* Heed the warning in Matthew 18:6. “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were drowned in the depths of the sea.”
- *Your sin against unbelievers.* Matthew 5:14-16 exhorts us that “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” People are watching you. What will they think of God and Christ if they see you choose a course of sin?
- *You sin against the church.* There are people who look up to you as a model and an example of a Christian spouse and parent. People who have been hurt through broken or damaging relationships and who are striving to overcome a natural bitterness. People who desperately need to see healthy Christian models so that they can learn to live in God’s grace and see with God’s eyes. If you fall into sin, Satan will take the opportunity to whisper in their ears, “See? People are untrustworthy. Nobody knows the meaning of the word ‘commitment.’ Everyone is self-centered and unfaithful.”

I warn you that God judges sin. Hebrews 4:12-13 reminds us, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

You will have to give an account to God of your actions today.

Remember that, as a Christian, you do not have the right to do as you want. You gave up that right at the Cross. You belong to Jesus now, and are called to obedience to him: “Or do you not

know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (I Corinthians 6:19-20).

But God is a God of hope:

- Psalm 43:5 ... “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.”
- Romans 5:3-5 ... “We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”
- Romans 15:13 ... “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Whatever has happened, God is a God of hope. If you have sinned, forgiveness is open to you (I John 1:9 – “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”). If your spouse has sinned against you, grace is available to you to forgive him or her and be reconciled (Philippians 4:13 – “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”) If you are weighed down with anxiety and despair, God can lift you up (Psalm 139:23-24 – “Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way.”)

I urge you to turn back from the path you are on. Return to grace. Return to forgiveness. Return to obedience. Return to the Word of the Lord and to the presence of God.

“So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

“And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’

“And they began to celebrate.” (Luke 15:20-24)

The Inadequacy of Being Sorry

When it comes to giving and receiving forgiveness, “I’m sorry” is *not* the same as “Please forgive me”:

- “I’m sorry” focuses on *me* instead of on the person I hurt. “Will *you* please forgive me?” puts the focus appropriately on the injured party.
- “I’m sorry” can be said in a vacuum and requires no response. “Will you please forgive me” and “Yes, I forgive you” are lifelines thrown across a broken relationship.
- “I’m sorry” has become cheap. Do we really want to use the same word for everything from “sorry that I missed your phone call,” to “sorry that I can’t make the dinner engagement we had,” to “sorry that I murdered your son”?
- “I’m sorry” may or may not acknowledge wrong-doing. I may just be sorry that you took offense at what I said or that I got caught red-handed in sin. “Please forgive me,” on the other hand, clearly acknowledges moral guilt.
- “I’m sorry” doesn’t necessarily require that we come down from our high-horse of pride. “Please forgive me” is by its very nature humbling: with the best kind of humility. It reinforces the fact that we are sinners, dependent on God’s grace, saved by faith, and working out our sanctification each day of our lives.

The Time to Deal with Death

This entry is an excerpt from my novella [Wasteland](#):

In the social structure and order that I hope you enjoy, it is easy to feel contempt and embarrassment when the mention of sin is made. Sin is a gross term. An ugly one. We prefer to label it, “Freedom of choice.” “Alternative lifestyles.” “Situational ethics.” “Tolerance.” It’s fine to label a murderer as a murderer—unless, of course, that murderer holds political office, or is an upstanding citizen, or a savvy lawyer. Then it is a matter of “extenuating circumstances,” and at best, “manslaughter,” or preferably “temporary insanity.”

But to define wrong as sin, and to use images such as leprosy in order to convey it—that is a social *faux pas* of the first order. But that, too, is the first symptom of sin: for just as leprosy destroys nerve-endings so that the victim is not aware of decaying and wounded and rotting flesh, so also sin deadens our senses so that we are unaware of our decaying and wounded and rotting souls.

We throw a thousand excuses at sin. We claim that our dysfunctional families and society made us what we are. We agree that if it feels good, and doesn’t hurt anyone, it can’t be wrong. We affirm that if the end is good, any means is justified in attaining it.

But this is all hypocrisy and self-justification. Just as we claim that there are little sins and big ones. For if murder is the destruction of the body, isn’t gossip the destruction of trust? Slander the destruction of relationships? Adultery the destruction of fidelity? Isn’t anger as sharp a blow as physical abuse, and isn’t gluttony as much an orgy as alcoholism? And for the passive sins—isn’t sloth the killer of ingenuity? Pride the hammer-blow to equality? Envy the destroyer of peace?

If we can ever get on our knees enough to acknowledge sin, we will find damnation coming hard on its heels. This is another subject to be ignored by polite society. We all know that we sin, but we refuse to call it by its rightful name. We all know that we will die, but we dance desperately in the sun in a vain effort to stay the coming of the night. But once you realize the truth of your own immortality—once you hear the voice of your judge reverberating through the night-time of your soul—once you recognize sin for the rupture in the universe that it is—then you will know the fear of damnation. For to give up an infinite good—to spit in the face of *Someone* of infinite good—is an infinite evil demanding infinite retribution.

But that is not a topic of conversation for morning coffee breaks. We save it for the bedsides of the sick and dying, and wonder why the hopelessness remains.

The time to deal with death is when you are still alive. Afterwards, it is too late. Face your fears and doubts and questions while you have the strength to seek out the answers. The strength to hammer on the door of eternity until Truth lifts the latch.

For he who asks, receives. He who seeks, finds. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

Restoring Our Sensitivity to Sin

“Why don’t I feel guilty?”

Have you ever asked that question of yourself? You knew you had done wrong. You knew it when you made the decision to commit the sin. You didn’t act out of ignorance. You hadn’t made a “mistake.” But even after your sin “found you out” and you were faced with the consequences, you still felt no guilt.

Some people would say, “You shouldn’t feel guilty! You were victimized by others and acted out of your own significant hurt.”

And perhaps that is true. Perhaps you were victimized. Perhaps you are in pain. That doesn’t mean you are excused from moral responsibility – and from moral guilt.

But what if, based upon your Christian faith, you acknowledge your moral responsibility but still feel nothing but emptiness inside? No true feeling of guilt? What is going on?

If you experience this, it is a definite warning sign – a warning that you have become de-sensitized to sin. All of us can fall into this trap. While there are several reasons we can become de-sensitized to sin, the biggest is probably this: *we become de-sensitized because of repeated acts of sin*. I read an illustration once (I cannot recall where now), that said the path of sin is similar to sticking a piece of duct tape to your arm and tearing it off. It hurts like crazy the first time – that’s guilt and conscience. But put that *same* piece of tape on again and tear it away, and it hurts less ... there’s less stickiness to it, and less for it to stick onto. Repeat and repeat, and finally the tape won’t stick at all. Similarly, when we repeat sin again and again in our lives, eventually it doesn’t appear to us to be sin at all.

So what do we do when we realize that we have sinned ... and that we feel no guilt about it?

Confess and repent of your sin. You see, both confession and repentance are acts of the will. They have nothing to do with our emotions. Certainly, it’s easier to repent if we also feel sorrowful and have an appropriate sense of guilt (since that drives us to our knees faster), but it’s not necessary. Acknowledge your sin, admit your offense against God and man, and make the decision to change your ways. God will forgive you.

Now, however, having taken the most important step of restoring your relationship with God, you need to **re-sensitize yourself to sin**, so that you recognize it for what it is and resurrect your conscience to help you avoid it. Here are some steps that may prove helpful:

First, I would suggest praying a very, very difficult prayer. It is taken from Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. The prayer is this:

"I beg for intense and increasing sorrow and tears for my sins."

Ouch. Such a prayer hurts. It will take guts to pray it, but I believe it is an important and necessary step. I encourage you to make it personal, for instance:

"I beg for intense and increasing sorrow and tears for my sins, and a renewed and holy sense of guilt for what I have done. I pray that You would restore to me a horror and hatred of sin that will drive me to You."

I believe that God will answer that prayer, because it is a prayer to be Christ-like. In the short run, it will hurt like anything, but in the long run, it will be for your good and his glory.

Next, I would spend time thinking about the effect your sin had on the life of the person(s) you sinned against. Imagine how their beliefs about themselves and life and other people have been twisted. Imagine their sense of pain, loss, betrayal, and fear. Imagine how their relationship with God or other people may be scarred for life because of what you did. Imagine how you might have helped set them on a path of sin and death, de-sensitizing their conscience and deceiving their minds.

This will hurt. Let it hurt. Pray that God will give you the grace to embrace the hurt, then give the hurt over to him.

Finally, I encourage you to pray for the person(s) you sinned against. Pray for their:

- **Spirit**, that God would draw them to himself if they do not know him, or that they would be restored in their faith.
- **Emotions**, that God would bring healing for the pain, fear, self-loathing, etc. Imagine the emotions they might be feeling, and pray specifically about those things.
- **Mind**, that God would remove lies, deceptions, and self-justifications and help them to understand and embrace the Truth.
- **Body**, that God would bring healing if there are physical wounds from your sin.
- **Relationships**, that God would give them people to support, love, care, and encourage them.

Bear in mind that re-sensitizing your spirit will take time, just as de-sensitizing it did. Do not be surprised if, as you continue to grow in the Lord, you find yourself "awakening" more and more to the horror and guilt of your sin. That is healthy, if it is treated appropriately: accept the

sensitivity with thanksgiving and rejoice, for you are forgiven! Satan plays with guilt two ways: removing our sense of it so that we can't recognize sin, and heightening our sense of it so that we can't recognize forgiveness. Remember: ***God intended guilt to let us know we had done wrong, so that he could make it right.***

The Cup of Despair

This entry is an excerpt from my novella [Wasteland](#):

I walked, and I did not so much as trouble to look for food. I no longer had the stomach to eat.

I did not spread aloe on my blisters or burns, either. I welcomed the pain. Tried to drown in it. Sought some mortification of my soul through the pain of my body.

I drank sparingly and continued to walk with the doggedness of despair.

In years since, I have seen often that we shy away from such despair. We want to spare others the path that I trod in the Aram Waste. We want to move hastily from sin and damnation to the good news . . .

But I myself move too hastily on. I believe we do ourselves and those we love an injustice when we do not allow time to drink deep of the cup of despair. That cold hand that grips our soul is often a doorway: the threshold into hope. It takes away the last grains of pride. Leaches out the last reliance we put in mortal friendships. Removes the last speck from our eyes that would blind us to seeing ourselves as we really are.

When we gloss over despair, we cheat our souls of knowing the full abundance of grace. If I am rescued, I want to understand the peril I stood in. If I am healed, I want to comprehend the illness with which I was struck. Only so will my life ever afterwards sing of gratitude and be characterized by vibrant change. Despair of the soul is the recognition of sin and damnation. To be saved from that eternal hell of self and separation is something I want to comprehend to the fullest.

Quit Fooling Yourself

We delight in deceiving ourselves when it comes to personal sin:

“I’m not doing anything really wrong.”

“It feels so good – how could there be anything bad about it?”

“This isn’t a sin.”

But if we looked at ourselves in the cold light of day, we would realize we were lying. We know when we’re doing wrong. We just want to keep on doing it, so we excuse it, justify it, or ignore it.

Then, we blame God when we start to reap the consequences of that sin. We blame God when our life takes a nosedive. We blame God when our prayers go unanswered. We blame God when we fall into doubt, depression, and despair.

Forget it. The truth is, if we harbor sin in our life – that is, if we knowingly and willfully continue acting in a manner displeasing to the Lord – then we are responsible for what follows. Not God. We are responsible. Me. You.

There’s only one remedy. We must get on our knees and get our heart clean, then stand on our feet and get our life clean.

It’s time we quit fooling ourselves.

Christ Died for My “Respectable” Sins

Jesus was despised because of my envy.
Forsaken of men because of my greed.
He became the man of sorrows due to my grudges,
and was acquainted with grief because I lack self-control.
Men hid their faces from him due to my laziness
and he was spit on because I laugh at crude jokes.

Surely my selfishness he himself bore
and my lusts he carried.
He was stricken because of my irritable words –
smitten of God as payment for my pride,
afflicted as the penalty for my lack of compassion.

He was pierced through for my gossip;
He was crushed for my impatience.
The chastening to forgive my lack of gratitude fell upon Him,
and by His scourging I am healed from my judgmental attitudes.

In my rudeness, I have gone astray,
and I have turned to my own prejudices:
but the LORD has laid on Him the total of all my ungodliness.

You Just Might Be Wrong!

Let me share one of the many items on my personal list of “things I have learned the hard way.” Ready? Here it is:

If everyone tells you that you’re wrong, you just might be wrong!

When I think of the trouble I could have avoided, the pain I could have been spared if only I had taken it to heart when people warned me I was making poor choices, it staggers me. So today, I simply want to pass on this hard-won bit of wisdom: if you are set on a certain course and *people who know you and love you* are concerned about the choices you are making, make absolutely certain to:

1. Listen carefully to them.
2. Examine in detail your reasons for making the decision(s) you are making. Be on the lookout for:
 - **Intellectual errors.** I.e., Did you make a logical misstep somewhere? Are you making an unwarranted assumption?
 - **Emotional errors.** I.e., Are you so emotionally wrapped-up in the decision that you refuse to consider that it might be wrong?
 - **Spiritual errors.** I.e., Is your relationship with God on the downward spiral? Do you want something that is clearly outside of God’s will?
3. Share those reasons with the people who were giving you the warnings.
4. Listen carefully to them again!

Sure – sometimes people can think you’re making a mistake, and they themselves can be mistaken. But, that being said ...

If everyone tells you that you’re wrong, you just might be wrong!

Provoking the Lord

I was reading in Judges, and was struck by these verses (2:11-13):

“Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger. So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth.”

It can be horrifying to really consider God’s wrath as it was frequently revealed in the Old Testament (and, incidentally, as it will be revealed again at the end of time). But let’s not lose sight of *why* God poured out his wrath and judgment: he was *provoked*.

Consider some of the many synonyms for “provoke”: aggravate, anger, chafe, enrage, exasperate, incite, inflame, infuriate, madden, offend, rile, vex.

My point is this: Israel wasn’t generally well-meaning but committing an occasional “oops.” God didn’t have a short fuse that they managed in all innocence to set off. They were deliberately, consistently, flagrantly engaging in sins that were evil to the “nth” degree. They were *provoking* the Lord to anger. Over and over and over and over and over and over again. Until finally, they got what was coming to them.

Here’s the takeaway: God is still God, and people are still people.

Are you provoking the Lord to anger with deliberate, consistent, flagrant sin?

If you are, then don’t be surprised when he responds accordingly.



Suffering

Why am I in Pain?

It's easy to get tied in mental knots when we are in pain. Sometimes we assume that God causes all our pain, or that all pain is the direct result of our sin. If you are in pain today, consider the following – I hope it will help restore your theological balance, and therefore your ability to move forward through your pain:

- Some pain is simply the result of the world being fallen. Things like sickness or natural disasters, over which we have no control. When catastrophe strikes, the good and the evil (and everyone in between) all suffer together.
- Some pain is the result of our past decisions. There are consequences to our actions. Some consequences take years to work through and work out. But don't *ever* think that God is up there gloating that you are in pain, or saying, "Well, he/she really deserves this!" No. Nix. Never. He was – and is – so concerned about helping you (no matter what the problem is that you are facing) that he sent Jesus to die for you and rise from the dead, so that you can have the power of the resurrection itself working on your behalf.
- Some pain is the result of other people's sin, like when one spouse abuses another the other. God doesn't *cause* that: he doesn't want it; he doesn't desire it. He *permits* it because that was the cost of giving us free will. To step in and prevent us from hurting each other would, in fact, be negating the freedom of action that was his greatest gift to us when he made us in his image. But his heart breaks every time we hurt each other, and he stands ready and waiting to help us when we call on him.
- And occasionally – just occasionally – God may actually send pain our way by his direct action. If he does, we can be sure that it is always for our own good, and that he never sends pain without also sending the grace to see us through it.

God is with you in your pain. He loves you. He will see you through.

Grace in Pain

This entry is an excerpt from my novel [Meditations of a Slave](#). We often cling to the myth that the Christian life will be easy: no bumps, no fusses, no pain. But that – as the narrator below suddenly realizes – is not what Jesus promises:

The pain grew more and more intense, and then, suddenly, something soothing and cool washed over me; and I froze again, but for a different reason. *I, unlike your old master, never ask you to suffer needlessly. My grace always resurrects the suffering to create life. Do you trust me?*

The words were a balm, and I paused in some timeless moment away from the pain of my leg to consider them. I only knew the punishment and driving presence of my old master. I wanted to believe that I would live happily now—despite what Paulos had told me.

But what my new Master promised was grace in pain, not painlessness. Grace meant that the suffering would always better me, and usually someone else as well. Grace meant that I'd be able to bear it. Grace meant that he'd be with me through it.

Questions to consider:

- Do you wrestle with the concepts of pain and grace? Where do you struggle most?
- What does it mean to you that God can redeem and resurrect your suffering – whatever the source of that suffering – to create life?

God Will Not Let You Be Destroyed

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...” II Corinthians 4:4-7

Afflicted. Perplexed. Persecuted. Struck down. Life does all those things to us, sapping our resources and our strength.

That is reality. It happens. The suffering is real, and intense.

But here is the greater reality: despite the affliction, through the confusion, regardless of the exhaustion, God will never let you be destroyed. He knows that we are fragile earthen vessels, and he extends “the surpassing greatness of his power” so that we will always survive, no matter what life throws at us.

- What does it mean to you to realize that intense suffering is part of this life – for everyone?
- Look back over your life: How has God’s power kept you from being crushed? How has his truth kept you from despairing? How has his presence reminded you that you are not forsaken? How has his grace prevented you from being destroyed?

The Big Uglies

Have you ever prayed – with despair wrenching your gut, doubt tearing at your mind, discouragement dragging you down, desperation clutching at your chest?

I have, too.

Then, after some indeterminate time on your knees, you drag yourself to your feet ... with the same despair, the same doubt, the same discouragement, the same desperation?

I have, too.

You may wonder if you have lost your faith. If you ever knew God at all. If you can go on another step. If this whole Christianity thing is worth it.

I have, too.

You've read through the promises in Scripture – promises of hope, of purpose, of comfort, of God's presence, his love, his Spirit. And it all seems empty.

I have, too.

The hard truth is, being a Christian doesn't exempt us from the big uglies of despair, doubt, discouragement, desperation ... or any of the other nasties out there. You can believe in God with all your heart, love him with all your soul, and follow him with all your strength – and still get jumped, and jumped badly, by the big uglies.

Are the promises of God true? Is his presence always with us?

Yes, and yes.

Perhaps part of our quandary is that we forget that we have to “wait on the Lord” before he will indeed renew our strength.

Sometimes, it can be a very, very long wait.

I know.

I've been there, too.

Negative Memories: How Do We Move Forward?

“God didn’t give us a delete button to erase the memory of our past. So God must want us to remember our past, but move forward. How do I do that?”

The question from my friend was excellent – and poignant. We have all suffered terrible times in our lives. Sometimes we want to forget them as if they never happened, and sometimes we find ourselves dwelling on them so much that we are essentially “stuck.” How do we remember and yet still move forward? I believe the answer is three-fold: we have to examine our aim, our attitude, and our approach.

Our Aim

First, our aim. The fact is, sometimes people want to stay in the past, even if it is a negative past. They hold on tight to the painful memories, drowning in self-pity because of some hurt, or mired in guilt because of some sin.

If our aim is that we want to dwell in the past, then that is inappropriate. We are to live and dwell in the present, with goals and hopes for the future. You can tell if you’re living in your memories if they are continually on your mind, in your words, and interfering with your daily activities ... and nothing ever changes.

That being said, when you have been through a difficult or traumatic period in your life, you will need to come to terms with it. And that will require time, thought, and effort. Processing something – asking questions about it, thinking it through, working it out, and putting closure to it – is essential. It is not the same as “dwelling in the past,” because your aim is not to live in the past, but is to specifically get out of the past. Processing is the way out.

Our Attitude

The next aspect is our attitude. Are we self-focused or God-focused? If I come to my memories with “I” on my mind (“I was hurt, I was lousy, I was a victim, I ... I ... I ...”) then there is a good chance that we are not moving forward, but are actually stuck in the past.

If we come to our memories with a “what can I learn?” attitude, that is God-focused humility. We are looking back in order to move forward: to gain wisdom, to gain character, to gain compassion, to gain knowledge.

Our Approach

Finally, what is our approach? Staying in the past is passive. It's as if we are watching our lives re-played on the TV screen: we sit, we watch, we stare ... and it always turns out just the same.

Alternatively, when we take an active approach to our memories, we are coming with our minds and spirits engaged. We ask questions: "What happened? Why did it happen? How could I have prevented this? What can I learn? Where can I see God's power and love and grace displayed?" We can't change the past, but we can learn from it to change the present and the future.

So if you are struggling with negative memories, don't be afraid. Take the time to process. Let your aim be to move forward, your attitude be one of a learner, and your approach be active. You will come through safely in the hands of God.

Jesus Understands Loneliness

“And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ which is translated, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’” Mark 15:34

There has never been greater loneliness than the loneliness on the Cross. Jesus, who from eternity had been one with the Father, was separated from him. The weight of sin crushed him, causing him to be accursed. And at the height of his pain and suffering, the Father appeared to abandon him.

And while my heart breaks because of what Jesus suffered for me, I am so very, very glad that he did. Because it means that he understands. He is no distant God: immovable, unshakable, removed from the world he created. He came and walked this earth and suffered and died so that he could truly say, “Yes, I understand the pain. I understand the loneliness. I understand the grief. I have walked the same road that you are on now.”

- What does it mean to you to realize that Jesus not only intellectually understands pain and suffering and loneliness, but that he has *experienced* it?
- Jesus’ suffering isn’t the end of the story. His suffering qualified him for a very special role. Hebrews 2:17 affirms, “Therefore, Jesus had to be made like his brethren in all things, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest ...” What does it mean to you to realize that Jesus is extending mercy to you, is faithful to you, and is interceding for you all the time?
- Likewise, your suffering isn’t the end of the story. Your suffering qualifies you for a very special role. Ask God to use your loneliness and suffering to increase your sense of compassion and mercy for others, and to deepen your ability to serve them.

Unsearchable, Unfathomable

Dedicated to the memory of Denton Conklin.

In Romans 11:33 we read, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!”

I’ve thought about that verse a lot lately. In July 2009, a good friend was killed instantly in a head-on car crash. He left behind a wife who suffers from a severe physical disability, and two children. He was a wonderful husband. An incredible Christian. A loyal friend.

And I ask God the age-old question:

“Why???”

Why did this happen? What purpose did it serve? Wouldn’t more glory have been brought to Jesus through my friend’s life and service on this earth? What of his family? Don’t you see their pain?

“Why???”

I don’t believe we will ever know “Why?” to many of the questions we ask. Especially when we are talking about deep things ... the loss of a job, a spouse, a child, a friend, a ministry, a dream. We cry out in agony, “Why?” but heaven does not answer.

Why this divine silence? First, because of this simple truth: God’s ways, wisdom, and knowledge are unsearchable – unfathomable. He is God. We are not. I doubt we could understand the answers even if he were to tell us.

Second, because we are then presented with an important decision: will we choose to trust, love, obey, and praise God, even when we never know the “Why?” behind the tragedies we experience? Will we place our faith in his character?

Or, will we make our love for God conditional upon our understanding of him? If the latter, then aren’t we actually making ourselves equal with God – demanding that we know all that he does, and perhaps even requiring him to submit his decisions to us for our approval?

We can harbor bitterness and resentment against God when he does not answer our agonized “Why?” Or, we can by faith turn his very silence into a reason for praise, even though that praise may be mixed with tears:

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!”



Wisdom

How Does Deception Begin?

“Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Indeed, has God said, “You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?”’”
– Genesis 3:1

Deception entered the world early ... in the very paradise of the Garden. As the precursor to sin and to the Fall of humankind, it would do us well to study deception.

So where does deception begin? As in the Garden, deception often **begins outside of yourself**. It is certainly possible to be entirely self-deceived, but usually we have some help. That is, we’re going along with our lives, and someone or something influences us to believe a lie.

Consider these examples:

- A single woman goes out with a man who convinces her, against her prior convictions, to have sex with him.
- A young Christian listens to a radio preacher who teaches that the “Church age” is at an end, and as a result he leaves the church where he was growing in the faith.
- A girl grows up under a Communist regime and learns to hate and distrust those who follow a different ideology.
- A widow who is struggling with the loss of her husband seeks the aid of a psychic to contact the dead.
- A teenager reads the works of thirteenth-century heretics and decides to follow their teachings.

From the above, we can see that the outside influence can be an individual whom you personally know, like a family member or friend; or someone you have never met, such as a radio or television personality. Even people who are long-since deceased can lead people into deception through the legacy of their written works, ideas, followers, or institutions.

The Bible has a great deal to say about how we can be deceived by others

- In Jeremiah 9:5, we read, “Friend deceives friend, and no one speaks the truth.”
- Jesus warned in Matthew 24:11, “Many false prophets will appear and deceive many.”
- In Romans 16:8, Paul writes, “For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people.”

We usually think of our enemies trying to deceive us. Deceivers are “the bad guys.” And certainly, our enemies – like Satan himself, the “father of lies” – will try to deceive us. But from the above verses, we see that friends can deceive us as well. Religious leaders can deceive us.

People within the church can deceive us. For that reason, we need to pay careful attention to **everything** we see and hear. I Thessalonians 5:21-22 commands us, “Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.” Only by being on the alert and practicing discernment in every area of life can we avoid the subtle trap of deception.

Beware of Pleasant Indoctrination

We think of indoctrination or brainwashing as a horrible, negative event. And, oftentimes, it is. But in many circumstances, indoctrination can be extremely pleasant.

Consider Daniel – a Hebrew captive in Babylon:

“Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles, youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding, and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king’s court; and he ordered him to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed for them a daily ration from the king’s choice food and from the wine which he drank, and appointed that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king’s personal service. Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Then the commander of the officials assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Beltshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach, and to Azariah Abednego” (Daniel 1:3-7).

Don’t kid yourself – the king, Nebuchadnezzar – had in mind one thing: to indoctrinate these Jewish lads into Babylonian (Chaldean) culture so that they would be useful to him. What did it look like to Daniel and his friends?

- A new name.
- Good food.
- Shelter.
- Education.
- Authority.

If you were a captive in a foreign land, fully expecting a life of menial and perhaps painful slavery, this list would sound heavenly.

But Daniel saw immediately that this was a program of indoctrination. He was fully willing to serve in his new home and to honor his new king, but he would not compromise his convictions – and that started with protesting the food, since it had most likely been offered to idols on an altar prior to being set on the table as dinner.

His convictions carried the day ... as they did throughout his life, culminating in a night spent in the lions’ den for refusing to worship anyone other than the LORD God.

Of all the many, many lessons we can learn from Daniel, spend some time considering this one today: is our culture and are the people around us trying to give us a pleasant indoctrination into beliefs, attitudes, and actions that are contrary to our convictions? (Phrases like, "Appearances are everything," "The one with the most toys wins," and "If it feels good, do it" come to mind ...)

Remember – indoctrination can be a very enjoyable experience. It's the final exam that can prove fatal.

Easy Errors

It has been said that the best lie is 99% truth. It's that 1% of error that trips us up – often with ramifications hugely out of proportion to the lie itself.

I'm concerned that, as Christians, we have swallowed some lies. I call them "easy errors" ... they all have an aspect of truth, but without qualification they become dangerous lies:

Easy Error #1: God can change people.

True, God can change people. That is, after all, the essence of the gospel message! But here's what's missing, and why this can become an easy error: *God can only change people who want to change.* God will never force a person to change against their will. He does not command holiness by jerking our strings like a divine puppeteer.

What's the ramification of believing only the first statement, that "God can change people"? Here's one dangerous result: we may be praying for someone whose life is out-of-sync with God's will, and then become hopeless and blame God when they don't change. It is imperative to remember that change is a partnership between God and the human soul. When we are willing – and only when we are willing – he will work miracles.

Easy Error #2: God can change me.

Yes, this is a variant on the first easy error. This is when we pray that God would change our heart, remove temptation from us, stop us from sinning ... but we aren't willing to put forth the effort to seek God, we don't love him with all our heart, we continually place ourselves in temptation's path, and we really enjoy sinning. Just as God can't change others unless they want to change, *God can't change me unless I want to change.* He is always willing – he's waiting on me.

Easy Error #3: God is sovereign, so why pray?

This error acknowledges the sovereignty of God, but forgets that God has chosen to work in partnership with the human race. God commands us time and time again to pray. Why? Because *many times, God will not act unless we pray.*

Won't God always accomplish what he wants? Isn't that what sovereignty is all about? Well ... yes and no. The book of Revelations demonstrates conclusively that God is in control over all. But the fact that we live now in a world rife with sin shows that God takes our free will very seriously.

We can look at it this way: God's sovereignty is like a broad brushstroke over a huge canvas. It provides the background for everything else. Our prayers are like the fine lines that create the details of the painting. If we fail to pray, the picture will come out very differently than if we spend time on our knees.

Easy Error #4: God will open and close doors to direct my life.

My answer to this would be: sometimes. And sometimes not. Certainly, if we are seeking God's will for our life, he will on many occasions use circumstances to help guide us. Doors open, doors close.

But that is not always the case. After all, if God *always* used circumstances to open and close doors, we would never have to reason out whether a decision was wise or not. We would simply wait to see what circumstances dictated.

Instead, we see throughout Scripture that we are encouraged to pray for wisdom, discernment, understanding, and knowledge. That is why I firmly believe that God sometimes purposefully leaves *multiple* doors open ... some of which may lead to positive ends, some of which may be deadly. Why? Because he wants us to be able to make a mature decision using the other tools he has given us, such as our reason, his Word, his Spirit, and the counsel of others.

Think of it in terms of raising a child. Is a child mature if he always sits on his hands and waits to "see what will happen"? Or is a child mature when he can weigh real alternatives, make a wise decision, and move boldly forward?

The Common Denominator

As you look at the above easy errors, you will see a common denominator. In each case, the error has at its core a *desire to forego personal initiative and responsibility*. We ignore the interaction between free will and the grace of God. We disregard the responsibility we have to pray. We abdicate our responsibility to make choices.

Basically, we want life handed to us on a silver platter. We're not willing to do our part.

Easy errors? Yes.

But with serious consequences.

The Abdication of Responsibility

Frequently, I hear people praying something like this:

“God, if this isn’t your will, then shut the door. Just take it away.”

I challenge that type of prayer as a spiritual abdication of responsibility. We are not praying in that instance for *wisdom to make a right choice* about the situation. Instead, we are praying that God would remove the *possibility of making a wrong choice* about the situation. And that, to me, is passing the buck, and is the antithesis of spiritual maturity.

Will God sometimes close doors that aren’t his will? Yes. But should we count on him always to do so? Emphatically “No!”

Think of it in terms of raising a child. When the child is very young and toddling around the house, you do remove him from harm’s way. You literally shut doors on danger. He doesn’t know any better, and he *can’t* know any better. You don’t expect him to. He’s too young.

Now fast forward eighteen years. The child is now a young man. Would you consider him mature if you *continued* to remove all possibility of him getting into trouble or making a foolish decision? No. He is only considered mature when he is able to make a wise decision *with all options open to him*.

Don’t pray that God will remove the need for you to make a decision. Pray that you will have the wisdom to make the right decision.