
Good News: Peace with God

There is no better place to begin our study of “The Christian Basics” than with the Gospel. That is where Jesus Christ began. Our texts from Mark and 2 Corinthians are vital to our understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

¹⁶Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

¹⁸All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Summary

In our Mark text, we discover that the Gospel is essentially an announcement that, with the coming of Christ, a new Kingdom is being inaugurated. This Kingdom is actually a story, a narrative that, if we believe it, provides the larger story that explains our lives and provides the “script” for everyday living. The problem is that we often believe and live out “competing narratives” scripted by “imposter kings.” The challenge today for all who hear this Kingdom announcement is to repent (turn away from the imposters) and to believe (put our full trust in the true King and Author of our story).

In II Corinthians, we see that, in Christ, everything has been made new; but that all of these gospel blessings are grounded in an amazing act of God, namely, that He has reconciled us to Himself. This reconciliation was necessary because of our sin and His infinite holiness. This great act of God has now become our primary message here and around the world. The most amazing thing of all is the way that God accomplished this reconciliation: His innocent Son became sin that we unworthy sinners might become His sons and daughters! It is only logical now that we worship and serve, with all of our hearts, the God of this amazing grace.

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood?

*Died He for me, who caused His pain? For me, who Him to death pursued? Amazing love!
How can it be that Thou, my God, should die for me?*

—Charles Wesley, 1738

Discussion Questions

- 1) What are the most common “competing narratives” that allure? Why do we listen to them? What do they promise us? Where do they lead us? From the Westminster Shorter Catechism definition of repentance, what, in your own words, is the fundamental concept in it?

- 2) How is the narrative of God’s Kingdom better than any other “script” that would attempt to define us? The call to follow Jesus is both urgent and radical. How do you see these in the text?

- 3) What is the “key” that “unlocks” this Kingdom to us?

- 4) What is the fundamental problem that naturally disqualifies us for citizenship in the Kingdom of God? Why do many people find this analysis offensive?

- 5) What is reconciliation, and why is it necessary?

- 6) Discuss 2. Cor. 5:21. What are the essential ideas in it?

Related Reading

Knowing God

by J.I. Packer: Chapter 18, The Heard of the Gospel, and chapter 19, Sons of God.

ISBN: 083081650X

Redemption: Accomplished and Applied

by John Murray

ISBN: 0802811434

Notes:

Going Deeper

If we are to be ambassadors of Christ and ministers of reconciliation, how do you plan to fulfill that role this week and next?

What are some specific areas of your life right now that are products of “competing narratives?”

Good News: Believe It

In our previous studies, we saw that the gospel is an announcement of the Kingdom of God and that at the heart of this good news is our reconciliation with God through the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Our text this week addresses the response that is required of anyone who would hear and receive the gospel: repentance and faith. But, we must beware of the “counterfeits” of both repentance and faith.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

¹⁶Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

Repentance and Faith

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (#87) defines true repentance this way:

Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

Of true faith, the Catechism (#86) says:

Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.

Repentance and faith are “two sides of the same coin” and are the “instrumentality” of our receiving salvation. Amazingly, they are also both free gifts from God.

We can see two very important elements of saving faith in the responses of the first disciples to the call of Jesus. They readily followed Jesus and they followed Him radically, that is, they left other things, even work and family, behind. Jesus became everything to them. Following Jesus is much like getting married: we take Him, forsaking all others; we are committed to Him forever; and our relationship becomes the framework for all of life.

Discussion Questions

- 1) In order to enjoy the full benefits of the Kingdom of God, we must repent and believe. Why are these two things so closely linked?

- 2) From the Westminster Shorter Catechism definition of repentance, what, in your own words, is the fundamental concept in it?

- 3) What is meant by the term “counterfeit repentance”?

- 4) The call to follow Jesus is both urgent and radical. How do you see these in the text?

- 5) How might we today express the radical nature of discipleship? How do we “leave business and home” for Him?

Article to Read

All of Life is Repentance
by Tim Keller
[WEB LINK](#)

NOTES:

Going Deeper

1. Do you know for sure that you have savingly repented and believed the gospel of Christ? How do you know?
2. In what ways could you follow Jesus more readily and more radically?

Talk to Him

Walking with God, as we saw last week, means listening to Him. This week we learn that it also means talking to Him. Jesus teaches this in a famous section of the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 6:5-15

¹⁵“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁶But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread,

¹²and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,

¹⁵but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Prayer is simply talking to God, not only with our voices but with our hearts. We talk to Him as the Sovereign Lord of the universe and as our loving Father; and we talk to Him as people who are completely dependent upon Him for every good thing.

Two Correctives:

1. Jesus teaches us that our purpose must, first of all, be sincere; that is, not with the desire to impress others or even to feel better about ourselves, but rather, simply to know Him better (v. 5,6). 2. We are also taught that the value of prayer is not directly proportional to the length or “beauty” of our prayers (v. 7,8), but rather to the desire in our hearts to be with Him. Just talk to Him!

The Lord's Prayer is a prayer Jesus taught us to pray and a form of prayer that comprehends the major areas of concern in our prayers to Him. It is important to remember that the first three petitions (v. 9, 10) have to do with God's glory and fame; the latter three petitions (v. 11-13) have to do with our welfare.

"What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Spirit can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men—men of prayer."
E. M. Bounds (1835-1913)

Discussion Questions

- 1) In your own words, describe what prayer is.

- 2) What is difficult for you about praying?

- 3) Do you have a regular approach to prayer that has worked for you?

- 4) What kind of help do you feel you need to be more effective in prayer?

Related Resources

GUIDES ON PRAYER

A Diary of Private Prayer
by John Baillie

[*The Valley of Vision*](#)
by Arthur Bennett

TEACHING ON PRAYER

[*The Hidden Life of Prayer*](#)
by D. M. M'Intyre

Prayer
by O. Hallesby

NOTES:

Union with Christ

There is no better framework to begin this section of our Christian Basics Study, Experiencing God, than by looking at the doctrine of Union with Christ. This series will take us through what theologians call the *application of salvation*, or the *ordo salutis*, and our text from Romans 6 is a perfect place to take our first steps from.

Romans 6:1-14

¹What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For one who has died ahas been set free from sin. ⁸Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

¹²Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.

¹³Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. ¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

One with Jesus Christ

John Murray described the importance of the doctrine of Union with Christ in this way, "Union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation... It is not simply a phase of the application of Redemption; it underlines every aspect of redemption... it has its source in the election of God the Father before the foundation of the world and it has its fruition in the glorification of the sons of God." With this importance of Union with Christ we see from Romans 6 some priorities Paul wants believers to note as they wrestle with the importance of the application of Salvation in their lives.

6:1-4. Paul wanted the believer to understand that when they are in Christ they are dead to sin and should therefore live in sin no longer. 6:4-5. The framework Paul builds on this foundation with is the believer's Union with Christ, specifically that those who have faith in Christ were baptized into His death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too might be able to walk in a newness of life.

6:6-11. From there we noticed that the threads that constituted the fabric of the framework were threefold:

- The reality that our old self was crucified in him so sin would be brought to nothing and we have been set free
- If we died with Christ we believe we also live with him
- Death no longer has dominion over the believer found in Christ.

6:12-14. All of this, according to Paul's argument, comes to fruition, or the final result, of this aspect of the believers Union with Christ, namely that the believer is forgiven and free in Christ!

Discussion Questions

- 1) In your own words, what does "union with Christ" mean?
- 2) In Christ your old self has been crucified and sin has been rendered powerless, that you may walk in a "newness of life." IN what ways do you find freedom in these _____?
- 3) What do you think are characteristics of this "newness of life"?

Related Reading

Westminster Larger
Catechism #66 and #79

[Redemption
Accomplished and
Applied – Chapter 9:
Union with Christ](#)
by John Murray

[Saved by Grace
Chapter 4: Union with
Christ](#)
by Anthony A. Hoekema

[Institutes of the Christian
Religion: Book III](#)
by John Calvin

Notes:

Regeneration

Last week we began our series on Experiencing God by looking at what it means to have Union with Christ. This doctrine underlies and permeates all aspects of the application of our salvation. This week we are looking at the starting point of our salvation, which is our regeneration. In John, chapter 3, Jesus explains to Nicodemus that he must be “born again” before he can “see the Kingdom of God”.

John 3:1-15

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.
²This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” ³Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

⁵Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

¹³No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

A Second Birth

Regeneration begins with the understanding that we have no ability on our own to reach out to God. Nicodemus proves this point when he responds to Jesus with the question in verse 4, “can (a man) enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Of course the answer is no. We played no part in our first birth and we cannot play a part in our second birth. Our first birth happened as a result of the will of our parents, and our second birth happens as a result of the will of God.

Jesus teaches that this regeneration takes place by the act of the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can breathe life into the spiritually dead. And we need this life, this regeneration, because without Christ we are spiritually dead. (Ephesians 2:5) So God alone, by his own will and grace, takes our cold dead heart and replaces it with a heart that can respond to Him. (Ezekiel 36:26)

“A man is opposed to Christ, he hates his gospel, does not understand it and will not receive it-- the Holy Spirit comes,

Justification

We have been studying the wonderful theme of experiencing God. We can truly experience Him because of the reality of union with Christ and new birth by the Holy Spirit (regeneration). What we see in Romans 3:19-26 is that we can experience intimacy with Him because He has “justified” us; that is, He declares us acceptable in His sight and includes us among His beloved children.

Romans 3:19-26

¹⁹Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

²¹But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Made Right Before God

In verses 19 and 20 we discover the “Gravity of Justification”, that is, the urgent necessity to be justified by God. Whether we are law abiding Jews or conscientious Gentiles, we have all violated our own moral standard and thus stand before the Lord, by nature, condemned. No one in all the earth can ever say before the Lord, “I stand on my record.”

In verses 21-24a we see the “Gift of Justification” - God has done for us what we couldn’t do for ourselves. He has given us a way to be declared righteous apart from our own moral efforts. This justification is merely received, not earned. It is by faith, not works. And the faith by which we receive justification is itself a gift! (Ephesians 2:8, 9)

In verses 24b and 25a we come to the heart of the matter - the “Grounds of Justification”. Why is God’s gift of justification not a mere legal fantasy? Because our justification is grounded upon a real sacrifice in real space and time that really paid for our transgressions. The atonement of Christ was a “penal substitution,” a sacrifice made in our place which completely satisfied the demands of God’s justice concerning our sin. This truth has liberated hundreds of millions of Christian believers through the centuries and still does today.

In verses 25b and 26 we see the “Glory of Justification.” The ultimate end of this infinitely gracious act of God is to glorify His own matchless Name. We are not saved at the expense of God’s reputation. No, our salvation enhances God’s reputation as the living and true God

Whose justice and grace are both infinitely glorious. Hallelujah to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Justification is God's act of remitting the sins of guilty men, and accounting them righteous, freely, by his grace, through faith in Christ, on the grounds, not of their own works, but of the representative lawkeeping and redemptive blood-shedding of the Lord Jesus Christ on their behalf.

—J.I. Packer

Discussion Questions

- 1) What is the purpose of “the law” (v.20)?

- 2) What must we do to receive the gift of justification (v.22)?

- 3) How would you describe what is meant by the “penal substitutionary” nature of Christ’s atonement?

Related Reading

HELPFUL BOOKS

[The Cross of Christ](#)
by John R. W. Stott

[Faith Alone](#)
by R.C. Sproul

*The Westminster
Confession of Faith,
Chapter x 1*

Digging Deeper

How do you tend to justify yourself rather than trusting in God’s justification of you?

Sanctification

Over the past three weeks we have studied how the believer not only walks with God (through Scripture and prayer) but also how he/she experiences Him in a deep way. We have seen that we need new life through union with Christ (Romans 6), we need a new heart through regeneration (John 3:1-18), we need a new status with God through justification (Romans 3:19-26), and, this week, we see that we need a new direction in life through sanctification. While God's act of justification removes our condemnation, sanctification gradually removes our corruption. Listen to how the apostle Paul states it:

Romans 8:1-11

¹There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

⁶For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Sermon Summary

Paul makes several crucial points in this text about Christian sanctification:

- 1. Remember what God has done for you.** He has accomplished two things that the law could not: freedom from condemnation and freedom from bondage to sin.
- 2. Be who you are.** Sanctification can only occur in the lives of regenerate (born again) believers (v. 5). Our "walk" determines our thinking. If we are unregenerate, we will think about and pursue carnal things; if we are regenerate, we will think about and pursue spiritual things. We must be born again to experience God. Sanctification occurs as we increasingly "set our minds" on the Spirit (v. 6-10), not the law. God has set us free, through union with Christ, from the curse of the law and the bondage of sin, and we now can grow in the likeness of Christ. Unlike regeneration, which is "monergistic," sanctification is "synergistic," that is, it occurs by the power of God and the willing, conscious submission of the believer.
- 3. Contemplate what you shall become.** Sanctification one day ends in our glorification (v. 11). Paul says in II Cor. 4:16 that now our outer nature is wasting away while our inner nature is being renewed (sanctified), but one day our outer nature will also be sanctified.

God is transforming us spiritually now, but later also physically. His renovation of sinners will not cease until we are gloriously transformed into the likeness of Christ and placed in the new (sanctified) heavens and the new (sanctified) earth. Glory! Hallelujah!

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why is the new birth necessary for Christian sanctification?

- 2) Why is it necessary to believe and understand clearly the biblical doctrine of justification in order to experience true sanctification?

- 3) What are some of the defective ways in which church people try to grow in sanctification? Why do these methods not work?

Related Reading

[The Discipline of Grace](#)
by Jerry Bridges

[Growing Your Faith](#)
by Jerry Bridges

[Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XIII](#)

The Holiness of God

The most important thing about any person is what he or she thinks about God. The Lord said through the prophet Jeremiah, "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 9:23, 24) The knowledge of God is our greatest treasure.

If we are walking with God through Bible reading and prayer, and if we are experiencing Him through union with Christ, the new birth, justification through faith, and Spirit-empowered sanctification, we then want to grow in our knowledge, reverence, and love of Who He is.

God is infinite and eternal, and the study of His character is inexhaustible, but it is helpful for us to select a few attributes of God that will give us "windows" into His being and His works. Over the next three weeks, we will study His holiness, His sovereignty, and His goodness.

Covenant Renewal

In Joshua 24, the Israelites have newly entered the promise land, and Joshua leads them in a covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem. Here they are to listen again to the Word of God and to restate their loyalty to Him. When Joshua asks them which God they will serve, they claim to want to serve the Lord, "for he is our God." Joshua then raises a profound and provocative objection: "You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins." Eventually the Israelites prevail: they will put away their idols and serve the Lord alone. Joshua then set up a large stone under the terebinth as an enduring witness to their covenant vows.

Why did Joshua warn them so strongly? What is it about God's holiness that they and we need to know in order to serve Him?

Perhaps we should begin by asking what is God's holiness. The word "holiness," at its root, means "separateness" or "apart-ness." The Scriptures teach us several aspects of God's holiness: His beauty and splendor (Psalm 29:2; Isaiah 6:1-4), His sovereignty and transcendence (Exodus 15:11; Isaiah 57:14, 15; Rev. 15:4), His goodness in redeeming us (Isaiah 43:1-3a, 14, 15; 49:7; 54:5), and His moral purity (Habakkuk 1:12, 13). He alone can sanctify us or anything else (Exodus 31:13; 19:4-6).

Why is it important for us to know God's holiness? In the Scriptures, we see that it is an essential element of personal spiritual renewal (cf. Isaiah 6:5-8), it provides the model and motivation for our sanctification (cf. Leviticus 11:44, 45; I Peter 1:15, 16), it inspires our worship and service to the Lord (Psalm 99; Isaiah 6:8; Matthew 6:9), and it excites our desire to see Him face to face on the Great Day of the Lord (Matt. 5:8; Rev. 1:12-18).

Joshua was saying, in effect, to the Israelites "you can't renew your covenant with the Lord unless and until you assess properly Who your covenant partner is! If you trifle with Him, He will consume you!" The same would be true with believers today. Have we fully considered the holiness of the Triune God? Has His holiness wrought in us a desire to be holy and to worship and serve Him wholeheartedly and to see Him one day face to face?

"Any sin is more or less heinous depending upon the honor and majesty of the one whom we had offended. Since God is of infinite honor, infinite majesty, and infinite holiness, the slightest sin is of infinite consequence. The slightest sin is nothing less than cosmic treason when we realize against whom we have sinned."

—Jonathan Edwards

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why do we not naturally think of God in His holiness as He is revealed to us in the Scriptures? What most often motivates and informs our view of God's character other than the Scriptures?

- 2) What are some ways in which believers tend to trifle with God's holiness?

- 3) How can we grow in our knowledge and experience of the holiness of God?

Related Reading

[*The Holiness of God*](#)
by R.C. Sproul

[*The Attributes of God*](#)
by A.W. Pink

Notes:

Digging Deeper

What evidences in your life show that you have taken God's holiness very seriously? What evidences in your life show that you need to take His holiness more seriously?

The Sovereignty of God

In order to know the Lord as He is, we must know Him as the Sovereign God. But what does this mean? Certainly it means that He created all things and that He governs all things. But does He actually predetermine who is saved? Does He rule over things that are evil?

What the Bible teaches us is that God decrees everything that comes to pass (Psalm 135:6), including the hairs on our heads (Matthew 10:30), the decisions of human beings (Proverbs 21:1), our eternal salvation (Romans 9:10-18; Ephesians 1:4, 5), and every historical event, both good and bad (Isaiah 45:7; Lamentations 3:37, 38).

Romans 8:28-30

²⁸And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

In the very famous verse of Scripture we are here considering, Romans 8:28, Paul is teaching us several things about God's sovereignty:

- 1) He is in charge of everything in our lives;
- 2) He works out everything for the good of those who love Him; and
- 3) those who love Him are called by Him for His purposes.

What difference does all this make? Four things come to mind:

- 1) when we are suffering various afflictions we can be sure that God has ordained our trials for a purpose that will ultimately be for our good;
- 2) we can especially know for sure that we will receive eternal life, because God always brings to completion what He has begun;
- 3) we are humbled to our rightful place as an unworthy recipient of sovereign grace
- 4) God is exalted to His rightful place as Sovereign King of the universe.

"A consciousness of our powerlessness should cast us upon Him who has all power. Here then is where a vision and view of God's sovereignty helps, for it reveals His sufficiency and shows us our insufficiency."

—Arthur W. Pink

The Goodness of God

Psalm 100

- ¹Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!
- ²Serve the LORD with gladness!
Come into his presence with singing!
- ³Know that the LORD, he is God!
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
- ⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!
- ⁵For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Psalm 100 teaches that to know God, is to worship Him and rejoice in Him. And an essential thing to know about God is that while He is holy and powerful (the last two weeks), He is, thankfully, good and not wishing that any should perish. The psalmist calls us to know that the Lord, he is God! He is good, his love endures forever, and his faithfulness endures to all generations.

Some people are perplexed that a good God would allow suffering in the world. And while we can only conjecture as to an adequate explanation of the presence of sin and suffering, we can affirm that God has addressed it in the most personal and powerful way possible. He sent His Son to suffer and die for the sins of the world, and in Him God not only identifies with our suffering in the most complete way, but by His resurrection points us to the ultimate victory over all that has been lost in this fallen world and the transformation promised in the re-creation and restoration of the divine image in the coming Kingdom.

God's goodness is found in all of his acts. In creation He manifested his general grace to the whole world wherein God saw everything He made and "it was very good" and then allowed the sun to shine and rain to continue to fall on the evil as well as the good. But greater goodness came in his redemptive grace in the sending of His Son, where the angels declared "goodwill toward men" and Jesus died for our sins. He continues with present blessings wherein "every good and perfect gift is from above". That is why the psalmist calls us to enter his courts with thanksgiving.

But God should not only be thanked for what He does, but should be praised for who He is in and of Himself. When our confidence in his goodness rises to that level, then we can trust Him in the midst of life's most difficult circumstances. In Romans 8 after Paul says that "for those who love God all things work together for good", that truth is not to be unduly separated from the verses that follow where Paul speaks of tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, and of the sword as part of the possible future for anyone who follows Christ. But even in those circumstances it is His goodness that prevents us from being separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Psalm is very clear about our response. And it is not just for individuals or our church to respond as indicated, but there is a call for "all the earth" to serve and praise Him.

Discussion Questions

- 1) According to Psalm 100, what about God gives us reasons for thankfulness? What about God most moves you to praise and thanksgiving?

- 2) What circumstances are most likely to cause someone to doubt God's goodness?
 - A. How would God have us view life's difficulties in light of His goodness?

 - B. Have you experienced God bringing good out of a bad situation? (Romans 8:28-30)

- 3) Describe a worshipper who knows God is good. (Psalm 100) Is that you?

Related Reading

[Knowing God Chapter 16: Goodness and Severity](#)

by J. I. Packer

[The Reason for God Chapter 2: How Could a Good God Allow Suffering?](#)

by Timothy Keller

Digging Deeper

Is there currently any circumstance that causes you to doubt God's goodness?

Do my outward attitudes, actions and words communicate to others that I believe God is good?

Does someone you know have a problem believing God is good? How can you help this person grasp this and discover its practical implications?

The Wisdom of God

Read Proverbs 2:1-15; Colossians 2:1-5

There are five books of the Bible called “wisdom literature” – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. In one way or another, those books teach God’s people how to think and how to live. “Wisdom” has been defined as “choosing the best end and the best means for reaching that end.” (Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*) Wisdom is “applied knowledge” or “the art of proper living.” Obviously, then, the wise person will be a blessed person.

How then do we obtain this wisdom? Wisdom comes from God. He communicates it to us through general revelation (creation and conscience) and through special revelation (His Word and Spirit). The Scriptures teach us that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”; that is, if we would live wisely, we must know the Lord, from Whom all wisdom comes.

God displays His infinite, eternal, and unchangeable wisdom in three great works. First of all, in creation God displays His wisdom. The psalmist says, “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.” (Psalm 104:24). Our creativity is a display of our wisdom – which, of course, comes from God. In Exodus 31, God gives craftsmen the knowledge and wisdom to create.

Secondly, God displays His wisdom in His providence. He wisely rules over all things to accomplish His gracious purposes. The prophet Isaiah reminds Israel of God’s all-wise providence in Isaiah 40:21-31. Israel is encouraged to trust the Sovereign Lord who wisely brings all of history to its grand conclusion.

Thirdly, and most gloriously of all, God displays His wisdom in the redemption of His people. In Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Colossians 2:3) What seemed foolish to both the Jews and Greeks, is in fact the wisdom of God and the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) After Paul’s explanation of God’s plan of salvation in Romans 1-11, he concludes his presentation with a burst of praise to the wisdom of God:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”
“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”
For from him and through him and to him are all things,
To him be glory forever. Amen.

What does this mean for us? In order to be wise people, we must seek the Lord. We must study His creation and study His Word. We must bow down in worship and humble our minds and wills before Him. We must seek the infilling of His wise Spirit. We must learn from wise people. And we must believe the glorious wise gospel of Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What are 3 ways God displays His wisdom?

- 2) Look at James 3:13-18. What are the differences between earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom? What are the motives behind each type of wisdom?

- 3) How do we plug into the wisdom of God?

- 4) Why does the world look at Christian wisdom as weak and foolish? (1 Cor. 1:18-31)

Related Reading

How to Read Proverbs
by Tremper Longman

The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes
by Derek Kidner

Westminster Confession, Chapter V

Westminster Shorter Catechism, #8-11

Digging Deeper

What types of situations do you face in which you feel that you do not have sufficient wisdom to make decisions? How can you grow in your ability to make good decisions in these areas of your life?

Make a schedule to read through Proverbs (1 chapter per day completes the reading in one month) and note specific expressions of wise living as you read.

Worshiping God with My Whole Heart

Last week we studied the wisdom of God and the wisdom He imparts to His children. In this week's text, the Apostle Paul shows us that the first priority for the wise person is the worship of God. This emphasis on worship is consistent with both the Old and the New Testament. John Calvin put it this way, "The first foundation of righteousness is undoubtedly the worship of God."

Ephesians 5:15-21

¹⁵Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

¹⁸And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, ²⁰giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

In Paul's instructions regarding the believer's worship, we can observe four very helpful truths:

1. We must worship by the Spirit of God. (v. 18) Just as we can wrongly come under the influence of alcohol and drugs, Paul says we can come "under the influence" of the Spirit, and when we do we will become worshippers. It is the Spirit Who gives us new hearts, illumines our minds to understand the Scriptures, enables us to believe God's promises, and empowers us to worship Him. He Himself, constitutes true worship. His Presence is the sine qua non of true worship.

2. We must worship through our voices. (v.19a) When we come to worship we are not attending a performance; rather, we are the performance. And God is the audience we seek to serve. We, therefore, sing, not because we're good singers, but because He is a gracious God and commands us to sing. (Psalm 100:1) The whole congregation is God's choir, and by the Spirit everyone of us joins in.

3. We must worship to the Lord. (v. 19b) He is actually present when we worship. Everything is either addressed directly to Him or it is done consciously before His face to please Him. This is why our very order of service is in the form of a dialogue: He speaks and we respond. The liturgists are here simply as "prompters" to help us.

4. We must worship with our hearts. (vs. 19c, 20) When we come to worship, we come with many gifts: our time, our voices, our money, our listening ears, our minds—but the most important gift we bring is our hearts. This is what He wants above all else. Isaiah recorded the words of the Lord about Israel: "...this people...honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me..." (Isaiah 19:13)

What does it mean to worship with our hearts? The heart is known as the center of our being, the place where we feel things deeply and hold our firmest convictions. But what is the greatest thing the heart actually does? Above all the heart loves. The heart chooses to bind itself to the object of its affection. This is what the Lord wants: your deepest love. Isaac Watts put it this way:

The Great God values not the service of men, if the heart be not in it; The Lord sees and judges the heart; he has no regard to outward forms of worship, if there be no inward adoration, if no devout affection be employed therein. It is therefore a matter of infinite importance, to have the whole heart engaged steadfastly for God.

But how do I do that? Two pointers that should help:

1. Open your heart to His love. Let Him in. Let Him love you. Think about the Incarnation. He did this for you, to save you from your sins (Matthew 1:121), to be with you forever (Matthew 1:23; 28:20), and by His poverty to make you rich (II Corinthians 8:9). We give thanks "always and for everything," because in every circumstance His blessings abide with us. He really loves us.

2. Get rid of your other lovers. You can't have both Christ and some idol in your life. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters..." The other "lovers" want to pull you away from Him. You must forsake them. Here is how A.W. Tozer once prayed:

Father, I want to know Thee, but my coward heart fears to give up its toys. I cannot part with them without inward bleeding, and I do not try to hide from Thee the terror of the parting. I come trembling, but I do come. Please root from my heart all those things which I have cherished so long and which have become a very part of my living self, so that Thou mayest enter and dwell there without a rival. Then shalt Thou make the place of Thy feet glorious. Then shall my heart have no need of the sun to shine on it, for Thyself will be the light of it, and there shall be no night there. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why must worship be the highest priority for every believer? Why is it often not?
- 2) What does it mean to worship "by the Spirit" (v.18)?
- 3) What sets us free to sing in worship to God?
- 4) What non-essential issues do we need to set aside when we come to worship?

Memory Verses

FOR THIS WEEK

*³³Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
³⁴For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?
³⁵Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"
³⁶For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*

Romans 11:33-36

Related Reading

HELPFUL BOOKS

[*Worship Matters*](#)

by Bob Kauflin

[*Worship is a Verb*](#)

by Robert Webber

[*A Royal Waste of Time*](#)

by Dawn Marva

[*Divine Hours*](#)

by Phyllis Tickle

Digging Deeper

Look at your priorities and commitments and schedule. What needs to change for worship to be your first priority?

How can you become a more engaged worshipper? List at least three action steps.

The Service of Worship

CAN THE AMAZING GRACE OF WORSHIPPING GOD BE FOUND IN TODAY'S CHURCH?

The Amazing Grace of Worship

It is an act of God's amazing grace that we are called by Him to join the angels in offering Him worship. Amazing grace that we stand before Him as acceptable worshippers! Amazing grace that our voices are blended with those of the seraphim! Amazing grace that He reveals Himself to sinners like us! To worship God is to experience amazing grace.

This past year, like most years, I have had the opportunity to worship in many churches outside of Memphis. Through the years I have enjoyed these moments. They have been memorable occasions of experiencing God's grace in worship. Additionally, it is good for my soul occasionally to be an anonymous worshipper in the pew, not having planned the service, not coordinating the various elements and participants, not concerning myself overly much with what's coming next or what I'm going to say, and especially not worrying about what time we finish the service!

A Serious Downgrade

I have to say, however, that recent experiences have not been consistently encouraging ones. I appreciate the fact that all of the churches I have attended are full of fine Christian folk with very good intentions, but I have been saddened by what seems to me to be a steady downgrade in the very essence of corporate worship and in the form and content of contemporary preaching. Don't misunderstand: many of the musicians were well-gifted and many of the preachers were good communicators. That's not the problem.

The problem is that the American evangelical church seems to be losing its sense of God's presence, its understanding of God's Word, and its very purpose for assembling together. We have become so focused on ourselves that we have gradually perverted every aspect of worship. In many churches, no longer is our worship a "service" (to God), but it is an "experience" (for us); no longer do we consciously seek to please God, but rather ourselves; no longer are His attributes exalted, but rather the personalities of the performers; no longer is worship considered something profoundly serious (before God), but rather it is something primarily fun, entertaining, and exciting (for us); no longer do pastors carefully interpret and apply what God has said in His Word through expository preaching, but rather they select some (if any) Bible verses to support whatever preconceived practical advice they want to give to the people; no longer are we left with a compelling sense of God's majesty, our sinfulness, and

the wonder of His redemptive love, but rather we leave with a sense that we really need to feel better about ourselves and, by George, we can do it; no longer do we enter sanctuaries that remind us through words and symbols that we undeservedly belong to God's ancient people and that He is our God through the sacrifice of His Son, but rather we enter spaces no different than the local theater or shopping mall to remind us that anybody can worship God, even without atonement and regeneration; no longer do we carefully comb through the libraries of human language, art, and music to present our best offerings to God in worship, but rather we pitifully scramble for the latest tunes and technology to be "relevant" to our own age. The net result, I fear, is that we, ironically, have become tragically irrelevant because we have lost our chief pleasure — the unspeakable delight of meeting the Triune God, being graciously forgiven for all our sins and being covered with the righteousness of His Son, Jesus Christ, and together bringing Him pleasure while rendering to Him the glory, honor, and obedience that He alone deserves. In one instance after another I left many of these "experiences" feeling robbed of the most important experience of all — the real thrill of being led into His presence. More importantly, I felt that God was robbed of what He alone deserves — our complete, joyful submission to Him in worship, according to the guidance of His own Word.

What To Do?

I found myself concerned for the next generation of American Christians, many of whom probably have never learned to express reverence or sincere gratitude to God in a thoughtful manner. What does one do about this?

After thinking about it, I realized that God has seen His people through many historic moments of spiritual and moral (and liturgical) declension, and He never once needed me to get us through those times! Secondly, I realized that I am more committed than ever to robustly biblical worship at Second Presbyterian Church. And thirdly, I believe He wants me to pray — fervently, believingly, and patiently — for His Church that He loves so much. He doesn't love us, after all, because we are such great worshippers. Just the opposite. We worship Him because He loves such weak worshippers — like me. Amazing grace indeed.



Worshipping God with My Voice

During the Christmas season we are surrounded with music. Why? Because human beings always express their strongest passions in music—whether their deepest sorrows or their highest joys. That’s one reason that the Christian faith is a musical faith. The gospel of Christ, the history of redemption, and the future hope have always inspired our poets and musicians—and every believer—to make a joyful noise.

We see the musical inclinations of God’s children especially in Mary’s Magnificat:

The Magnificat: Luke 1:46–56

My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
 For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
 For he who is might has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
 And his mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
 He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
 He has brought down the might from their thrones
 and exalted those of humble estate;
 He has filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich he has sent away empty.
 He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
 as he spoke to our fathers,
 to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

We need to note several things about singing in worship:

1. God’s great being and works demand it. We read in Exodus that after the exodus from Egypt, Moses sang; after David was forgiven his sin with Bathsheba, he sang (Psalm 51); after God saves us, even He sings! (Zechariah 3:17). If we believe He created the world and sustains everything in it; if we believe He sent His Son to die for our sins; if we believe His promises for eternal life, we too must sing.
2. Our song is primarily about Him rather than ourselves. Mary was highly favored to be the mother of our Lord, and her song reflects her personal joy and amazement at her privileges, but the primary theme is His mercy. Our songs, too, must be focused on the Lord, His character and His work.
3. Our song is carefully prepared. Look at how Mary carefully gleaned her thoughts and words from the song of Hannah in I Samuel 2 and how she thoughtfully recalls the biblical promises to Abraham. She was a very good young theologian, as well as poet. Our singing and our meditations must also be deeply reflective upon God’s Word.
4. Our song is an offering to the Lord. Singing in worship is a sacrificial gift to the Lord. Look at Hebrews 13:15. Singing to the Lord requires time, energy, and, most importantly, heart. “Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise.”

Discussion Questions:

- 1) What is the function of worshipful singing in scripture?
 - a. Colossians 3:16-17
 - b. Acts 16:25
 - c. Matthew 26:26-30
 - d. Psalm 95:1-2; 96:1-3; 98:1; 100:1,4,147,149,150
- 2) What elements of singing do we need to just “get over”?

Other Resources

[The Trinity Hymnal](#)

[The Trinity Hymnal Online](#)

[The RUF Hymnbook](#)

Worshiping God: My Treasure

Generally speaking, American Christians think of themselves as being a fairly generous bunch of folks. In a recent book by Christian Smith and Michael Emerson, however, the argument is made that we are not so generous after all. In *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give More Money Away*, Smith and Emerson show data that reveals that the median Christian giver donates .67% of his income to charities. Apparently only 9.4% of Christians actually tithe. Smith and Emerson also make the claim that if 90% of American Christians would tithe (allowing for 10% unemployment), we would have an additional \$85.5 billion for reaching the lost and serving the poor. American Christians alone have the capacity to relieve worldwide hunger and disease!

But the real question is "Why?" Smith and Emerson propose a number of possibilities, including our consumeristic culture and the deafening silence of church leaders, but perhaps the text for this week explains it even better:

Matthew 2:1-12

¹Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ²saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

In this story of the Magi, Matthew is continuing his presentation of Jesus Christ as:

- 1) the Son of David (Matthew 1:1-17) and
- 2) the Son of God (Matthew 1:18-25) and now
- 3) as the universal King (Matthew 2:1-12).

Jesus is worshipped with lavish gifts by Gentiles! Why? Notice four things about these wise men:

1. They saw something others didn't see. (2:1,2a)

They saw Him as King even when political leaders and clergy didn't. The song, "We Didn't Know Who You Was" describes just about everybody else in this story. But these wise men knew, even from their study of the heavenly bodies, that this Baby was Special.

2. They wanted something others didn't want. (2:10)

They went when others wouldn't go. Even (vs. 9) when they didn't know exactly where to go (no address, no GPS), they went toward Bethlehem. Notice that God later gave them specific instructions through the guiding star. So it is with us, we do what He says even if we can't see the entire outcome, knowing that He will guide us along the way.

3. They did something others didn't do. (2:2b-9)

There are some things that can make us very happy but notice here the unrestrained, unbounded joy of the wise men when they received what they were searching: "They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." Our giving begins with what we want. The true believer, more than anything else, simply wants Him.

4. They gave something others didn't give. (2:11,12)

They gave Him tribute, honor, and obedience befitting a King. What tribute can we give that honors Him as King? The tithe. How do we give it to Him? We bring it into the storehouse/temple. What is today's temple? The Church. We give gifts, of course, beyond the tithe to other charitable organizations, causes and people, but the tithe itself is reserved for the worship of Christ as King.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What are some reasons that biblical giving is not the practice of many American Christians?
- 2) What should be the chief motivations for our giving?
- 3) Why is it important for our tithe to go into the "storehouse"?

Related Reading

[Christian Giving](#)
by Sandy Willson

[The Treasure Principal](#)
by Randy Alcorn

Digging Deeper

Pray that God will make you a generous giver.

Develop your giving plan.

GUIDANCE FROM GOD’S WORD: CHRISTIAN GIVING **by: Sanders Willson**

There’s a story about a horrible riot in a major city that local policemen found impossible to disperse. They tried tear gas, fire hoses, rubber bullets --- nothing worked. The local Presbyterian pastor offered his help. The chief of police kindly thanked him and said, “Yes, Pastor, prayer is all we have left to do.” The pastor said, “Chief, I can do that and more,” as he immersed himself in the crowd. Fifteen minutes later the crowd had completely dispersed and all of the rioters had run home. Later, the chief of police said to the Presbyterian pastor, “Your prayers must be absolutely incredible!” The pastor said, “Well, Chief, I did pray before I went into that unruly mob, but what really made them scatter was what I said to them.” “And what was that?” asked the chief. The pastor replied, “I just began to preach last Sunday’s stewardship sermon.”

Why is it that the Lord said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive,”¹ and the people of God often believe just the opposite? Is it not a simple lack of faith in God’s promises? There is only one place in the Bible where God explicitly invites us to “test” His promises to see if they be true --- it is His promise to bless those who bring tithes into the storehouse.

⁸ “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

“But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’

“In tithes and offerings. ⁹ You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. ¹⁰ Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

---Malachi 3: 8-10 NIV

What is also clear in this text is that the non-tithing Israelites were under a “curse” (v. 9) because of their disobedient stewardship. Wow! Dear friends, we may be concerned about stewardship for many reasons --- wanting to pay our church utility bills, compensate our staff, support our missions agencies, etc. --- but the overwhelming concern is that we be under God’s blessing, and not under His curse! For the Israelites, following their recent return from Babylon, this divine curse² would explain their poor economy, their withering crops, their persecution from their neighbors, and their broken families. In our case, it might explain much of the spiritual lethargy and relational

¹ [Acts 20: 35](#)

² [See also Malachi 1: 14 and 2: 2](#)

heartbreak in churches today. The message seems to be clear: Tithers invite God's blessing; non-tithers invite God's cursing. That is a powerful statement! Why would God get so upset about such a seemingly minor matter?

Let me ask you something. Has your home ever been burglarized? Has anyone broken into your home, rummaged through your drawers, and taken what he wanted? If so, you know the outrage, the sensation of being personally violated, the righteous indignation against high-handed injustice. That is exactly how the Lord describes his own feelings concerning one who does not bring a tithe into His storehouse. How, then, would God feel toward His Church if there were "robbers" rummaging through His property, taking what they wanted, and asking with feigned innocence, "How do we rob you?" (v. 8) This is why God is so angry with the Church's failure to tithe; but no matter how angry God becomes with us, He is always gracious, and He faithfully shows us the way back to His blessing: "Bring the whole tithe into my storehouse, that there may be food in my house." (v. 10a)

The Biblical Tithe

What is a tithe? The word means "tenth." In the Old Testament the tithe of the Israelites' harvests was given to support the poor³, to supply the priests and teachers⁴, and to provide for the major festivals of worship and fellowship⁵. (In fact, some scholars believe there were actually three tithes: a triennial tithe for the poor, and annual tithes for the priesthood and the festivals --- 23 1/3% per year!) The primary purpose of the tithe, however, is to confess and confirm our relationship with the Lord: He is the owner, we are the "tenant farmers." He does not require 100% or 50% or even 33 1/3%, but only 10% from His "renters." The tithe is a reminder to us that everything, including our very bodies, belongs to the Sovereign Lord.

Some might say, "I thought that tithing was an Old Testament requirement, and that we are now required by the New Testament simply to give cheerfully, generously, sacrificially, intentionally, and proportionately." This is true, but it is only part of the truth. The full truth is that the Old Testament and the New Testament *both* teach tithing⁶

³ Deuteronomy 14: 28, 29

⁴ Numbers 18: 28

⁵ Deuteronomy 14: 22-27

⁶ Genesis 14:20; Leviticus 27:30; Numbers 18:21; Deuteronomy 14:22f; II Chronicles 31: 5,6; Nehemiah 10: 37-39; 13: 4,5; Matthew 23: 23

and also cheerful, generous, sacrificial, planned, and proportionate giving.⁷ Jesus chided the Pharisees for meticulously tithing their garden herbs (a relatively light matter), but ignoring justice, mercy, and faithfulness (weighty matters). His solution was not for the Pharisees to obey the weighty and ignore the light, but rather to obey both the weighty and the light matters of the law.⁸ The same is true for us today.

Sometimes folks ask, “Should I tithe on the gross income (before taxes) or the net income (after taxes)?” The answer seems clearly to be that we are commanded to tithe on our total personal earned income, whether it be a teenager’s baby-sitting money, a child’s allowance for chores performed, or a CEO’s multi-million dollar income. Isn’t it interesting that in American tax policy, charitable giving is tax-deductible. Have you ever considered why? It is because our early founders acknowledged that tithes belong to the Lord, not to individuals, and not to governments. Righteous governments don’t tax God! We would do well to look at our gross, pre-tax income the same way. When one Presbyterian elder was asked whether to tithe on the gross or on the net, he simply asked, “Which do you want God to bless?”

The Biblical Storehouse

God told the Israelites to bring their tithes into the “storehouse.” The question is often asked, “What is the contemporary equivalent of the storehouse: Is it the church, all Christian causes, or even all charitable causes?” Let’s look at what the Bible says.

In II Chronicles 31, King Hezekiah calls upon the people to repent and bring in their tithes. Do they ever! The response is so massive that Hezekiah had to build “storehouses” (storerooms in the temple) to accommodate their generosity. (Isn’t it also obvious that it had been a while since the people had tithed – the temple’s capacity was woefully inadequate and out of date.) We are told that God blessed and prospered His people.

So the storehouse is within the temple; but where is the temple today? Was it not destroyed in 70 A.D.? Yes, but the apostles of Christ teach us about the real temple of God. Paul says that we, the people of God, are that sacred temple⁹; Peter says that each believer is a “living stone” of God’s temple¹⁰. If we, then, bring our “tithes into the

⁷ Cheerful (Exodus 35: 4, 21, 22, 26, 29; 36: 2-7; II Corinthians 9:7); Generous (Proverbs 11:25; 22:9; II Corinthians 9:6); Sacrificial (2 Samuel 24: 24; Mark 12: 43, 44; II Corinthians 8: 1-5); Planned (I Chronicles 16:29; I Corinthians 16: 1,2); Proportionate (Deuteronomy 16:17; II Corinthians 8: 12).

⁸ See also Matthew 5: 17-20

⁹ I Corinthians 3: 16,17; see also Ephesians 2: 19-22

¹⁰ I Peter 2:5

storehouse,” we bring 10% of our earned income into the Church of Jesus Christ, the church whom God created, to whom He gave apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers, the Church to whom He gave the sacraments and the keys of the Kingdom (Church discipline). This seems to imply rather strongly that para-church organizations and other charitable groups are not qualified recipients of God’s tithe.

Moishe Rosen, the founder of Jews for Jesus, once sent a letter appealing for gifts to meet the urgent financial need of the organization. In his letter, Moishe said, “We really need your help, but please don’t send us any tithe money; we prefer not to operate with stolen funds.” As a completed Jew, Moishe knows his Bible --- Old and New Testaments!

There are a number of objections that could be raised. One time a man said to his pastor, “Preacher, I make too much money to give the whole 10% to the church; it would overwhelm the deacons and probably give me too much influence in the local church.” The pastor said, “I understand. Let’s just pray about that right here: ‘Dear Lord, please reduce this man’s personal, earned income until he feels safe giving a tithe to Your Church.’” That is one way to handle it!

Sometimes folks believe their small income doesn’t matter or that their creditors should be paid before they tithe. Remember the woman with two mites¹¹ and how Christ commended her generosity, not because of the amount, but because of her attitude. The size of our gift makes absolutely *no* difference to Him; what matters is our repentant and loving hearts. Remember also that every human creditor must learn to line up behind our Heavenly Creditor!

Some folks may be concerned about how para-church organizations would finance their ministries if we did not send them tithe money. Dear friend, if every church member tithed to the church, there would be absolutely no problem financing *every* worthwhile ministry in the country from the church’s treasury; furthermore, God’s people learn to give free-will offerings beyond the tithe, which may be sent to many different types of Christian and secular causes. This is God’s way. Since we are giving God’s tithe, it is best for us as individuals not to attempt to direct those funds beyond simply bringing them into “the storehouse.” This is why the saints in the early church brought their gifts to the feet of the apostles.¹² God’s ordained church leaders were the ones who then allocated and disbursed God’s tithes and offerings. There is something beautiful about the tithe: the individual donor gets no thank you notes, no special influence in the

¹¹ [Luke 21: 1-4](#)

¹² [Acts 4:37](#)

church, no “position on the board of directors.” Why should he? He is merely giving to God what is His!

The Biblical Blessing

If the tither gives 10% of his income and does not even get a thank you note, what motivates him to persevere. The scripture text in Malachi promises to the Israelites several blessings: material abundance, physical protection, healthy reputations, and spiritual confirmation. Although many Christian tithers can attest to God’s many material and physical blessings to them, the people of God no longer own a holy land with geopolitical boundaries --- when the rains fall, they fall on all alike. We are now a chosen people in dispersion among all the nations; therefore, God’s blessings are not always physically (or fiscally) discernible; but we do experience the unspeakable privilege of God’s favor resting upon us, individually and corporately, so much so that we can truly say we “do not have room enough for it.” (v. 10)

There was a man,
Some called him mad;
The more he gave,
The more he had.
--John Bunyan

And we do have a promised land: a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven¹³. Our rewards are truly “out of this world.” God is no man’s debtor; the rewards will be astonishingly immense and beautiful.

There is a small church not too far from here where the pastor preached to his congregation what the Bible says about tithing. The next week the pastor was visited by the church treasurer, the Sunday School superintendent, and the chairman of the deacons, all of whom confessed they had not been tithing but were going to begin tithing immediately. Over the next four years, that little church sent four of their families to the mission field, tripled their giving to world missions, and led a number of people to saving faith in Christ. Could there be a connection?

One of our senior members wrote recently to our senior minister:

I want to share a story with you about myself. I was well past middle age when the Lord finally decided that it was time for me to meet His Son and give my life to Him. As is the case with any new Christian, I was hungry for the Gospel. It was about this time that Lane Adams was selected as the Senior Minister at Second. What a preacher! His ability to present the Lord Jesus as the Living

¹³ [Revelation 21 and 22](#)

Savior came as a breath of fresh air to this baby Christian. Sunday after Sunday I would sit in the sanctuary and feel spiritually lifted up and yet there was something wrong – something was missing. It wasn't until Lane preached a stewardship sermon that the mystery was solved. He used the third chapter of Malachi as his text, and the light finally dawned when he got to that part where Malachi speaking for God told the people, "You have robbed me in tithes and offerings." I had been robbing God. That was what was wrong. We weren't tithing – far from it. Ten percent right off the top – it just didn't seem possible. It didn't come easy at first – house notes, car notes, children in school, bills to pay, and very little if anything left over at the end of the month – but we did it. We started the very next Sunday and have continued to experience the joy of God's blessing – just as He promised. Pray boldly about stewardship, Sandy. Convey to those listening that the Lord truly opens the windows of heaven and the joy of His love to those who heed his admonition with regard to giving. He does open the windows of heaven.

Will you take the Lord at His Word? Test Him! Today!

General Advice on Christian Giving

The Christian is the eternal beneficiary of One Who emptied Himself of His great riches and became poor in order that we might become rich. (II Cor. 8: 9) Because he/she has been greatly loved, the Christian cultivates a cheerful, generous, sacrificial attitude and cheerfully plans his giving for maximum good in the Kingdom of God. There are normally four objects of Christian giving: The Church, the para-church ministries, the non-Christian charitable organizations, and the non tax-deductible giving to individuals. Within the category of church giving alone, there are various designations at Second Presbyterian Church: general ministry fund, world missions fund, building fund, the 2PC Foundation, and designated gifts.

Here are several legitimate giving models for the Christian, from which you might choose:

I. A Conservative Christian Giving Model

The tithe is divided among:

General Ministry Fund (5%)	World Missions (2%)	Building Fund (2%)	2PC Foundation (1%)
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Giving beyond the tithe is divided among:

2PC Designated Gifts	Para-church Ministries	Non-Christian charitable causes	Personal gifts to those in need
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II. A Recommended Christian Giving Model

The tithe is divided among:

General Ministry Fund (7-9%)	World Missions (1-3%)
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Gifts beyond the tithe are divided among:

2PC Building Fund	2PC Foundation	2PC Designated Giving	Para-church Ministries	Non-Christian charitable causes	Personal gifts to those in need
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III. An Aggressive Christian Giving Model

The tithe is given to:

General Ministry Fund

Another tithe is given to:

World Missions (3 1/3%)	Building Fund (3 1/3%)	Para-church Ministries (3 1/3 %)
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Other gifts divided among:

2PC Designated Gifts	2PC Foundation	Non-Christian Charities	Personal gifts
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The Christian should plan his/her giving at least one year ahead of time. His tithes and offerings to the church are an act of worship and, therefore, should be given to the Lord in the public worship services, as much as possible. His giving to non-church institutions should normally be planned annually so that he does not make the mistake of simply responding to “urgent” appeals. He should normally plan for a personal discretionary fund that allows personal gifts to be given as needs may arise. In giving to non-church institutions, the Christian needs to evaluate the agency in a number of ways: 1) Mission Statement of the organization; 2) Accomplishment of stated mission; 3) Caliber of non-family board members; 4) Caliber of director; 5) Statement of faith; 6) Financial accountability; 7) Base of donors and donor trends; 8) Recommendations from knowledgeable people; 9) Involvement of capable volunteers.

The most important principle, however, in all of our giving is to give out of a grateful and joyful heart seeking to bring praise and glory to God alone.

Worshipping God with My Time

Over these past three sermons we have seen that the most important thing we can do with our hearts, our voices, and our treasure is to worship God. In our lesson today we see that the same is true with our time.

Studies reveal that the average American values his time twice as much as his money and this phenomenon increases with one's income. We also know that 40% of American last month felt stressed with all they had to do, and 33% as seriously and chronically stressed out! We obviously have a problem with time; and our text for today has the answers we need.

Read Exodus 16

In this text the Israelites have been delivered from Egyptian slavery just 45 days before, and they are already grumbling! They're hungry, and they see no reasonable prospects for food in their future. God's answer to their grumbling is amazingly gracious. Notice:

1. God gives us the gift of a joyful life schedule. (16:1-26)

In answer to their grumbling, God didn't destroy them or even punish them, but rather He gave them food, a sure sign that He was their God. Not only that, but He graciously gave them something they didn't even request, and it is the ultimate solution for our grumbling, namely, sacred time to delight ourselves in the Lord. When He gave them manna, He instructed them to collect twice as much on the sixth day and none of the seventh day, because the seventh day was to be a "day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord." What is this "rest?" In Genesis 2:2 we read that after God created the cosmos in six days, "he rested on the seventh day." Obviously, this does not mean that He was recuperating from exhaustion, but rather He was taking delight in all He had done. So it is with us. We take sacred time to delight ourselves in all that God has done in creation (cf. Exodus 20:11) and in redemption (cf. Deuteronomy 5:15). Isaiah also emphasizes the command to delight ourselves in 58:13, 14.

Our delight in God is unbounded as we remember that Jesus said that He is the manna (cf. John 6:47-51), the rest (Matthew 11:18-20) and the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). We enter our rest by obeying and trusting in Him (cf. Hebrews 4:1-11).

2. We often squander His gift. (16:27)

It's amazing to see that after being told exactly how to enjoy God and His provision for them, some of them went to work on the seventh day! Are they nuts? Just like us! We squander the gift when we try to fit our worship into a very busy Sunday. True worship will never fit into your busy schedule. If you would offer true worship, your schedule must fit into a pattern of giving one day a week to delight yourself in the Lord, because true worship only fits into a context of biblical rest. God eventually evicted them from the holy land because they would not enjoy His rest (see Leviticus 26:34).

3. We can regain His gift of joy. (16:28-35)

Notice that after the Lord chided His people (vs. 28, 29), they indeed found rest (v. 30). So can you. You many need to sell your house or cut your budget, but you can have His rest if you want it. You may be a very important person and a very busy person, but you can have His rest, if you'll listen to Him.

And notice in vs. 31-35 that this gift is not only for us, but for the generations to come. Why not get out of the "spin cycle" and enter God's Sabbath rest?

We Belong to Each Other

Paul, in the first three chapters of Ephesians, explains the great foundation upon which our salvation rests—this is our “calling”—accomplished by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. We will explore these mysteries for all eternity—even the angels stand in utter amazement at the wisdom of God manifest in the Church.

Having laid that theological and spiritual foundation, the Apostle is now eager to explain to us how we live this out, how we respond to this immeasurable, unfathomable love of God. He transitions here with some very interesting language – he says we must live a life “worthy” of the calling we have received. The word worthy can mean “equal to” in the sense of two weights in a balance. Now this is truly a remarkable statement about the Christian lifestyle, that is, it must have a depth, a gravity, a significance, that is equal to the gravity of God’s saving work on our behalf!

Now Paul mentions many things in chapters 4-6 about this “weighty” Christian lifestyle: our honesty, our speech, our sexual morality, our worship, our submission to authority; but it is very instructive to notice what he mentions first of all among the important ethical areas of our lives: our unity in the Body of Christ.

Ephesians 4:1-6

¹I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Notice three principles in this text:

1. Church unity must be one of our primary objectives in life. (v.1)

Paul was pleading with them from prison – this was extremely important – to develop, promote, and maintain the unity of the church; because through church unity (a) God is honored, (b) the saints are blessed, and (c) the non-Christians are drawn to the Lord.

2. Church unity will demand radically gracious behavior from us all. (v.2)

Look at these traits in verse 2: humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance. We are going to have to have some help from Headquarters! And this is exactly what God has done: He has given us His Spirit that we may demonstrate these virtues to one another.

3. Church unity is secured by the unity of the Godhead. (vv.3-6)

We are only “maintaining” (v.3) what has been given (vv.4-6). In verses 4-6 we see the word “one” seven times. God has firmly established us as His instruments to carry out the purposes of His will, namely, that all things will be united in Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:10) We are going to be successful! We can’t fail! Hallelujah! The big question for us is how we are going to live this out today and tomorrow, until He comes.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why is church unity so important to God? To the church? To the unchurched world?

- 2) What are the greatest challenges today to church unity?

- 3) What are some things every believer can do to contribute to the unity of the church?

- 4) What are some of the “cheap substitutes” we often offer to God in the place of real unity? Why should we not tolerate those?

- 5) What difference does it make for us to know that our unity in the church is secured by the unity of the Godhead?

Memory Verses

FOR THIS WEEK

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,

Philippians 4:19

Resources

HELPFUL BOOKS

[Life Together](#)

by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

[Total Church: A Radical](#)

[Reshaping around](#)

[Gospel and Community](#)

by Tim Chester and

Steve Timmis

Digging Deeper

In studying this lesson, what action steps with what people do you need to implement in the days ahead?

Beyond these specific relationships, what can you do in your home church to promote peace and unity?

Serve Each Other

Jesus is making His way to the Cross. What awaits Him is unimaginable...pain, brutality, rejection, betrayal, the cosmic weight of becoming the sin-payment and with that, taking on the totality of His Father's wrath – and all of this, out of love.

Surely at a time like this, His closest friends would be there, rally to support Him and stand with Him. Not so. Instead, two of them, the Son's of Zebedee choose this moment to negotiate a preferred seating arrangement for themselves in glory. Wow. Can you imagine someone being that self-focused, so filled with themselves and their own position, status and security that they are completely unaware of the needs of others? Sure you can. That's you. That's me.

What we see in our text is that Jesus doesn't just condemn us for this, He offers us His life, His grace and the energy of His Spirit to do what is counter to our nature – which is to actually become a servant. Not merely to do acts of service, but to be a servant – to lay down our lives just as Jesus so willingly laid down His life for us.

A Mother's Request: Matthew 20:20-28

²⁰Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. ²¹And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." ²²Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." ²³He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father."

²⁴And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. ²⁵But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Consider these insights into the text:

1. An expression of self-interest uncovered (v.20-21)

The Mother of James and John ask Jesus to allow them to sit on His right side and His left in His future Kingdom (v.22-23) Jesus denies their request on two accounts:

- Their ignorance (v.22) Neither the mother nor the sons really know what they are asking
- His inability (v.23) Seating arrangements in the Kingdom of heaven will be assigned by the Father not the Son.

2. An example of true greatness revealed (v.24-25)

Jesus used this tense situation to set before us a picture of true greatness:

- Greatness as viewed by the Gentiles (v.25) Greatness to them is the powerful lording over others
- Greatness as viewed by a Kingdom mind (v.25ff)

3. An expectation of servant living required (v.26-28)

- Requires serving, sacrificing for others

Discussion Questions

- 1) What did Jesus have to say about the path to true greatness (Matt. 20:25-26)
- 2) What do you find hardest about this definition of greatness?
- 3) Is there a particular person you find it especially difficult to serve? If so, why?
- 4) What changes must happen in us to take on the nature of a servant?

Resources**BOOK**

[Humility: True Greatness](#)

by C.J. Mahaney

Notes:**Digging Deeper**

What is one tangible step you can take this week to embrace the Jesus life as a servant, "the first among you must be your slave."?

Knowing that your service is meant to build up the body of Christ, is there something you have been uniquely gifted to do that you sense God reawakening you to do?

Forgiving Each Other

If we love God, we must also love our brother and sister. Last week we saw that love demands that we serve each other. This week we observe that love demands total forgiveness of one another.

Read Matthew 18:21-35

The context of this passage is seen in the previous verses. Jesus teaches His disciples that being brothers and sisters in the Kingdom means that we must lovingly confront each other in order to be reconciled. Peter, it seems, realizes that this means that forgiveness will be required—but how often? Jesus gives an amazing answer:

1. The rule of forgiveness is unconditional. (v.21, 22)

Peter thought he was being very gracious to suggest a seven-fold forgiveness. Jesus' answer is startling: not seven, but seventy times seven, which is to say "without limit!" Our forgiveness of others is to be without limit in frequency or in gravity. In Mark 11:25, Jesus said: "And whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." No matter how deeply or how often we've been hurt, we must forgive.

2. The rationale for forgiveness is unassailable. (vv.23–34)

Look at the parable Jesus told. The second servant owed the first servant 100 denarii - probably \$10,000 in today's economy. That's a big debt to cancel. But why must it be canceled? Because the first servant was forgiven a massive debt by the master, 10,000 talents—probably about \$6 billion! The logic of mercy is that those who have received it must give it away. How do we do this? Consider four steps:

- A. **Honestly assess the debt.** Unless you accurately calculate the damage, you don't know how much to forgive. And don't forget to consider how you have also sinned against your debtor.
- B. **Seek agreement.** This is what Matthew 18:15-18 is all about. The best transaction occurs when both parties agree about the nature of the offense. It is true that we should overlook most offenses against us; but most people confront what they should overlook and overlook what they should confront. The standard for confrontation should usually be the spiritual health of the offender and of the Body of Christ and the name of Christ in the community.
- C. **Cancel the debt.** Don't just think about it or pray about it or wait until you feel like it. Do it.
- D. **Burn the note.** When we forgive we drop all future claims against the old debt.

3. The results of unforgiveness are unthinkable. (v.35)

To refuse to forgive is to face the judgment of God without the forgiveness offered in Christ—unthinkable! Look at Matthew 6:14, 15:

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Charles Spurgeon once said, "To be forgiven is such sweetness that honey is tasteless in comparison with it. But there is one thing sweeter still, and that is to forgive."

Discussion Questions

- 1) What is Jesus' rule for the extent of forgiveness (v.21-22)?

- 2) What are the benefits of forgiveness for you? For the debtor? For the church? For others?

- 3) Review the 4 steps described regarding the process of forgiveness.

- 4) How is Christian forgiveness distinctive from all other types of forgiveness?

- 5) Share an experience when you observed forgiveness being offered and it had an impact on you.

Other Resources

BOOK

[Choosing Forgiveness: Your Journey to Freedom](#)

by Nancy Leigh DeMoss

SERMON AUDIO

[Forgiveness and Restoration](#)

by Tim Keller

Notes:

Digging Deeper

Is there anyone you know you have not fully forgiven? List what each has done to you. List what you have done against them.

Develop an action plan to be reconciled on all of these issues with all of these people.

Mutual Accountability

In God's loving plan to redeem sinners, He has called out His Church to live in loving community—to become the new humanity in a world of broken relationships. In our studies we have seen that all believers must join a local church and, in this new community, they must care for each other, serve each other, and forgive each other.

There is something else that believers must do in their churches: we must share responsibility for each other's moral and spiritual lives. In our membership vows at Second Presbyterian we promise to seek to live a godly life (vow 3), and to seek the purity of the whole church (vow 5). Americans, in particular, do not naturally do this. We are perhaps more individualistic than any people on earth; but Jesus clearly commands it.

Read Matthew 18:10-20

We might ask ourselves, "In a large church, how are we supposed to take the responsibility for thousands of people's moral and spiritual lives?" Here is Christ's answer:

1. Lovingly pursue the wandering members you know. (v.10-14)

We are responsible to seek to help gather absentee members of the flock. Notice the profoundly theological motivation for our pursuit of every single member: the Father loves every one of them, He has provided guardian angels for each one, and He rejoices when each stray is brought home.

Since He loves them, we dare not despise them; and, as we pursue His wandering sheep, we must be gentle with them:

- Express genuine affection toward them;
- Ask them questions before giving advice;
- Clearly state your concern;
- Persevere.

2. Lovingly confront the erring members you know. (v. 15-17a)

We are responsible to help correct each other in our sin. None of us can, or should try, to correct everybody; but as we get to know each other in Congregational Communities, in small groups, and on various ministry teams, we can lovingly correct and be corrected by the people we know in the church. Here's how Jesus teaches us to do this: in the case of sin that offends us or endangers a member or the church, spiritually,

- We go privately to the erring brother or sister,
- If he/she does not repent, we bring along one or two others in the family,
- If he/she does not repent, we report the matter to the church (in our case, through the elders).

If these steps fail to effect true repentance, we must continue the process.

3. Lovingly discipline the unrepentant members you know. (v. 17b-20)

We have all seen difficult and extreme cases in families in which a grown child must be threatened with having to leave the house because he will not cease and desist from destructive behavior. Sometimes when this happens, the son will subsequently repent and return to his family. Jesus is saying that the same is true of God's family. (Look also at I Corinthians 5; II Thessalonians 3:6, 14; II John 10,11) Notice these principles in the text:

- We never give up on people – if they no longer are members of the church, we still love and evangelize them. (v. 17b)
- We are given Christ’s authority to discipline each other. (v. 18) “Authentic community” is impossible without godly authority.
- We don’t do this alone. (v. 19)
- We seek God in prayer. (v. 19)
- Christ is always with us. (v. 20)

In fact, this is all, ultimately, about Christ—His will, His Name, His presence, His joy, His Church. The Church of Christ is a saving community, and every member is responsible to care for his brother and sister.

Discussion Questions

- 1) How do most of us need to change our lives to conform to Matthew 18:10-20
- 2) What are the motives for obeying Matthew 18:10-20?
- 3) Why is Matthew 18 important in our witness to the world around us?
- 4) What is the connection between church discipline and salvation?

Digging Deeper

Is there a person you need to pursue or confront?
Develop a strategy to do so.

Read this Week

[Dealing with Conflict Successfully](#)

by *Second Presbyterian Church*

Helpful Resources

BOOKS

[Managing Conflict God’s Way](#)

by *Deborah Smith Pegues*

[The Peacemaker](#)

by *Ken Sande*

[When You Don’t Agree](#)

by *James Fairfield*

[Managing Conflict Creatively](#)

by *Donald Palmer*

WEB RESOURCES

[Peacemaker Ministries](#)

[Website Resources](#)

by *Peacemaker Ministries*

[Conflict Resources at Monergism.com](#)

Various Contributors

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

On Valentine's Day we celebrate the love we have for our lovers, friends, families, and classmates. Valentine's Day is a blessed day where receiving and giving love is more natural than on other days but it also exposes a weakness, namely that we realize we are not great at loving others, particularly those who do not love us back, those who are not like us, or those we have nothing in common with. The truth is that because Jesus Christ has loved us freely we are free from living self focused lives and free towards other centered loving. God's love frees us to love others freely, no matter what the return on investment is.

People who have been saved by faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ have been freed from keeping score before God and other people so the need for self promotion, self righteousness, self image management, self justification, and the like is dissolved. Rather, we are free to live as we are designed to live- with the Lord at the center of our lives and with others as the recipients of His love through us.

Read Galatians 5:13-14

We must be honest with ourselves: we have misunderstood the love and work of Christ for his people so we have misunderstood the implications for our lives and, thus, we have misrepresented his love to the world- our love is more directed at ourselves, or at least what is comfortable, easy, and familiar to us! But because the work of Christ has set us free we must be a people who love others freely.

1. Christ's work brings freedom from Self-Centered Living (5:13a)

Paul builds on a theme he began in 5:1 (and really in 1:10) by reminding the believer that the work of Christ has set us free and this freedom is living free from a life of keeping score. Paul says, "... do not use your freedom as an opportunity for your flesh..." The word opportunity is a Greek word used in military offenses speaking specifically about where initiatives are launched out. So, literally, our freedom in Christ is a freedom from a life where our living offenses are launched from our selves, for ourselves, and because of ourselves. It is not about us keeping score, being better than others or looking good for everyone around us but rather living true humanity, life as God designed it for His people, with God at the center and not ourselves and others as the recipients of His love through us.

2. Christ's work brings freedom towards other's centered loving (13b-14)

The fact is that true freedom is service, not selfishness. As Paul unpacks how we are to live in the freedom we have from Christ's work he calls us to be other centered in our loving in two distinct categories: loving the People of God and Loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. These opportunities to be other centered in our loving are ongoing, ethical obligations for Christians. (On loving the People of God see Rocky's last sermon) Paul states this explicitly in 14: For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'you should love your neighbor as yourself.' Paul mentions this here in Galatians and again in Romans 13:9 showing the importance of this ethical obligation for those who have found freedom in Christ.

Why is it important to Paul? It is important to him because it was important to Jesus. You see this theme throughout the teaching and life of Jesus but most famously is the parable

of the Good Samaritan we read in Luke 10. Why is loving our neighbor as ourselves important to Paul & Jesus? Because God has always designed his people to love freely towards their neighbors. We first encounter this command explicitly in Leviticus 19:18 but it is implicit in God's word as far back as Genesis 12.

The point? The call to love our neighbors as ourselves is an ancient obligation for the people of God but it has frequently been an ethical standard we fail to meet. Why? Because in our humanity we are instinctively focused on loving ourselves. We enjoy loving those that love us back, or loving others when there is something in it for us, so we don't love our neighbor well. We see the grace of God on display in this passage as God holds out, yet again, the opportunity to find freedom and fullness through living his design for life.

Discussion Questions

- 1) How does a life of "keeping score" push your focus on yourself and weary your spirit? How does the work of Jesus Christ free us from the weight of a self-focused life?
- 2) How has the call for God's people to love their neighbors as themselves been an ancient call? Why should this matter?
- 3) What are the motives for loving God's people and for loving our neighbors as ourselves? How does understanding the work of Christ act as a foundation for us?

Helpful Resources

BOOKS

[Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just](#)

by Timothy Keller

Digging Deeper

When you reach the end of your life, what will your regrets be? Will you regret more loving others as yourself or being too self-focused in your loving?

Serving Our World

With all of the problems we face among our own friends and associates and within the city limits of Memphis, we might ask ourselves why we should concern ourselves with the needs of people we don't know, who live thousands of miles away. If we watch Jesus closely, we begin to get some answers.

Matthew 12:9-21

⁹He went on from there and entered their synagogue. ¹⁰And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—so that they might accuse him. ¹¹He said to them, "Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹²Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

¹³Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other. ¹⁴But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

¹⁵Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all ¹⁶and ordered them not to make him known. ¹⁷This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁸"Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.

I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.

¹⁹He will not quarrel or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;

²⁰a bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not quench,

until he brings justice to victory;
²¹and in his name the Gentiles will hope."

1. Our ministry is to heal broken people. (v.9-16)

Why did Jesus heal this particular man? And why on the Sabbath? (Especially knowing how strongly the clergy opposed such a thing.) Because the man was there, he was in need, and Jesus could help him. We treat our animals this way – why not hurting human beings? If we carefully observe the world we live in, we can see many ways in which we can help people.

2. Our mission grows out of the heart of Jesus. (v. 17-20b)

Under great opposition, Jesus quietly slips away and then instructs His disciples not to broadcast their praises of Him. What does this tell us about Jesus? Isaiah 42 gives us the answer: God prophesied centuries before that His Son would be gentle and humble. The entire Christian mission emanates from this heart.

3. Our mission ends in global justice. (v. 20c-21)

Being very gentle and humble, we might fear that Jesus would never be able to accomplish His mission; but the Bible proclaims a wonderful story—in the end, justice and mercy and salvation will win out, and the nations of the earth will turn to Him. We are guaranteed success!

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why did Jesus withdraw from the crowds in verse 15, and why did He silence His disciples?
- 2) Describe the character of Jesus Christ as given in verses 18 through 21.
- 3) What will the world look like when “he brings justice to victory”?
- 4) What are our biblical motivations for being engaged in the Christian mission around the world?

Helpful Resources**BOOKS**

[Operation World](#)

by Jason Mandryk

[Let the Nations Be Glad](#)

by John Piper

Digging Deeper

Draft a plan for your engagement in the international Christian mission:

1. I will pray for _____ each week.
2. I will give \$_____ [Missionary Name] to world missions annually.
3. I will make myself available to participate in a missions trip.
4. I will offer myself to God for His purposes, whatever that may entail.

On The Chasing Of Chariots

Acts 8:26-39

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹ And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” ³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

There are two people in the story—a deacon named Philip* and an official in the court of the Ethiopian Queen. Those two people are in two categories which comprise the only two kinds of people in the world - - - one is a Missionary and the other is a Mission Field.

1. The glory of instant obedience.

The angel said, “Get up and go,” so Philip “got up and went.” There is no calculating the devastation of disobedience, and there is no calculating the glory to God as a result of obedience.

2. The necessity of closing.

Close the deal. Engage. Chase down the chariot.

3. The utterance of the Name.

The Ethiopian had just left the festival in Jerusalem and he is studying God’s word. He wanted to hear what he didn’t understand. Philip preached Jesus.

4. The importance of the question – which question?

“What prevents me from being baptized?” ...what prevents me from doing what Jesus commanded? Maybe you. Because you didn’t go. Because you didn’t “close.” Because you didn’t utter the Name. The offense of the Gospel is that Jesus is the only Savior. Will you tell others...for Him?

Discussion Questions

- 1) If we do not view these two categories as airtight black and white compartments, but as two boundaries across a broad spectrum, where would you fall? On a scale of one to ten (one being an absolute Mission Field and 10 being a consistently faithful Missionary) what number would you assign yourself?
- 2) What concrete steps could you take which could move you further toward a ten?
- 3) What did Philip model which could help us make that advance?
- 4) What characteristics about the eunuch made evangelism easier?
- 5) What circumstances would have rendered witnessing harder?
- 6) The man was reading from the Isaiah scroll. What specifics in the passage (vv. 32-33) would be essential for sharing with a potential convert?
- 7) From the starting point in Isaiah Philip proceeded to teach other things from other places as He preached Jesus. What else would you point out to an unbeliever from truths not found in that place in Isaiah?

*There are two Christians named Philip. One is the disciple who became an Apostle and the other is the servant named in Acts 6:5 who waited on tables. There is a consensus that it is this second Philip in view here. Even though the word ‘deacon’ is not mentioned in Acts 6 those seven who waited tables and distributed food among the widows are usually regarded as the first deacons.

Memory Verses

FOR THIS WEEK

“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Colossians 3:23-24

Helpful Resources

BOOKS

[A Chance to Die](#)

by Elisabeth Elliott

[Spiritual Secret](#)

by Hudson Taylor

[The Unlisted Legion](#)

by Jock Purves

[George Whitefield](#)

by Arnold Dallimore

Serving Our Workplace

It is such a temptation to separate our spiritual life from our work life. Sometimes we are deliberate about this, but I think that most times we simply forget to bring Jesus into our Monday through Friday. How does embracing the Jesus mission work into the everyday tasks and jobs that fill up our week? What does the Bible have to say about our response to the “bosses” in our lives or, if you are the boss, what does the Bible have to say to you?

Ephesians 6:5–9

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶ not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. ⁹ Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Don't let the reference to slaves and masters through you off. Paul was not condoning slavery. He was simply dealing with a cultural reality of the first century (there were an estimated 60 million slaves at the time). This section of Ephesians really begins at 5:21 where Paul writes that we are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. He then goes on to teach how this applies to marriages, to children, to parents, and finally to the context of the first century workplace.

What Is My Mission as an Employee? (v.5-8)

In these verses we see that there is a right behavior (obedience), a right attitude (with fear and trembling) , a right commitment (with a sincere heart), a right motive (as you would Christ), and a right diligence (not as eye-service or people-pleasers). Notice too that all of this is centered on Christ as being our ultimate Master or boss. Christ is mentioned in each of the four verses. Paul wants to make it clear that all our work, no matter how mundane, is for the Lord.

What Is My Mission as an Employer? (v.9)

Right away, Paul challenges these earthly masters to have the same mindset as the slaves, “doing the will of God from the heart”. The employer should seek to obey and please the Lord, understanding that Christ is his Master. The employer treats his employees in the same manner that Christ has treated him. He is just and fair, reflecting the character of the ultimate Master.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Of the five ways we are called to respond to our earthly masters, which one is most difficult for you? Why would you say that is?
- 2) What if you have an unfair or harsh boss...how do verses 5- 9 apply to that situation?
- 3) What if your job seems boring or not very significant....how do you apply these verse to your situation?
- 4) As a boss or a teacher, what would you say (according to these verses) that you are doing well? And what might need improvement?
- 5) As a boss or teacher, what are some practical ways to carrying out the command and perspective of verse 9?

Digging Deeper

As an employee or student or employer or teacher, what do think God is asking you to do in the next weeks or months as a response to the study of these verses? What do you need to adjust to get back on the Jesus Mission in your workplace?

Helpful Resources

BOOKS

[Taking your Soul To Work: Overcoming the Nine Deadly Sins of the Workplace](#)

by Stevens and Ung

[Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor](#)

by Ben Witherington III

Making Friends

Abraham Lincoln once said, “A better part of one’s life consists of his friendships.”

The Bible also teaches us that friends are extremely important. Regarding friends, David’s son, Solomon, said:

“Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.” (Prov. 13:20)

“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” (Prov. 17:17)

“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (Prov. 18:24)

“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, profuse are the kisses of an enemy.”
(Prov. 27:6)

“Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.” (Prov. 27:17)

There are many different levels of friendship, but the friendship in our text is one of the most famous in all world history – that of David and Jonathan.

I Samuel 18:1–5

¹As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. ²And Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father’s house. ³Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. ⁴And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. ⁵And David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him, so that Saul set him over the men of war. And this was good in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of Saul’s servants.

Let’s make several important observations from these verses:

1. Real friends are knit together in the soul. (v. 1,2)

Aristotle said, “What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies.” The biblical version of that concept is two souls knit together by God – with a common love for God and a common purpose in life. David and Jonathan were both gifts from God to each other. They didn’t so much make the friendship as they received the friendship from each other and the Lord. We must always be open to soul mates, but also never try to force what only God can accomplish.

2. Real friends are covenantal partners. (v. 3)

We learn in I and II Samuel more of the implications of “covenantal friendship,” but we can look at our own church membership vows and be reminded of our pledge to seek the corporate peace, purity, and unity of the Body of Christ. Our friendships are not merely

the products of our sentiments or affections, but also of our wills and our minds. Our friendships must be built on principle as well as preference.

3. Real friends sacrifice for each other. (v. 4)

Notice that in his friendship with David, Jonathan stripped himself of his robe and his weapons. He divested himself of his claim to the throne out of his love and loyalty to David (cf. 23:17). He risked his life for David (cf. 20:30-33). His love was sweeter than that of a woman! (II Samuel 1:26) All true friendships involve cheerful sacrifice.

4. Real friends make each other successful. (v. 5)

David and Jonathan were “good for each other,” and they took delight in each other’s success.

5. Your real friend is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ!

He is knit to you, in covenant, at great sacrifice to Himself, so that you might be eternally “successful.” How can you be His friend? Think about that.

Discussion Questions

- 1) How can we make ourselves available for real friendships?
- 2) How do you recognize a real friendship when you have one?
- 3) What most often causes the dissolution of good friendships?
- 4) How does our friendship with Jesus affect all other friendships?

Digging Deeper

- 1) What do you need to do to be a better friend to Jesus?
- 2) What do you need to do to be a better friend to others?

Helpful Resources

BOOKS

[Friends and Friendships](#)

by Jeremy and Mary White

The Indispensable Element

We have seen that “the Jesus mission” involves our relationships in our city, our world, our workplace, our friendships, and (next week) our families. In all these various venues of the Jesus mission, there is an indispensable element we all must have in order to carry out the mission: an intimate knowledge of Jesus Himself.

Mark 8:27–9:1

²⁷And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." ²⁹And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." ³⁰And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

³¹And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

³⁴And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

¹And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power."

Let's observe three primary ideas in this text:

1. We must know Jesus as the Christ. (8:27-29)

Presented to the disciples in Caesarea Philippi were many choices. Shrines to the gods had been erected there, including an altar to Pan, the great pagan god. We can only intelligently, faithfully devote ourselves to Christ if we renounce all His competitors. Notice that Jesus first asks what others think, but inevitably the question falls upon each one of us, “But who do you say that I am?” Amazingly, Peter comes up with the right answer!

2. We must know Jesus as the crucified Christ. (8:30-33)

We might wonder why Jesus strictly forbids them from telling others about him (just the opposite of His command in Matthew 28:18-20). Scholars speculate about this “messianic secret.” It seems that this command is given because, at this point, they only know Christ without His cross. Look how Peter responded to Jesus’ teaching about His future sufferings (how quickly the “answer man” falls from his exalted position!). Peter rebukes Jesus! Mercy! Jesus then explains to Peter that his theology was actually Satanic, as is the theology of all who try to present Jesus without His substitutionary atoning work on the cross.

3. Jesus must know us as crucified Christians. (8:34-9:1)

Jesus tells us two important things about “crucified Christians”:

- Crucifixion is required. (v.34)
As Amy Carmichael wrote, “Can he have followed far who has no wound nor scar?”
- Crucifixion is rewarded. (v. 35-38)
As Jim Elliot once wrote, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why is it important to study other religions and to dialogue with people who believe them?
- 2) How does Jesus perfectly fit the biblical title “Messiah/Christ”?
- 3) What are some contemporary versions of “cross-less Christianity” that you have heard? Why are they so damaging?
- 4) In what ways do we sometimes try to live as “cross-less Christians”?

Suggested reading:

[What Is A Biblical Christian](#)
by Albert N. Martin

Digging Deeper

- 1) What causes you at times to shrink back in the face of the world’s persecution of Christ and His followers? Have you ever caught yourself being ashamed of the gospel? How can you change that?
- 2) What positive steps can you take to deny yourself and take up your cross?

Serving Our Families

We have seen that “the Jesus mission” involves loving our neighbors in our city, our world, our workplace, loving well in our friendships, and now we see it involves serving our families. In all these various venues of the Jesus mission, there is an indispensable element we all must have in order to carry out the mission: an intimate knowledge of Jesus Himself and his cross-shaped method of living. As we look at our passage during this group we will see that serving our families is no exception to this call for God’s people to be about the Jesus mission in all of life:

Ephesians 5:22–6:4

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband

^{6:1} Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³ “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” ⁴ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Let’s observe two primary ideas in this text:

1. The Jesus Mission in serving families involves wives & husbands who trust God’s design

Paul explicitly states that the way a husband and wife are apart of the Jesus mission in serving families is A) Wives submit to your husbands and B) Husbands love your wives. Paul’s imperative for wives to submit to their husbands is part of a litany of the New Testament that incorporates Colossians 3, I Peter 3, Titus 2, among others. Wives submitting to their husbands means for them to respect their authority and to order their life under his headship. When women express frustration over this design, questioning the goodness of God, then we are rebelling against God’s word and falling into the same trap as our first mother Eve while also experiencing the aspect of the curse articulated in Genesis 3:16. While it is the sin in the heart of the wife that leads to the rebellion against God’s design of submitting to her husband it is also the sinful abuse of the design by men who have made the word “authority” a dirty word for many of us. But, regardless, wives are called to submit in all things as the church submits to Christ.

The call for Husbands to love their wives means that husbands should love their wives as Christ loves the church. How did he love the church? Jesus died on the cross to take the curse away from his church. He absorbed the effects of the curse upon and within himself so that we may experience life everlasting. Christ lived as a servant and died as a slave so that the church could be edified, glorified, purified, and holy. Christ lived as a servant and died as a slave so that the church could be presented in splendor, without spot or wrinkle. Jesus absorbed the curse so the church could experience blessing. And Paul says this is how a husband should love his wife. This sort of love for a wife is how a husband serves his family. Paul reinforces this call for a husband to love his wife by using the imagery of a man protection, nourishing, and cherishing his own body saying that in the same way a husband is to love his wife and one tangible manifestation of this love should be the removal of the effects of the curse she experiences in her call to submission. Your wife should welcome your headship because of your love and service.

The authority Paul stands on for his bold proposal is found in Genesis 2 and God's design for the husband and wife and it is summarized in 5:33 where he writes, "each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."

2. The Jesus Mission in serving families involves Children & Father's who trust God's design

Paul explicitly states that the way a child and a father are a part of the Jesus Mission in serving families is through A) Children Obeying and B) Fathers raising. Paul's imperative for children to obey their parents is supported by the 10 commandments and is coupled with a reminder of the covenantal blessing of life. Obeying for the children is not a matter of outward conformity of obedience but rather a heart stance where respect, appreciation, dignity, and the worth of your parents and the positions of authority God has given to them.

Father's are called to participate in the Jesus mission through loving their families through raising their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. This explicitly means that they are not to provoke their children to anger or use Scripture as a weapon but to model the love of Christ for His Church with their lives so that when they discipline them and instruct them the Father's have already become what they are calling their children to.

It is important to remember that we can only submit because Jesus submitted to the Father's will for Him. We can only truly loved because we were first loved by God who demonstrated His love through sending His son to die for us. We can only truly obey because Jesus was obedient to death, even death on a cross, and we can only raise in the discipline and instruction of the Lord because our Heavenly father discipline's us and instructs us with his word and His work. Being a part of the Jesus mission in serving our families is not self resolve, or trying harder, but being transformed by the word of God so we can live in the shape of God for the glory of God.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why do we struggle to trust God's design for life, marriage, and family? What are competing designs we find ourselves being shaped by?
- 2) How do the metaphors that Paul uses of Christ's relationship to the church bolster his call for wives and husbands to trust God's design in submitting and loving?
- 3) Why is it difficult for husbands to love their wives and wives to respect their husbands?
- 4) What difference does honoring make in the children's obedience of their parents and how does that look in everyday life?
- 5) Why do Fathers provoke their children?

Digging Deeper

- 1) Read through Philippians 2:1-5 and discuss how the realities Paul calls believers to speaks to serving our families.
- 2) Memorize Philippians 2:1-5 and talk with your family about how it should make a difference in your relationships.

Suggested reading:

[Intimate Allies](#)

by Longman & Allender

[Love & Respect](#)

Dr. Emerson Eggerichs

[Say Goodbye to Whining, Complaining and Bad Attitudes in Your Kids](#)

Scott Turnsky &

Joanne Miller

Dealing with Temptation

This week we begin a new series entitled “Living in the World.” Leonard Ravenhill once said, “The most amazing thing God ever did was to take an unholy man in an unholy world, make him holy, and put him back in an unholy world and keep him holy in it.” That is exactly what has happened to all of us who follow Jesus—we have been made holy, and we are being kept holy in an unholy world.

One of the first things we face while living in this world is how to deal with temptation. We usually laugh about temptation, like Mae West: “I generally avoid temptation, unless I can’t resist it.” The Bible, however, presents temptation in a very different light: it is the most powerful tool of the one who hates us and desires to destroy us, Satan himself.

Temptation is simply an enticement to sin with a (false) promise for greater good. The one who foists these temptations upon us is both relentless and ruthless. We know from experience that falling into temptation has very destructive consequences. John Owen, in his book, *Of Temptation*, teaches that falling into temptation defiles our conscience, disquiets our peace, weakens our obedience, and clouds our vision of God.

In today’s text, Paul gives some amazingly helpful counsel on dealing with temptation. Paul is warning the Corinthians against the temptation of idolatry and then he says:

I Corinthians 10:12-13

¹²Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall ¹³No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

In his commentary on this text, Matthew Henry says that Paul gives us a word of caution and a word of comfort. Let us consider those two things:

1. Don’t trust your unreliable self. (v.12)

A. Some think they can stand, but Paul says this is an illusion. All we need to do is consider Peter’s experience when he said to the Lord that although everyone else would leave, he never would, and then a few hours later he denied Jesus!

B. Take heed. Paul teaches us that rather than being presumptuous about our moral strength; we need to be very careful. We can do that by abiding by five principles:

Know yourself. If David had known himself better, he would not have gone to the top of his palace to look out over the women bathing, and he would have avoided some terrible consequences.

Fill your heart with the love of God. We do this through the Word and prayer. This was obviously what Joseph was doing when he fled from the temptation of Potiphar’s wife.

Take measure. Joseph did this by avoiding Potiphars wife and not listening to her.

Keep good friends. Peter discovered this when his friend and fellow apostle corrected him as shown in Galatians 2.

Repair the breach. We can see that Paul says to the Corinthians, “...flee from idolatry...” in verse 14. When we experience weakness, we should make the appropriate corrections in our lives.

2. Do trust your reliable Savior. (v.13)

A. God, in His faithfulness, limits our temptation. Our temptations are not uncommon to other people, especially Christ, and, secondly, they are not beyond our ability to handle. It is wonderful to know that all of our temptations have been filtered by the Lord so that we will not be overwhelmed.

B. God provides for His tempted children by always allowing a way of escape and by giving us strength for endurance. It is good to know that we are never inevitably trapped by any sin or temptation, but that God will always provide for us. The way in which He especially provides for us is in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ, who Himself faced the evil one in the wilderness.

It was in that wilderness that Jesus accomplished what the Israelites failed to accomplish in their 40 years in the wilderness: He triumphed over the evil one so that now He can comfort us and strengthen us in our temptations (Hebrews 2:18; 4:15).

This is how God keeps us holy in an unholy world. Praise be to His name!

Discussion Questions

- 1) Describe Satan's typical tactics in temptation.

- 2) Review the practical points given on how we can deal with temptation.

- 3) Why does Jesus' victory in the wilderness against the evil one secure our victory against him as well?

Extra Reading

HELPFUL BOOKS

Overcoming Sin and Temptation

by John Owen

A modern language translation of three classic short works by John Owen on fighting sin.

Dealing with Moral Failure

One of the most cherished, memorized, and quoted psalms in the Bible is the one King David wrote after the worst moral failure of his life. David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and then murdered her husband. The prophet Nathan had called him to account. David's response is recorded in Psalm 51. One of the most important components of our Christian lives is our willingness and ability to recover from our own moral failures. Let's take a close look at this psalm, to see what it is we must do when we fall into sin.

1. Ask God for help. (v.1, 2)

Psalm 51

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!

We can only be helped when we ask God for it. We can only fully confess when we know of His willingness to forgive. David immediately calls upon the unfailing love and compassion of God.

2. Make a good confession. (v.3–6)

Notice here that David comes completely clean with his failure:

A. I did it. (v. 3)

³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

B. I offended God. (v. 4)

⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

C. I'm like that. (v. 5)

⁵Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

D. I've no excuses. (v. 6)

⁶Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

We can only be healed of what we fully, candidly confess.

3. Seek full restoration. (v.7–12)

A. Complete cleansing (v.7)

⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

B. Joy of forgiveness (v.8, 9)

⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. ⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

C. Spiritual renewal (v. 10)

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

D. Intimacy with God (v. 11,12)

¹¹Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

God is gracious not only to remove our offense but to bring us joy in our recovery. Don't stop until you know the joy of restored intimacy with Him.

4. Re-engage God's mission. (v. 13–10)**A. Witness with zeal. (v.13)**

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

B. Worship with brokenness. (v.14-17)

¹⁴Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. ¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. ¹⁷The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

C. Work with vision. (v.18,19)

¹⁸Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; ¹⁹then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Our moral failure may change our circumstances in some ways or alter the types of ministries we can perform, but we are always His grateful servants.

Discussion Questions

- 1) How do we sometimes make “partial confessions” or “qualified confessions?” What are the effects of these approaches?

- 2) Why is it important that we consistently experience full restoration from our moral failure? Why do we sometimes doubt that this is possible?

- 3) How is our witness, worship, and work diminished without a full recovery from moral failure?

Digging Deeper

Is there some sin or moral failure for which you have not fully confessed and made proper restitution? Draft a plan for how you can to that this week.

How are you not experiencing a fully recovery from sin? Take steps to discuss this with a pastor or mature Christian.

Suggested reading:

by Sinclair Ferguson

[The Doctrine of Repentance](#)

by Thomas Watson

Managing Our Possessions

In our current series of lessons, we are studying how we can live effectively in a fallen world. There are many "dangers, toils, and snares" which would derail our walk with Jesus, and we need to be prepared to face each one of them successfully.

Today we look at the theme of money management. Money is obviously very powerful, both for good and ill. The apostle Paul said that the love of money is the root of all evil, and, at the same time, we know that money can accomplish great good. In our text this week Jesus tells a fascinating parable followed by some vital teachings on money management.

Luke 16:1-15

¹He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. ²And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' ³And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. ⁴I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' ⁵So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' ⁷Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' ⁸The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. ⁹And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

¹⁰"One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? ¹³No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

¹⁴The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. ¹⁵And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

Jesus says three primary things in this text.

1. Godly money management capitalizes on opportunities. (vs. 1-9)

Jesus teaches here that children of darkness are often more shrewd than the children of light in using earthly resources. The manager in his parable dishonestly cancels portions of the debt owed to his master. The dishonest manager is using worldly wealth to gain friends. Jesus teaches us that we should learn a lesson from this shrewd, dishonest manager: we too should learn to use our earthly resources to make friends in heaven. We do this, of course by serving the poor and evangelizing the lost.

2. Godly money management prepares us for ownership. (vs. 10-12)

In these verses, Jesus teaches us that there is a real connection between our stewardship in this life and our ownership in the next life. Right now we do not own anything. We are only managers. But in the Great Day to come, we will own the universe along with Jesus Christ. Our faithfulness now is a requirement for our inheritance then. How do we manage faithfully?

John Wesley once said, "Make as much as you can; save as much as you can; give as much as you can." The real question is whether we are managing our resources according to our selfish agendas or according to the Kingdom agenda.

3. Godly money management reveals Christ as master. (vs. 13-15)

Jesus teaches us that we can have only one master. If we love the one, we will hate the other. The perfect illustration of this fact is seen in the reaction of the Pharisees in verse 14. They loved their money; therefore they ridiculed Jesus. When Jesus challenges our money management, we will do one of two things: we will either, like the rich young ruler, withdrawal from him, or, like Zacchaeus, we will “come down out of our trees” and worship and serve him with our money. Which are you?

Discussion Questions

- 1) What are some of the "shrewd" ways in which we can manage our money?
- 2) When we say we want to know God's will, what issues do we normally have in mind? What issue does God have in mind? (see verse 3)
- 3) In managing money as believers, why does it not make any difference how much money we have?
- 4) Why does making more money rarely make us any happier?
- 5) Why is our money management a test of our loyalty to God as our master?

Related Reading:

The Treasure Principal
by Randy Alcorn

Counterfeit Gods
by Joshua Harris

Digging Deeper

What changes do you need to make in your money management in order to be serving God alone with your finances?

Sexual Ethics

The sexual life of believers has always made us distinctive from the world. In case we think that our sexualized culture makes it impractical to live out the Christian sexual ethic, we must remember that the Graeco-Roman world was at least as challenging as our own. For this reason, the Apostle Paul makes a strong plea with the Thessalonians to live out their sexual lives in a counter-cultural way.

Read I Thessalonians 4:1–8

Let's make three primary observations in the text.

1. If you believe in Christ, you must also walk with Him (vv. 1,2)

Notice that the Apostle says that "you received from us" how you ought to walk. We know that we "receive" the gospel (cf. I Corinthians 15: 3), but he says here that our lifestyles are also received. That is, if we receive the sacred truths of the gospel, we must also receive a new way of living. If we depart from this way of living, we also depart from Christ!

2. Your walk with Christ excludes sexual immorality (v. 3)

We walk with Christ for the purpose of conforming to His will. And what is His will for you? Paul says it is "your sanctification." This He wants from you more than anything else; and the first aspect of holiness Paul mentions is your sexual life: "that you abstain from sexual immorality."

The Bible's definition of "sexual immorality" is roughly this: any intimate sexual behavior outside of a biblically warranted marriage (one man and one woman in a faithful covenant union). Notice in Matthew 5: 27-32 that this moral purity extends even to our thoughts!

So whether we are single or married, male or female, young or old; whether we have homosexual tendencies or heterosexual tendencies, the calling is the same for all God's people, that we must refrain from all intimate sexual activity except that in a biblically warranted marriage.

3. Sexual immorality is highly destructive (vv. 4-8)

Not only does God give us the command to abstain from sexual immorality, but, as usual, He also tells us why: it is highly destructive. In three ways:

1) Sexual immorality destroys our gospel witness (vv. 4, 5)

Paul here draws a contrast between Christian behavior and that of the Gentiles: they have sex according to their glands, we according to God's will and character. The pagan gods were capricious and fickle; our God is holy, faithful and true to His one bride, the Church. We imitate Him. If we were to imitate the unbelievers' sex life, we would simply be demonstrating that we serve the same gods as they!

2) Sexual immorality wrongs our brothers and sisters (v. 6a)

Contrary to the popular idea that sexual relations with a non-marriage partner can be a loving act, the Bible teaches that it is actually a hateful one. At the best it is indifferent. The best thing we can do for one another is to encourage each other to be more like Christ, but if we are having immoral sexual relations with someone, we are doing the exact opposite. Furthermore, we are actually stealing from them, for we are taking something from them that does not rightfully belong to us. Sexual immorality is intensely selfish.

3) Sexual immorality provokes God (vv. 6b-8)

God takes great offense at our sexual immorality. Just take a look at I Corinthians 6: 9, 10 or Ephesians 5: 5 or Revelation 21: 8, and you can see that the Kingdom of God is shut to the sexually immoral. Why is this? Paul tells us: a) sexual immorality is a violation of our sacred calling to follow Jesus and b) it disregards God, treating Him as though He were a light weight

pagan god who has no eyes or ears and no power to react or, even worse, as though He didn't exist at all. And it treats Him as though He were not present, and yet He is the One Who, by His grace, has made our bodies temples of His Spirit!
(cf. I Corinthians 3:16)

Well, what should we do, for we have all transgressed the sexual standards of the Bible and, on our own merits, would stand condemned and excluded from His favor?

Praise God for the Good News! Because of what Jesus has done for us on Calvary's Cross, the powers of death and hell are forever destroyed. Because of His great work for us, we are completely innocent—no matter how wicked we have been. Because of His substitutionary atonement, even our future sexual sins are entirely forgiven already! What a gospel! What a God! What can I do to demonstrate my gratitude to Him?

Live a holy life. Abstain from sexual immorality. Amen.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why can we not separate Christian doctrine from Christian lifestyle? Why would we even try? (see verses 1, 2)

- 2) When we say we want to know God's will, what issues do we normally have in mind? What issue does God have in mind? (see verse 3)

- 3) Review the implications of sexual impurity. (V. 4-8)

- 4) Think about the power of the Gospel/the atonement over sexual sin.

Suggested reading:

[Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God](#)

by C. J. Mahaney

[Sex Is Not the Problem \(Lust Is\)](#)

by Joshua Harris

Digging Deeper

What concrete steps do you need to take to insure that you are walking with Jesus and avoiding sexual immorality?

Speak The Truth

In a recently published book entitled, "Tangled Web: How False Statements are Undermining America," James B. Stewart shows how the rising flood of lies in our nation is unravelling society itself. He cites Martha Stewart and "Scooter" Libby and Barry Bonds and Bernie Madoff as classic examples of this tragic phenomenon, and he suggests that we can not survive as a nation in this ethical environment.

More tragic are the studies by George Barna which clearly demonstrate that the professing Church is ethically no different from the unbelievably world. We lie at the same rate, we cheat at the same rate, etc. Barna says that the only significant statistical variation between the average unbeliever and the average professing Christian is where they are sitting at 11:00 on Sunday mornings!

The Apostle Paul has something to say about this. He shows in our text today that we must be people of the truth because 1) we have been radically transformed, 2) we have been clearly commanded, and 3) we have been compellingly motivated.

Read Ephesians 4:25

1. We have been radically transformed (v.25a)

Paul speaks of a life-changing experience we have undergone: "having put away falsehood..." or, literally, "having put away the lie..." What is this lie we have put off when we came to Christ? The lie that says that we are at the center of the universe and that our goal in life is to grab for all the worldly pleasures we can enjoy.

What is the truth that has displaced that lie? The truth that Jesus Christ is at the center of the universe and that my highest priority in life is to find my joy by bringing Him pleasure. Satan himself is the father of lies who seeks to destroy us; Jesus came speaking the truth and has defeated the evil one and set us free from his tyranny; therefore, we are committed to the truth with all our hearts.

2. We have been clearly commanded (v. 25b)

Now that we live in the truth, we must speak it. Let's consider four ways in which we must speak the truth:

1. *With a new world-view.* We now see things differently. We used to respond in fear and in pride. That is why we lied. We now fear God alone and we make Christ our only boast. We now believe that God is our Creator and Sustainer and Judge; therefore we choose not to dishonor or to provoke Him, but rather to please Him.
2. *With a new integrity.* We now tell the truth even if it hurts (cf. Ps. 15). We consider it vital that others be able to trust our word, because we are the people of God.
3. *With a new candor.* We now refuse to hide behind self-justifying, self-defensive words, which not only are untrue but also betray a lack of trust in the Lord as our Advocate and Defender. In his book, "The Human Element," Will Schutz describes the rigidities and defensive behaviors that occur in so many organizations because, down deep, we don't want other people to know things about us that cause us to despise ourselves. Brothers and sisters, we have been delivered from this garbage and have been commanded to act like it!
4. *With a new ministry.* Now that are liberated from the lie, we cease from flattering others (saying positive things about them that are untrue and only intended to ingratiate ourselves to them). We now have the truth, which gives us the power to encourage them (saying positive things about them that are true and which are intended to build them up in Christ).

3. We have been compellingly motivated (v.25c)

Paul explains why our truth-speaking is so important: “for we are members one of another.” John McKay, twentieth century missionary and later president of Princeton Seminary, once said, “A lie is a stab into the very vitals of the Body of Christ.”

It is interesting to observe that Paul is quoting here almost verbatim from Zechariah 8:16, where the children of Israel are being told that one day they will return in safety to the city of Jerusalem, the “City of Truth” (KJV), where they will “Speak the truth to one another” and all the nations will envy them. O, for that day!

How about your life? Are you telling the truth even when it hurts? Is there someone you need to apologize to for having misled them? Do you have defensive patterns of communication which you need to renounce and change? Are you using the truth to encourage and edifying others? Let us each one “speak the truth with his neighbor.”

Discussion Questions

- 1) In what ways have we been radically transformed? (cf.Ephesians 4:17-24) Why does this transformation preclude lying?

- 2) What are some of the ways in which we are to be truth tellers?

- 3) Why, typically, do we tell lies in the first place?

Suggested reading:

[Deception: Letting Go of Lying](#)

by Lou Priolo

Making Peace

Peacemaking is a theme most often stressed by the mainline Protestant churches and often ignored by the Evangelical churches, but we discover in the Scriptures that it is an essential of our Christian experience; in fact, it is found right here in the Beatitudes at the opening of the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:9

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

His basic teaching is obvious: peacemakers will be blessed by God. It behooves us, therefore, to ask ourselves “what is a peacemaker?” And “what is the nature of this blessing?”

What is a peacemaker?

1. One who embraces God's grand vision of peace.

The word “peace” in the Bible is an extremely important one. The Hebrew word “shalom” is mentioned over 250 times in the Old Testament; and the Greek word “Eirene,” is mentioned 92 times in the New Testament. We could describe shalom briefly by calling it “holistic well-being founded upon reconciled relationships.”

In Isaiah 9:6, 7 and 11:6 – 9, we are shown the vision of the messiah's shalom: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb... The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra... The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” This is the vision we must embrace. Furthermore, Jeremiah 29:7 teaches us that we must seek to realize that vision, no matter where we are in the world. The reason we often do not embrace the grand vision is because it is painful for us to look at our broken world by comparison. For example, we now have 28 major wars going on around the world, with many other minor ones, and thousands of lives are being lost. The American government spends \$1.2 trillion on our military program, while it would take only \$65 billion (5% of our military expenditures) to feed, clothe, and educate the children of the world.

Meanwhile, in Memphis, Tennessee, about one third of our families with children below the age of five live below the poverty line. Recently 25 to 30 of our local churches spent several years together studying our city to discover what would make for shalom in Memphis. They agreed that for Memphis to have shalom all of our neighborhoods would need to have effective law enforcement, available housing for families and singles, job opportunities, solid education, opportunities in the fine arts, and, most of all, vibrant churches in every neighborhood. Here is what that study group discovered (among other things): we have 127 neighborhoods in Memphis, 27 of which are experiencing shalom in every sector of life. (that's where most of us live). Out of the 100 neighborhoods which are in some deficit, 56 of those neighborhoods are in severe deficit, meaning that every sector of shalom is in arrears.

It is painful to embrace God's grand vision for shalom, because we hurt for our neighbor and are compelled to help.

2. One who understands the root of the problem

While we applaud the mainline church for reminding us of our role as peacemakers, we must say that we often find the liberal protestant church misdiagnosing the root problem. Jesus teaches us that the reason we have arguments, strivings, wars, and arguments is because of our jealousy and selfish ambition, our lusts that are unbridled by the Spirit of God (cf. James 4:1,2); that is, if we want to have peace with our environment, with our neighbors around the world, our church, and our families, we must receive the peace of God. The peace of God begins with peace with God. (Romans 5:1) This is the peculiar perspective of the follower of Christ. Jesus said, “peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I get to you.” (John 14:27)

3. One who dies to himself

We die to ourselves into ways: a) negatively, we cease from provocations; and b) we actively mediate and pursue peace. On the one hand, we must cease and desist from provoking arguments and from rumor mongering that only divides people; and, on the other hand, we must

not merely be appeasers. Appeasement, or simply not causing problems, is not the full role of a peacemaker. Many times peacemakers must engage in conflict in order to promote the general welfare of society. The most important way in which we confront our neighbor is with the gospel of peace itself, calling upon all humanity to repent and believe the gospel in order to have peace with God and with one another.

What is the nature of our blessing?

Ultimately, our blessing consists of the very precious name by which he calls us: "sons of God." One day he will renew the entire heavens and the earth, and we will be the crown of his new creation. Just as Jesus Christ came as Prince of Peace, we, too, will be princes and princesses on the earth. As David said in Psalm eight, we will be "crowned...with glory and honor," with "dominion over the works of (His) hands," with "all things under (our) feet."

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why is it essential that we embrace the grand vision for biblical shalom?

- 2) Explain why peace in the world requires peace with God. How has this peace with God been accomplished?

- 3) What are the negative and positive aspects of peacemaking? How did Jesus perform both of these?

- 4) What are the privileges promised to biblical peacemakers? What does it mean for us to bear His name?

Suggested resources:

[The Peacemaker](#)

by Ken Sande

Peacemaker Resources
Website

<http://www.hispeace.org>

Go Easy on the Trees

As evangelicals we often ignore the topic of the environment because 1) we think of eternal life as more important than temporal life, 2) we think of spiritual things as more important than material things, and 3) we fail to see the connection between creation and redemption.

Deuteronomy 20:19–20

¹⁹ When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you? ²⁰ Only the trees that you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, that you may build siege works against the city that makes war with you, until it falls.

This week's text is very interesting because Moses tells the children of Israel, before they go into the holy land, that their warfare is to be constrained in a particular way: when they besiege an enemy's city, they are not to destroy the fruit trees in order to build siege works. All of the surrounding nations typically destroy the fruit trees as part of the act of war; but Israel was to be different. Why? Because of what God had taught them about creation and their relationship to it. These things are the rich theological background behind His commandments to them and to us.

What are the central truths about creation that we must know and embrace?

1. God is at the center of creation.
We are neither Cosmo centric nor anthropocentric, but rather theocentric. We do not worship the world nor do we believe the world is here primarily for our exploitation. We believe the creation's primary purpose is to display the glory of God. cf. Genesis 1:1 and Psalm 24:1.
2. God is personally related to His creation.
We are neither deistic nor pantheistic, but rather theistic. Genesis 3:8 teaches us that God Himself dwells here among us.
3. We are God's image-bearers who are called to rule by serving the creation and preserving it. Cf. Genesis 2:15.
4. Our natural tendency is to despoil and destroy God's creation. We, therefore need the directions God gives us, as in Dt. 20:19,20.
5. God will redeem and renew not only our bodies at the resurrection, but also the entire heaven and earth. We, therefore, are a people who labor with a sure and certain hope.

How are we doing as stewards of the earth? Let's look at this under five categories:

1. Land
The number of arable acres per person in the world is now decreasing significantly. We are also losing gradually our topsoil. The amount of area becoming deserts each year is 23,000 square miles. That is the size of West Virginia!
2. Water
Both the quantity and the quality of our water supply is diminishing. This is true both internationally and nationally.
3. Air
Our air contains 30% more carbon dioxide today than 250 years ago. At the same time, acid rain is destroying many of the fish in our fresh water lakes and ponds.
4. Plants
Presently in the world we destroy 25,000,000 acres of forests per year. That is equal to the size of the state of Indiana. In America alone we bulldoze 400,000 acres of land per year
5. Animals
From the animal kingdom we lose three species every day. Two thirds of our bird species are in decline. One third of our fish species are in danger. 11% of our mammals are in danger. This is what some call a biological holocaust.

God will redeem and renew not only our bodies at the resurrection, but also the entire heaven and earth. We, therefore, are a people who labor with a sure and certain hope.

Where do we go from here?

1. Develop deep Biblical convictions.
2. Pray
3. Personally practice creation care
4. Engage issues and efforts in your community
5. Influence public policy

Remember that above all other things in His creation, God cherishes you the most. He will one day receive you happily into the new heavens and new earth that He is preparing for you.

Discussion Questions

- 1) As a result of reading and studying this text, how has your view of creation and our role in it changed?
- 2) Of the current trends regarding the environment, which of them concerns you the most? Why?
- 3) What are some of the practical things we can do to help serve and preserve our environment?
- 4) What public policies most need to be changed in our country?

Suggested resources:

For the Beauty of the Earth
by Steven Bouma-Prediger

Pollution and the Death of Man

By Francis Schaeffer

[Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation](#)

(PDF)