

## 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

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

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

<sup>16</sup>From 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. <sup>17</sup>Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

<sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup>that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup>Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>For 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 Heart 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

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### 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, will 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

<sup>15</sup>“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. <sup>16</sup>But 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.

<sup>7</sup>“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. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

<sup>9</sup>Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.

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

<sup>11</sup>Give us this day our daily bread,

<sup>12</sup>and forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

<sup>13</sup>And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.

<sup>14</sup>For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,

<sup>15</sup>but 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

<sup>1</sup>What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? <sup>2</sup>By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? <sup>3</sup>Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup>We 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.

<sup>5</sup>For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup>We 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. <sup>7</sup>For one who has died ahas been set free from sin. <sup>8</sup>Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup>We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. <sup>10</sup>For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. <sup>11</sup>So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

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

<sup>13</sup>Do 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. <sup>14</sup>For 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

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

<sup>2</sup>This 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.” <sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” <sup>4</sup>Nicodemus 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?”

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup>That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ <sup>8</sup>The 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.”

<sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup>Truly, 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. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

<sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that 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,*

*puts light into his darkened understanding, takes the chain from his bonded will, gives liberty to his conscience, gives life to his dead soul, so that the voice of conscience is heard, and the man becomes a new creature in Christ Jesus.”*  
– Charles Haddon Spurgeon

### Discussion Questions

- 1) What is the analogy Jesus makes between physical and spiritual birth?
- 2) Have you heard people make a distinction between a ‘Christian’ and a ‘born-again Christian’? What did they mean? Is there such a distinction?
- 3) How does knowing that your Regeneration was an act of God alone encourage you in your daily walk with Christ?
- 4) How does knowing that Regeneration proceeds faith change your prayers for your friends who do not know Christ?

### Digging Deeper

Discuss how Regeneration affects people’s understanding of God’s Word

Make a list of 3 people who need salvation and commit to pray each week that God would change their hearts.

### Memory Verses

FOR THIS WEEK

Jesus answered him,  
“Truly, truly, I say to you,  
unless one is born again  
he cannot see the  
kingdom of God.”.

*John 3:3*

FOR NEXT WEEK

for all have sinned and fall  
short of the glory of God,  
and are justified by his  
grace as a gift, through  
the redemption that is in  
Christ Jesus

*Romans 3:23-24*

### Read For This Week

ARTICLE

*Regeneration Precedes  
Faith*

by R.C. Sproul

([www.monergism.com](http://www.monergism.com))

### Related Reading

ARTICLE

[\*Union with Christ\*](#)

by Michael Horton

HELPFUL BOOKS

[\*Redemption\*](#)

[\*Accomplished and\*](#)

[\*Applied – Chapter 9:\*](#)

[\*Union with Christ\*](#)

by John Murray

*Manual of Christian  
Doctrine*

by Louis Berkhof

*The Mystery of the Holy  
Spirit – Chapter 6: The*

*New Genesis*

by R.C. Sproul

## 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

<sup>19</sup>Now 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. <sup>20</sup>For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

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

For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup>for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup>and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup>whom 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. <sup>26</sup>It 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

<sup>1</sup>There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup>For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. <sup>3</sup>For 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, <sup>4</sup>in 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.

<sup>5</sup>For 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.

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

<sup>9</sup>You, 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. <sup>10</sup>But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup>If 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; 1 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

<sup>28</sup>And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup>For 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. <sup>30</sup>And 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

### Discussion Questions

- 1) What is the “sovereignty of God” from Romans 8?
- 2) What things in life experience cause people to question God’s sovereignty over all things? What is your answer to these objections?
- 3) In what ways is God’s sovereignty an encouragement in your life?

### Related Reading

[\*Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God\*](#)

by J. I. Packer

[\*A Step Further: Growing Closer to God through Hurt and Hardship\*](#)

by Joni Earackson Tada

[\*Suffering and the Sovereignty of God \(A collection of Essays\)\*](#)

Edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor

### Digging Deeper

When tough time comes, rather than submitting yourself with contentment to the sovereign plan of God, how do you normally react?

# The Goodness of God

## Psalm 100

- <sup>1</sup>Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!  
<sup>2</sup>Serve the LORD with gladness!  
Come into his presence with singing!  
<sup>3</sup>Know 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.  
<sup>4</sup>Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise!  
Give thanks to him; bless his name!  
<sup>5</sup>For 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?

### 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?

## 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

# 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

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

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

<sup>33</sup>*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

<sup>34</sup>*For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?*

<sup>35</sup>*Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"*

<sup>36</sup>*For 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.



## Worshiping 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

<sup>1</sup>Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>saying, "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." <sup>3</sup>When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>"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."

<sup>7</sup>Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>And 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." <sup>9</sup>After 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. <sup>10</sup>When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup>And 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. <sup>12</sup>And 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,”<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

“But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’

“In tithes and offerings. <sup>9</sup> You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. <sup>10</sup> 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 curse<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 20: 35

<sup>2</sup> 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 poor<sup>3</sup>, to supply the priests and teachers<sup>4</sup>, and to provide for the major festivals of worship and fellowship<sup>5</sup>. (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 tithing<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 14: 28, 29

<sup>4</sup> Numbers 18: 28

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 14: 22-27

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 temple<sup>9</sup>; Peter says that each believer is a “living stone” of God’s temple<sup>10</sup>. If we, then, bring our “tithes into the

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<sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>8</sup> See also Matthew 5: 17-20

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

<sup>10</sup> 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 mites<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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

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<sup>11</sup> [Luke 21: 1-4](#)

<sup>12</sup> [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 heaven<sup>13</sup>. 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

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<sup>13</sup> [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
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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.

# Worshiping 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?

## HELPFUL BOOKS

by Walter Chantry

- What changes in your weekly habits will be necessary for you to participate in a real Sabbath rest each Sunday?