

AFTER CHRISTMAS WITH DOCTOR LUKE

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8. TRIUMPH OVER TEMPTATION Based on Luke 4:1-13

Plato had a friend named Trachilus who had a very close call and almost lost his life in a storm at sea. The ship actually sank and he was thrown into the sea, but he managed to get to shore. When he reached his home he ordered his servants to wall up the two windows in his chamber that overlooked the sea. He was afraid that some bright day he would look at the tranquil scene of beauty and be tempted to once again venture out on its treacherous waters. This is one of man's major methods of fighting temptation. It is by striving not to see it.

There is no doubt about it that what we see is a primary lure of temptation. Had Adam and Eve never looked upon the forbidden fruit and seen its loveliness they would not have been so easily enticed to taste it. Had David not seen the beauty of Bathsheba he would not have been lured into the sin that so marred his life. Had Lot's wife been unable to look back at Sodom she would not have become a pillar of salt.

The story is repeated for perpetually as people testify that had they never seen that

automobile with the key in it they never would have stolen it. Had they never seen that door open, they never would have entered the building, and on and on it goes. What the eyes see provoke all kinds of feelings in the mind and body, and that is why we teach the children to sing, "Be careful little eyes what you see." But the fact is, there is no escape from seeing what can entice you to choose evil. Even before television it was nearly impossible, but now it is definitely impossible. Sin is so visible in our world today that we could accurately describe our period of history as the times of temptation.

It is reassuring for us to see that Jesus went through such a time as this himself. Satan took Him to a high place so He could see all the kingdoms and all their splendor. We sometimes think of His temptation as a one time ordeal, and so we dismiss it as totally different from the lifetime battle that

we have to endure. We imagine the testing of Jesus to be like this: "Yes, I'll never forget that day when I was about 30 years old, and I had a terrible time of triple temptation." We figure that anyone can get through a tough day, and so we tend to doubt that Jesus really knows what temptation is all about for the average man.

Take note of the precise language of Luke in verse 2: "Where for 40 days He was tempted by the devil." We think in terms of 40 days of fasting and then a day of temptation, but Luke says it was 40 days of temptation. We are talking a major battle here, and not a mere skirmish for a day. W. Graham Scroggie writes, "...it is not the 40th day that we fear so much as the 39 days of petty assault, of guerilla warfare, of irritating trial....But Jesus faced these also. In ways of which we have no record, He was assaulted by the devil during the whole period, and the 40th day temptations were but the last, concentrated, and desperate assault of the infuriated foe upon His weakened body but loyal spirit."

Jesus was tempted in all points like as we are, and not just in the 3 areas of which we have record here. The last verse of this record makes it clear that when it was done it was far from over. Satan just withdrew to lick his wounds and prepare for another assault at an opportune time. In other words, a careful reading of this temptation account makes clear that this triple temptation, though of tremendous significance, is only a trickle of the total temptation Jesus had to endure. Someone said that those who flee from temptation usually leave a forwarding address. Satan catches up with them, and so it was with Jesus, for this ordeal of His was not just a one-time shot.

We do not live in a world that Jesus does not understand. He knows every trick of the devil, and He knows the power of temptation. We need to take seriously Heb. 2:18, "Because He himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted." Let's recognize that Jesus has been there. He knows the power of persistent temptation, and He also knows the way to victory. The study of His temptation is one of the best things we can do to

learn how to handle this universal experience.

When I say universal, I mean it in an absolute sense. Death is universal, but we have a couple of exceptions in the Bible of those who never died such as Enoch and Elijah. We say sin is universal, but we have one exception, for Jesus was tempted in all points like as we are, and yet He was without sin. But the one thing we can say is absolutely universal from Adam to the last person on earth is temptation. God cannot be tempted, but man cannot not be tempted. Nobody, not even God in human flesh, can escape the testing, for it is part of what it means to be human in a fallen world. This leads us to the first point we want to consider about Christ's temptation, and that is the paradoxical reality of

I. THE VALUE OF TEMPTATION.

Matthew begins his account in 4:1 by saying, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." Luke begins with an emphasis also on Jesus being full of the Holy Spirit and led by the Spirit. If you think being a Spirit filled Christian will shelter you from temptation, think again. This encounter of the Savior and Satan was no accident. It was an appointment. It was a part of God's plan and an important event in the life of our Lord. John Milton saw this. His two greatest poems are *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. The first deals with the temptation of Adam and Eve and their failure and fall. The second deals with the temptation of Christ and His

success.

Milton is saying that what Adam lost Jesus regained in the wilderness of temptation. It is true that Jesus died for our sins on the cross, but where did he earn the right to be the spotless Lamb of God worthy of being such a sacrifice to atone for sin? It was here in the desert where He was put to the test, and it was here that He passed the test. Here is where Jesus became our Savior, and He could never become such without being tempted, and that is why He was led of the Spirit to be tempted. This means that there is value in temptation, and not only for Jesus, but for all of us. That is why it is so universal. No person can be what God made them to be without temptation.

Walter Baghot said, "It is good to be without vice, but it is not good to be without temptation." This is biblical, and that is why God allowed Satan to tempt Adam and Eve, and why He led His Son to be tempted. Temptation is from the Latin *temptatia*, which means a testing or trying out. Not to be tempted would be to have God reject you before you got a chance to prove you can see evil and choose good. Products are tested to see if they will serve the purpose for which they are made. Man is made to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. The only way He can fulfill this purpose is to have the ability to see evil and choose what is good. This can only be tested by making the choice of evil possible, and that is what temptation is. It

is the lure and enticement to choose what is not God's will.

William Prescott was right when he said, "Where there is no temptation there can be little claim to virtue." There are many sins that I feel no enticement toward at all. I am not virtuous by avoiding these, for my dog avoids them also. I am only virtuous by avoiding the ones I find appealing. The man who has an opportunity to steal and doesn't do it, even though he feels like doing it, is more virtuous than the man who never feels like stealing. If you never feel like doing something, you are not being tested, and so you never choose good when evil was not a tempting choice. The man who has an opportunity to do evil, and also feels the enticement of it, but then chooses not to do it, that man makes a virtuous choice. Edmund Vance Cooke wrote,

So you tell yourself you are pretty fine clay
To have tricked temptation and turned it away,
But wait, my friend, for a different day;
Wait till you want to want to!

What this means is that most righteous people are those who have felt the pull of sin in the world, but who have had the power to say no. Martin Luther praised temptation as one of his key teachers. He wrote, "Temptation is one of the three things needed for a saint's development." We have all heard that we need to study the Bible and pray, but we have missed this one that we also need to be tempted to grow. John Bunyan wrote, "Temptation provokes us to look upward to God." Jesus could not have been our Savior without temptation, and none of us can be all that God wants us to be without temptation. We are to love and hate temptation at the same time, for it is the door to both good and evil. It is important to see this, for if you only feel negative about temptation, you will fail to sense when you are led of the Spirit to be tempted for the sake of growth and advancement in the kingdom of God.

Every temptation is an opportunity to demonstrate where we stand. It is one thing to say, "I am for honesty and morality." But it is another thing to choose honesty and morality when the dishonest

and immoral is enticing you and making you feel they are so appealing. The Christian will have these feelings where evil can seem so good. Can it be good to have such feelings? Yes it is, for that is when your value system is truly tested. Is it just something you were taught like the multiplication table, or is it something you really believe? Temptation will put you to the test and reveal just how deep your commitment is to the values you profess. Temptation separates the men from the boys. The temptation of Jesus made Him the most unique man ever, for He felt the appeal of it in all points, and yet He chose to follow, not His subjective feelings, but the objective Word of God.

The point is, this was good, and there is great value in temptation, for the testing tells you where you really are, and that is valuable knowledge. If you know there is an area where the enticement of evil could win over you, that is where you pray, "Lead me not into temptation

but deliver me from evil." This encounter of the Savior with Satan in the wilderness is the ultimate conflict, which rises far above those like David against Goliath, or Israel against Assyria. This is the heavy weight championship of the universe. No one else had ever defeated Satan, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Jesus was a hybrid of both God and man. Such a being had never before existed, and now He had to be tested. Could He take the pressure of being in the flesh and not yield to the lust of the flesh? Could He see with human eyes and think with a human mind and not be lured by the lust of the eyes and the pride of life? These were the questions that had to be answered, and not on paper, but in actual combat conditions of light against darkness. Some people do not take the testing seriously. They see it as a trivial time of play-acting, for they Jesus could not sin anyway, and so it was not big deal. Such a view misses the tremendous significance of this encounter. It denies the reality of Satan's cleverness, and the reality of Christ's freedom.

There is no temptation unless there is the freedom to choose what is offered. If Jesus could not turn stones into bread, it would be no temptation. It is no temptation for us because we do not have the freedom to make that choice and turn stones into bread. That was a choice Jesus could make, and He felt the need for bread after 40 days of fasting. He could have jumped off the temple and not been injured, and He could have won the crowds to Him by this spectacular feat of magic. He could have bowed to Satan and become the greatest ruler the world has ever known. Jesus had the freedom to make these choices, and so they were real temptations. Satan was not merely playing games. This triple temptation package was subtlety at its best, and had anyone of them worked he would have thrown a monkey wrench into God's plan of salvation. Humanity would have been under his control. Jesus would have had to die for His own sin, like all other men, and not be a Savior of the world.

Thank God that Jesus remained loyal to the Word of God, and He became the first man not subject to the kingdom of darkness. Because He passed this test Jesus became the founder of a new kingdom for man. It is the kingdom of light where men can gain victory over the powers of darkness. It is the kingdom where the gates of hell cannot prevail. We note that the angels did not come to comfort Jesus until the battle was over. He had to pass this test on His own on the level of His humanity. He had to earn the right to be our Savior and Lord as a man, and He could not have done so without being tempted, and that is why we see the value of temptation.

We need not fear the feelings of temptation as if it meant that we are not good. The best of people feel these feelings. Adam and Eve felt them as perfect specimens of manhood. Jesus felt

them as the only perfect man. Feelings that make disobedience to God seem appealing are not sinful. They are testing to see if you will put your money where your mouth is. Will you surrender to your feelings, or will you be loyal to the objective values you know to be the will of God? Every temptation is a call for a decision. We need to ask, "Is how I feel my guide, or is

what God says my guide?" The Christian who begins to conform to the world is easily identified as one who, like the world, does what he feels like doing. Strong Christians feel the same feelings, but they do not choose to follow their feelings.

Peter Marshall, the great preacher made so famous after his death by his wife Catherine Marshall, tells of his many temptations. He was constantly tempted to use time unwisely and to procrastinate in his reading and sermon preparation. He was tempted to run away from problems and move to other areas of service. He was tempted to give in to discouragement when things did not go his way, and his leadership was not accepted. He had his female problems as well. He once had to tell a very attractive woman that she was ugly and unappealing to him to get her to stop enticing him to fly to Mexico with her, and it worked. The point is, here was a godly man with all kinds of feelings that were very real. He felt them deeply, but he did not choose to make these feelings the basis for his behavior. He chose to do the will of God, and out of that choice came other feelings that counter those negative ones and made him a greater servant of the kingdom of God. Secondly we look at,

II. THE VICTORY OVER TEMPTATION.

The victory is what gives it value. If one fails to pass the test, it can hardly be called a value. Had Jesus failed it would have been the second fall of man, and we have no way of knowing if there could have ever been another chance. The whole plan of God for man's glorification depended on this victory over temptation. One of the reasons we do not recognize the tremendous value of this victory is because it does not seem like Jesus overcame any great sin. We fail to see the cleverness of Satan, and so we miss the impact of his appeal. We need to see that Satan is not appealing to a sinful nature in Jesus, and as was the case with Adam and Eve. A sinful nature is not necessary for temptation. Sin does not begin with what is evil. It begins with what is good, normal and natural, but which is beyond the bounds set by God.

There is no evil in eating a delicious piece of fruit. There is no evil in changing a stone into bread, or of trying to get popularity or power to benefit others. The devil is not stupid. He did not try and entice Adam and Eve into chopping down all the trees in Eden. He got them to lose all the trees and beauty of Eden, not by an appeal to do what is folly and obviously evil, but by an appeal to do what seemed so right. Satan did not come to Jesus with an appeal to steal fishing nets left unattended and sell them to other fishermen. He did not appeal to him to support His movement by raiding other boats to fund it. Satan came offering to meet normal and natural desires, and to achieve goals which were legitimate, and which were appealing to the most pure and righteous.

Dr. Kyle defined temptation like this: "Temptation is the incitement of our natural desires to go beyond the bounds set by God." This is good, for it does not say an incitement to do evil and what is unnatural. We get the idea in our heads that temptation is only to do what is evil. Not so, for it is often to do what is normal and natural, but beyond the bounds set by God. The

erotic feeling of passion, for example, is a God given and God blest emotion. It is good and normal. When David looked at Bathsheba taking a bath it was not wrong for him to be erotically stimulated. That is the

way God intended the naked body of a woman to affect a man. It was normal and natural for him to feel as he did. The temptation was to go beyond the bounds set by God. There would have been no problem had he satisfied those feelings stimulated with his own wife as God intended. His mistake was in satisfying them with the wife of Uriah. He let perfectly normal feelings led him to choose folly rather than the wisdom God had clearly revealed.

The problem was that David did not see far enough. He did not see beyond the sin to its consequences. The Son of David also saw the enticing side of people's allegiance to him. It was a glorious vision that no doubt gave him a feeling of power and joy when he thought of the good he could do as lord over the kingdoms of the world. But Jesus gained His victory over temptation, not by avoiding the temptation and the feeling, and not by rolling up the windows of His soul so that He could not see the appealing offer, but instead, by seeing deeper and further than the scene that Satan. Jesus won the victory by seeing the consequences of how His choice would affect His relationship to God. Life was not a matter of bread, popularity, or power. He saw that life was primarily in His relationship to God. Any choice that shatters that relationship is folly beyond compare.

Jesus had an ultimate allegiance by which He could test all His feelings, and that is how He could conquer over threat of the tempter. His question was never, "Does this feel right," for He knew that feelings cannot be a final guide. His question was always, "Does it fit my loyalty and commitment to honor God in all that I do?" The way to win is not to try and escape the enticing visions of temptation, but to see them in the light of a greater picture. People who fall for Satan's view of life see from too narrow a perspective. If they would take the blinders off and see the hole they would see that which leads to victory.

The Christian professor Ed Kindson says, "The first step in conquering temptation is to visualize the sin and its terrible consequences." If only Adam and Eve could have looked beyond the lovely fruit; if only David could have looked beyond the lovely body, and seen all of the pain that momentary pleasure would produce. They were tempted by what they saw, but they could have overcome the temptation by seeing further and seeing more. Buchner Fanning said, "When the mirage of temptation is lifted, we see sin as a barren desert, a desolate wilderness whose wastes are endless. Its waters are bitter and its shade is spiritual darkness. Its singing birds are but the bats and owls from the caves of doom, and its morning breezes are but the hissings of fiery serpents. Its beauty is artificial; its promises are false; its guides are liars."

It is shortsighted folly to do evil, thinking that good will result. This is rationalizing. It is like the thief who murmured as he broke the window, "God helps those who help themselves." Victory is in seeing the total picture in the light of God's objective word. A young man said to

his bride after the wedding, "Honey, I don't feel married, do you?" She replied, "Dear, you have better adjust your feelings to fit the facts." That is what victory over temptation is all about. Jesus adjusted His feelings to fit the facts of God's revealed will. In doing so, the temptation lost its power. The mirage faded, and he felt one of life's greatest feelings, which is the feeling of triumph over temptation.

9. LABOR AND LEISURE Based on Luke 6:1-11

Charlemagne founded great schools of learning even though he could not read nor write. Eliza Peters, an English woman, could also not read or write, but when she died she left her money to buy books for a medical school so that others could advance their learning. You do not have to know how to do something yourself to help others learn to do it. It is possible for a bachelor to teach you how to be happily married. It is possible for a single nurse to teach you how to care for a baby, even though she has never had a baby. It is possible for an architect, who has never pounded a nail, to instruct you on how to build your house or church. It is even possible for a secular teacher to help a child learn the 23rd Psalm or the Lord's Prayer.

The point of all this is, when it comes to balancing your life between work and rest I am no great authority. I got an early start at being a workaholic. I worked 40 hours a week in secular employment at the same time I was a full time pastor as well as a student in seminary. Any one of the three could have kept me busy enough, but I was doing all three. I lived under pressure and was on a treadmill that would not stop, and this became a life-style for me. It took me years to learn to take a day off. I am no authority on the balanced life, but I can still help you see the wisdom of it, and why it is the will of God for us. I am still learning, but some who get this wisdom early may be able to avoid the long way around that I have taken, and get to the practice of the balanced life sooner.

The essence of the balanced life is to learn not to put all your eggs in one basket. The Pharisees were great examples of how not to live. Their whole life was so involved in keeping the law that they became terrible specimens of humanity. They lost all human compassion for people because all that mattered to them was the law. They were the ultimate in legalists, and Jesus had nothing but conflict with them because He cared more about people and their needs. When His disciples were hungry and took some grain to eat as they walked through the field, He was not concerned about the petty issue of whether this was work or not. There was precedent in the Old Testament where David ate the bread that only the priests were supposed to eat. The Pharisees had no defense against this historical record. But they did not like it.

Jesus added insult to injury and healed a man on the Sabbath. He again had an unanswerable argument when He said, "Is it lawful to do good or evil on the Sabbath-to save or destroy life?" They had no clever comeback, for there was none. Jesus had outsmarted them and they were furious. They began to plot how to get rid of Him. If you can't destroy a man's arguments, you either have to accept his truth or destroy the man. They choose the latter and

plotted His murder. This illustrates just how serious it is to become addicted to any idea or concept that is not absolute. The Sabbath was the addiction of the Pharisees. They could be called Sabbathaholics, and the New Testament is clearly anti-Sabbathaholic.

The New Testament is radically different from the Old Testament when it comes to the Sabbath. Paul stresses the liberty of the individual conscience. He writes to the Christians in Rome where there was obvious conflict among those who felt obligated to keep the whole law, and those who felt equally obligated not to be bound by it. He wrote in Rom. 14:5, "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." The idea of one Christian trying to regulate another Christian's life, and telling them they should not shop on Sunday, eat out, or go to a sporting event says Paul is an attempt to play God. In verse 4 he asks, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or

falls."

Paul is shockingly liberal when it comes to the liberty of the individual as to how he observes the Sabbath, or any other day. If a Christian is convinced that what he does pleases his Lord, then he has the right to do that without flack from fellow servants. Paul came to this conclusion because he believed that the Old Testament laws concerning the Sabbath were repealed by the coming of Christ.

He made this clear when he wrote in Col. 2:16-17, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a new moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come, the reality, however, is found in Christ."

Paul is saying that it is just as inappropriate for one Christian to judge another on how he keeps the Sabbath as to judge him for drinking coffee rather than tea. In other words, legalism is a dead horse for the Christian when it comes to the Sabbath laws. Those who believe that 7th day is still the only valid day for worship write tons of literature to prove that Christians are still under the laws of the Sabbath, but it will not hold up under Paul's clear rejection. But Paul's point would also make it wrong for us to judge those who still keep the Sabbath laws, for that is part of the liberty the Christian has. If a Christian wants to be just as Jewish as they can be, that is their privilege. They just do not have a right to impose a conviction on Christians who would rather not be legalistic.

When I was in the Middle East Conference we had a 7th day Baptist Church as part of our conference for years. There was no problem until they began to put fliers on the car windows of other conference people worshipping at their church on Sunday. They were telling them that they were wrong to be worshipping on Sunday rather than on the Sabbath, which they said was Saturday. We had to ask this church to leave our fellowship, not because of what they believed

and practiced, but because they tried to impose it on others, for this is the very thing Paul says is to be rejected. If Christians say this is how they like to observe a day that is fine, but they are to respect the right of other Christians to be convinced that other ways are equally fine. To ever make up a list of the right ways to spend the Sabbath, or any other day, and label this the Christian way is to reject the New Testament revelation, and forsake the way of grace for the way of law.

Strong, the Baptist theologian, had a legalistic background. Sunday was a colossal bore to him. He thought God must be very dull, for the Lord's Day was a day of boredom and lack of enjoyment. Then as he grew up he discovered that Sunday was a day of resurrection and new life for the dead. His Sunday's were like the morgue, and not life a celebration of life, and a day of festivity. His tradition made it a day of no fun because they went back to the shadow in the Old Testament and filled it with law and restrictions. He saw the folly of this, and saw that Christians are to look to Christ and His resurrection, joy and victory rather than to the shadow of the past. Sunday should be a day we love and treasure, and not one we dread.

It is one of the sin's of legalistic minds that has robbed millions of Christians of the joy of Sunday celebration. It all began calling Sunday the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the 7th day of the week and Sunday is the first. They have never been the same day, nor can they ever be. But because Christians have linked them as one they have often robbed Sunday of its light by clouding it with the heavy shadow of the Sabbath. This is not biblical, for it a rejection of God's greater gift. Sunday is not the Sabbath but it is a day on which we are to fulfill the principle of the Sabbath.

Jesus often broke the Sabbath law, but He kept the principle of the Sabbath, which was the balanced life of labor and leisure. If Jesus would have been an workaholic who never took a day off to get away for rest from His labor, we would have to conclude that there was no permanent principle in the Sabbath law. It would be pure legalism to be thrown out as irrelevant to the Christian, but Jesus did practice the balance life and became our guide to keeping the permanent principle. Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. This means there is an essential value of this gift of God to man that never passes away. It is this essence that we must seek to preserve no matter how much of the legalism that we discard.

It is not the law written on tablets that really matters, but the law that is written in the very nature of man. This law says that labor must be balanced with leisure or man will suffer the loss of life as God intended it to be. No man can be fully human without this balance. All work and no play makes, not only John a dull boy, but every Tom, Dick and Harry, and Sue, May and Mary are equally dull girls without this balance. The abundant life Jesus came to bring us is the balanced life where we get out of life what is good for the whole man. We need rest, not because the law demands it, but because our nature demands it. The Christian is to obey the

principle of the Sabbath for the same reason he eats and drinks. He needs it for his own well being, and not because it is a law.

God has made us so that we need diversion. We are not machines that can crank out the same product day after day and year after year with no variety. I never heard of a printing press complaining because all it ever does is print with black ink. It never gets red or green, and it never gets to print anything but newspaper. A machine is designed to be able to do the same thing over and over with endless repetition and no variation. That is what is hard on man, and that is why man has invented the machine. Man is made for variety, and he needs to vary his activity to be healthy and happy.

The Sabbath principle is anti-slavery and anti-machine-like work. It demands that man be man and get a break from the slavery of work and perpetual labor. It demands some diversion that expands man's potential to be more than an animal or a machine. The diversion is to exalt man's humanity, and to develop his mind and soul. If his work is doing what is mental and spiritual, then the rest and diversion will likely be physical to balance out the whole man. The point is, every man has more to his being than can be developed in work. They need time spent in areas that develop what work cannot develop. The principle of the Sabbath is to aid man in becoming all that he can be, and so that he will grow in all areas.

Health, happiness and holiness all depend upon man being a creature of great diversity and not limited to one sphere of life. The unbalanced life is a perversion of what it means to be human. That is why the workaholic is a sinner. They have developed only on sphere of their humanity and have left the rest go to seed. How you get this diversity cannot be a matter of legalism, for people have all different needs. It is folly to try and regulate them as if they were machines. The more complex society becomes, the more foolish it is to try and define what rest and diversion is. What is important is a life where body, mind and spirit get what they need to grow and develop.

The goal of the Sabbath principle is that people will become what God made them to be. God is not merely brute force. He is power controlled by reason and wisdom. God is mind, and that mind is guided by holiness and righteousness. There is balance in God so that He is the only absolutely perfect person in the universe. Jesus reflected that perfection of the Father in His

humanity by the perfect balance of His life. The goal of the Sabbath principle is that we too by the balance life might become more Christ-like.

The Pharisees were only pigmies of men because they kept the Sabbath and all of its laws, but they did not develop compassion for people. They hated Jesus for healing people on the Sabbath because they were so addicted to one narrow aspect of life. They neglected the greater aspects of love and compassion for people. They turned the Sabbath into an idol, and

they made what was meant for a blessing to become a burden. Work is also a blessing that becomes a burden when it robs us of balance. The essence of all the Sabbath law is this: God is anti-workaholic, and pro-rest and relaxation. We want to look at these two things as we seek for balance.

I. THE WORKAHOLIC LIFESTYLE.

The worst part of this bad habit is that it makes you look like a saint rather than a sinner in our culture. We deplore the drug addict, but we admire the work addict. He represents strength, success and energetic persistence. All that we admire in America is found in the workaholic. Dr. Charles White, Director of Gerontology at the University of Texas Health Center estimates that as many as 50% of all white collar workers in America are workaholics. This means that they do not know how to enjoy leisure, but can only feel useful when they are working. They make their wives or husbands feel like they are always in second place to their work. They get more satisfaction out of work than they do with their family, and so if there is any conflict between work and family, work wins out and this means long hours of labor, and only bits of time with the family.

Ted Engstrom in *The Work Traps* says that these people have a deep need to achieve that makes their work their god. In other words, a workaholic is a form of idolatry. All other values are subordinate to their god, and even weekends and vacations are endured rather than enjoyed, for they long to be back with their first love. This, of course, leads to many wives saying that they need help. The workaholic is very often a divorced person, for few mates can live long at second fiddle to a job. They justify their divorce on the basis of abandonment just as God divorced Israel when she abandoned Him for other gods.

The point is, this addiction to work like all addictions is destructive of the health of the individual, of the home, and of all relationships. It is a very serious sin even though it is greatly admired. Some sins are despicable, and we are repulsed by them, but other sins are appealing and the sin of work addiction is one of them. The result is that the Christian is more attracted to this sin than most other additions, for it is so respectable. They can play any role in the church they desire even though they are workaholics. Ted Engstrom does point out that there is difference between a workaholic than a person who just loves his job. The workaholic often hates his job but feels compelled to work all the time anyway. The person who just loves to work can also let go of it and enjoy leisure, but the workaholic cannot enjoy leisure, but only work. What he is doing is giving us a way out if we really love what we do, for then we are like Thomas Edison and Henry Ford who work all the time and are heroes for it.

I think this may be a dangerous loophole that will enable a workaholic to justify his addiction. The fact is, Jesus worked hard and He loved what He did. He put in long hours, but He also had the balanced life. He could enjoy leisure and solitude, and He called His disciples to come apart and escape the work scene for a time of rest. It is no justification that you love your

work if you put it

before your relationships. Godly people who devote their lives to revival and other Christian service often end up with children who rebel. It is just as much folly to worship and serve a good false god as to worship a bad false god. Idolatry does not have a good and bad side, for it is always bad no matter how noble the goal you serve. It is wiser and safer to recognize that even if much good has come out of it, the workaholic is not living the balanced life.

Workaholics often become successful, but at the expense of the values that are greater than success. Billy Wilder of Hollywood, when the studios were on strike back in 1981, told of how terrible it was to be out of work. He said, "...this gives a man a terrible sense of impotence, because a man is his achievements. To be able to work 25 hours a day, 8 days a week is a privilege." This is a fanaticism that goes beyond the average workaholic, but the idea of your work being you is very common.

Picasso the artist said, "Always, you put more of yourself into your work, until one day, you never know exactly which day, it happens-you are your work. The passions that motivate you may change, but it is your work in life that is the ultimate seduction." When he called work the ultimate seduction he was saying that it can seduce us away from God, family, and every other person and value in life, and become our idol, and when it does this it robs us of the balanced life and makes us slaves to a narrow segment of life.

The problem with Martha was not that she loved to cook and work at being a great hostess. Hospitality is one of the gifts, and we can thank God for those people who have to work hard at making life enjoyable for others. Her problem was her lack of balance. She could not cease to be a workaholic and take on the role of a leisurely hostess, and just sit down and enjoy her company. The ideal hostess is not one who is ever working. That makes people feel nervous and unable to relax. The ideal is one who can relax with her guests and enjoy the fruit of her labor.

Since I have never cooked or served a meal in my life I may not seem like much of an authority, but the fact is, I have an abundance of experience of being where Jesus was in being cooked for and served. My experience confirms this. There is much more appreciation for the hostess who has a balance in her labor and leisure. If for some reason it was impossible for Martha to achieve this balance on this occasion, she would have been wise to recognize the value of Mary in supplying the balance by sitting with the guests. Here is a case where two are better than one, and together they added balance to the experience. Martha's problem was that she could not see the value of this balance, and she wanted Mary to join her on the workaholic side and let the leisure side be forgotten. Her problem was that she did not see the value of the balance, and that is the blindness of all addiction. It cannot see the value of anything but the addition.

Most changes in life are not to be made by throwing out of one thing and replacing it with another. They are to be made by the keeping of what we have and adding to it that which gives it balance. The problem with the workaholic is not that he or she loves to work. The problem is that they don't love enough other things like leisure and rest to give them balance. The evil of this is that it robs them of being a whole person, which is God's will for all of His children. An unknown poet wrote,

If your nose is close to the grindstone rough, And you hold it down there long enough,

In time you'll say there's no such thing As brooks that babble and birds that sing. These three will all your world compose Just you, the stone, and your worn out nose!

Without balance there are very few values in life that can remain good. Lack of balance turns the good into an evil. Jesus brought balance to the Sabbath, and He brought balance into work by stressing the importance of leisure.

II. THE LEISURE LIFESTYLE.

Jesus honored labor, but He was not a workaholic. He recognized the need to get away from it all and get rest. Just when the crowds were so vast that they could not handle them, or even get a chance to eat, Jesus said to them in Mark 6:31, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." Long before the word burnout was invented Jesus knew of the reality of it, and He would not let it happen to His disciples. Even though He had to leave crowds of longing people He called them apart. This was the prescription of the Great Physician. Any Christian who refused to take vacations is not a noble saint, but a rebel against the Lord who made us and knows what we need. It was not the law of the Sabbath, but the law of nature that Jesus was obeying, and He expects us to obey it. Rest from the labor of serving people is vital to the balance life.

Jesus fulfilled the Sabbath principle. He did not have a mass of laws to live by, but just the principle of balance. You work hard, but you also get away from it and do not idolize it, even if it is the noble work in the world. Jesus went about doing good, but He also stopped and got rest so He could feel good Himself. That is balance living, and that is why the workaholic is out of God's will. Learning to love leisure is an important aspect of the Christian life. From the Chinese point of view culture is the product of leisure. Only those who use leisure wisely can be cultured. People who are always busy are not wise people, even if they are rich and famous. The only wise people are those who know how to loft gracefully. To be lazy is to loft foolishly, but to loft gracefully is to so use time that it beautifies the total man.

Jesus said in Matt. 11:28-29, "Come to me all ye who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Jesus embodies the Sabbath principle, which says, don't

be a slave or a workaholic. Come apart from your labor and in leisure learn of Him, and develop His spirit of gentleness and humbleness, and find rest for your souls. Jesus says that the body, mind and soul needs rest. The whole man needs it because it is in rest that the whole man grows. This defines rest for us. It is that activity, or lack of activity, that refreshes, restores and revitalizes that body, mind and soul.

If we are following the Shepherd, He will make us to lie down in green pastures. If we are lost and wandering sheep, we will probably be laboring all the time because we lack the security of being in the Shepherd's fold. To be able to relax and enjoy leisure is a sign of faith in the Shepherd. May God help us all develop balance in our labor and our leisure.

10. DIGGING DEEP Based on Luke 6:46-49

Dr. Victor Heiser, author of the one time best seller *An American Doctor's Odyssey*, was 16 years old when the tragic Johnstown flood struck in 1889. He was out in the barn getting a horse when he heard a dreadful roar. When he ran to the door he saw his father up at the house frantically motioning for him to get to the top of the barn. In a few seconds he was up on the roof, and in a few more seconds he saw a mass of houses, freight cars, trees and animals strike his house. It collapsed like an eggshell, but the barn was torn from its foundation and began to roll. By scrambling and crawling he was able to keep on top. The barn struck a neighbor's house. He leaped into the air and landed on the house just as it collapsed. Fortunately another house rose up beside him and he was able to cling to it.

He lived this experience over and over many times in his dreams, and he vividly recalled his fingernails digging deep into the shingles. He was sweep into a jam of wreckage and had to constantly dodge the deathblows of trees and beams that came roaring pass. A freight car came crashing into the wreckage and he was thrown like a bullet into open waters. He was sweep into another jam of wreckage against a brick building that was still on its foundation. He managed to get to the roof of this solid structure, and with others there he was able to rescue people being sweep by until there were 19 gathered on that still standing building.

It was raining hard, and so they opened the skylight and got down into the attic where they spent a night of terror listening to the roar of the water and the crashing of buildings all around them. Their building held, but most did not. Two thousand and nine were recovered, and many were never found. Those in buildings with deep and solid foundations lived to tell of this fearful flood. Many gathered with the Rev. Beale in the First Presbyterian Church in the heart of the city. The waters filled the basement, but it with stood the flood and everyone there was spared. Life or death depended on the foundation of the building you were in. A solid foundation meant life, and a shallow foundation meant death.

This is so obvious a truth when we consider a physical flood, but men do not always realize that this is equally valid in the spiritual realm. Jesus concluded His most extended sermon on

record, the Sermon on the Mount, with an illustration concerning the need for depth. Jesus was vitally concerned about the matter of foundations, and He wanted to impress all with its importance. Whether you are wise or foolish depends on what you do with this issue. If you dig deep to lay your foundation, you are wise. If you are satisfied to be shallow, you are foolish, and what you build will never hold up in the flood, which the storms of life bring at some point. Jesus implies that all will be tested by the flood.

Jesus was a carpenter, and there is no way to know how many homes He built, or help build, before He began His ministry of building the kingdom of God. One thing we can be sure of, however, and that is that none of them fell in the rainy season because of a shallow and shabby foundation. Jesus was a builder of quality in both the secular task of building a home, and in the sacred task of building a life. He expected all who followed Him to do likewise, and to avoid being superficial, but to dig deep.

The interesting thing to observe here is, that which makes the great difference between the wise

and the foolish builder is not conspicuous. The two houses may look identical, and, in fact, the one with no foundation may even look superior as far as looks go. The shallow life may be as appealing as the deep one. Appearances are deceiving. It is when the flood comes to test them that the hidden foundation proves its value, and leaves the man who dug deep standing justified.

No life can escape testing, and that is why Jesus was so insistent upon depth. You recall in His parable of the sower how some seed fell on ground where it had little soil. It sprang up quickly, but it had no depth, and so when the sun arose it was scorched and withered away. Depth is not a luxury. It is a necessity for survival. When God plants He knows the value of depth. In Psa. 80:8-9 Israel is compared to a vine which God planted. "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land." In the New Testament Jesus takes over this image and applied to Himself and the church. He says, "I am the vine and you are the branches." Jesus is the vine with roots of infinite depth. There are adequate resources in Him for the branches to grow into all the world and bare fruit.

Christianity could not have survived without being rooted in Christ, for He alone has the depth to keep the church standing through the floods of persecution. God the Father plants deep; God the Son grows deep, and God the Holy Spirit reveals the depths. Paul says in I Cor. 2:10, "For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God." The subject of depth is one of the most important for a Christian to grasp. The disciples had fished all night and caught nothing, but when they listened to Jesus and launched out into the deep their nets were breaking because of the great catch. Digging deep, growing deep, and fishing deep are common themes in Scripture, and they challenge us to give more attention to the dimensions of depth. I

wrote these questions for all to consider:

Is there nothing in your net? Then you haven't gone out yet
To the depths where fish abundant can be caught.
Will you empty handed be In the shallows of the sea,
Or will you launch out deeper as you ought?

To help you answer these questions we want to answer another question, which we must understand. The question is, what did Jesus mean by depth? What does digging deep and laying a solid foundation for life mean? In building a house it is easy to understand digging deep, but in building a life there is no literal digging to be done, and so we can easily miss the point of Jesus. Therefore, let us consider the question, what is depth in building a life?

Verse 46 makes it crystal clear that depth is not in mere speech. The Lordship of Christ in our lives is not made real by merely saying Lord, Lord, if we do not then do what He commands. A verbal Christian is not a vital Christian. The Christian who thinks he is growing and sending roots deep because he is increasing his religious vocabulary is deceived. Nothing is more shallow than mere verbal growth. Jesus knew that the greatest temptation His followers would have would be to accept creeds for deeds.

Most Christians take talk far more seriously than Jesus did. We all tend to accept or reject people on the basis of their speech. If they say the right things in the right way they are in, but Jesus says, and all of history proves, we are building on the sand when we do this. Right words are

meaningless without right actions. Spurgeon said, "The common temptation, is, instead of really repenting, to talk about repentance; instead of heartily believing, to say, 'I believe,' without believing, instead of truly loving, to talk of love, without loving...."

Christians easily develop the dangerous habit of taking their talk too seriously. They tend to think that if they memorize a Bible passage that the experience of that passage is theirs. They think if they quote Paul, who said, "I am crucified with Christ," that they are, therefore, deeply consecrated and surrendered, when in reality they may be nothing of the kind. Jesus was not warning unbelievers, but He was warning those who loved and followed Him to beware of verbalization without obedience. Do not build on your words, but on your deeds. Satan will lead you, if you allow it, to build a high tower of which you will be proud, but if it is built on words alone it will fall in the flood.

Do not build on the shifting sand of sentiment, but on the solid rock of sound doctrine and reason. Many Christians are moved by emotion to start building, and they begin to build up a Christian life without bothering to dig deep, and they are even proud of the fact that they do not waste time with digging as others do. They feel it is a sign of greater faith to leave the foundation to God. Their attitude is that the Lord will protect. They forget that emotion is the

lighting and heating system of the home of life, and it makes the home enjoyable and pleasant when it is built. They allow it to become the basis for building, and the result is they are seldom prepared for the flood. They lose their faith and feel God has forsaken them. They are cared away by the flood of changing times, and they are tossed about by every wind of doctrine. Why? It is because they did not dig deep, but had a superficial faith that could not stand under pressure.

Jesus never built a house on the sand and then said, "I will not have to worry because my Father in heaven will protect it." If you don't dig deep, it makes no difference who you are, your house will not stand. Jesus was warning His followers not to make the same mistake that brought Israel to a fall. They honored God with their lips, but their heart was far from Him, and they did not obey His Word. Depth is in deeds is what Jesus was saying. Depth is not in feelings or speech. The intellect and emotion are important, but they are not the foundation. The will is the foundation of the Christian life. The Christian who does not dig deep and sink his will into the solid rock of obedience, will be a shallow Christian however gloriously he speaks of Christ, and however warmly he feels toward Christ. Some poet wrote

Not words of winning note, Not thoughts from life remote, Not fine religious airs, Not sweetly languid prayers, Not love of scent and creeds, Wanted: deeds.

It is not what Jesus said that saves us, but it is what He did at Calvary. The Word did not merely speak, but He became incarnate in flesh, and He lived and died for our benefit. It is what He did that robbed Satan of his victory, and gave us the victory instead. Many others have said great things, but nobody ever did what He did. Deeds make the difference, for depth is in deeds. Jesus makes it clear that the only difference between the man who went deep and the man who was shallow was in their deeds. Both heard His words, but one did them and the other did not. The only

distinction among hearers of the Word that really matters is that between those who are hearers only, and those who are hearers plus doers.

Depth is found primarily in what you do. Action is the measure of one's foundation. Any other test of Christian maturity leads to deception. James says in 1:22, "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." In the day of judgment the Scripture says repeatedly that we will be judged according to our deeds. It will be according to what we have done in the body, and not according to our profession, but according to our practice. "Let your light so shine that men may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." This was the message of Jesus. It is not just your words but your works that are a witness.

The question is not, what do you say to your non-Christian friends and neighbors, but what do you do? There is no argument against good deeds. The issue is not your speaking of the love of God, but of your demonstration of it in action. The Good Samaritan helped a beaten

man by taking him to an inn and paying for his care. Jesus could have said that He spoke to him of the love of God also, but He did not. Jesus pictured the value of this man by action only. We are not to assume that words are not important, but only that they are not sufficient alone. Words without deeds are superficial, but deeds with or without words are a deep expression of values.

One of the strangest paradoxes of life is that we tend to call a man who is active in all kinds of projects for people a do-gooder. By this we mean that he has a shallow philosophy for the cure of the world's ills. Then we come to Scripture and discover that it teaches clearly that the only Christians who are really deep and solidly Christ-like are those who are do-gooders. Jesus went about doing good, and Paul in Gal. 6:9-10 says, "Let us not grow weary in well-doing....let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." There is no escaping the fact that depth in doing. A Christian who is not a do-gooder is shallow however much theology he knows. Our problem is not Christian education, for you can hear and know the Word of God, and still build on the sand. Our problem is Christian action. We are not digging deed because we are not doing. The purpose for hearing is that we might be motivated to be doing.

Massillon, the famed French preacher and orator, use to say, "I don't want people leaving my church saying, what a wonderful sermon, what a wonderful preacher. I want them to go out saying, I will do something." That is precisely how Jesus felt, and that is why He ended the Sermon on the Mount with this challenge to be doers and not hearers only, for in doing one is digging deep. Only these will be fruitful and wise, and only these will stand firm in the flood. None of us will escape, and so none of us can afford to avoid examining our lives to determine if we are digging deep. Someone wrote,

God will not ask thy race, Nor will He ask thy birth. Alone He will demand of thee, What hast thou done on earth?

Lowell wrote, "Every man feels instinctively that all the beautiful sentiments in the world weigh less than a single lovely action." It does not do a great deal of good in your life to read the Bible if you do not obey it. The prayer that Jesus taught is not, thy will be talked about, thy will be sung, thy will be voted on, thy will be praised, thy will be taught, but, thy will be done. Merrill

wrote,

Thy will be done on earth, On bended knee we pray, Then leave our prayer before the throne
And rise and go our way. And earth is filled with woe, And war, and evil, still, For lack of men
whose prayer is, Lo I come to do thy will. Thy will be done on earth, Lord, grant me grace to see
That if thy will is to be done, It must be done by me.

11. THE DILEMMA OF DOUBT Based on Luke 7_18-35

It is a pain to struggle with doubt, but there is a great debate as to whether this is a helpful or harmful type of suffering. In Camelot, King Arthur says to Lancelot that he is satisfied he did the right thing in starting the round table. Lancelot replies, "Your majesty, did you ever doubt it?" And Arthur responds, "Lance, only a fool never doubts."

An army of followers will march to that drum beat, and praise the virtue of doubt. But they will face a mighty host who feel just the opposite; that only a fool would ever doubt. One of these leaders writes,

Is there no knowledge to be had? Has God not spoken once for all? Indeed He has, all doubt is mad And destined to disastrous fall. For God is God, and truth is true. All doubt is sinful in His sight, And doubters will have cause to rue Their doubt through hell's undoubted night.

So the authorities agree, you are damned if you do, or damned if you don't doubt. Thus we are stuck with the dilemma of doubt. It is always confusing when the same thing can be good or evil, for this forces us to think and be discerning. We would prefer that all the good guys road on white horses, and all the bad guys road on black horses. That way, you don't have to strain to evaluate and discern, for you just know by the visual evidence.

Have you ever turned TV on in the middle of a story, and watched it for a few minutes. It can be very frustrating because you do not know the context of the story, and you do not know who the

heroes are, and who are the villains. The result is, you do not know where you stand, and who you are for or against in the conflict. The bad guy may be so deceptively noble that you are attracted to him before you discover he is the villain. We can only feel comfortable in our convictions when we have the whole context before us, and can see how each piece fits the whole.

Our text in Luke 7 will help us see the dilemma of doubt in its full context so we can grasp how people can come to such radically opposite conclusions. In this text we see that both sides of the battle are correct. Doubt is both demanded and damnable. It has both positive and negative qualities that make it a cause for both helpful and harmful suffering. In order to see the whole we want to examine the individual parts of this dilemma, and we start with the negative.

I. DOUBT IS DAMNABLE.

None are so blind as those who will not see, and Jesus describes the Pharisees, and experts in

the law, as deliberate doubters who refused to see the light that God has put in front of their face. They are locked into a damnable doubt that God would ever do anything apart from them. The result is that no amount of evidence will overcome their blindness.

God sends John the Baptist as a solemn, somber, and serious prophet, and they reject him as a madman with a demon. God then sends His Son as a life-loving leader who joins his people for the sharing of the enjoyable social events of life. They reject him as too worldly; a glutton, wine bibber, and friend of tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus describes them like spoiled children who don't want to play funeral or wedding. They will not be led, but stubbornly resist all evidence so that no light can penetrate their dungeon of doubt, and they remain in the darkness of disbelief. You cannot find any better example of the danger of doubt. These blind leaders of the blind were literally damned by their doubt. Heaven was at their fingertips, but their doubt was leading them to hell and separation from Christ who offered them eternal life.

It is true that some of these leaders, like Joseph of Arimathea began to doubt their doubts, and came to the place where they believed. But most never did, and must have had great fears that it might be true that Jesus was the Messiah, for He did many miracles before their very eyes. The unbeliever has more to lose than anyone, and so his doubts are very frightening. Those who attack the believer try to throw him into a state of doubt, but this is a two edge sword, and cuts even deeper into the unbeliever when you throw him into doubt about his disbelief. A young skeptic said to Archbishop Temple, "You only believe what you believe because of your early upbringing." Temple replied, "You only believe that I believe what I believe because of my early upbringing because of your early upbringing." The skeptic was banged into silence by his own boomerang.

Remember, doubt is really the faith of unbelief, and you can throw a scare into the doubter by causing him to doubt that his doubt is a sure thing. Doubt is a valid weapon for the soldier of light to use in combat with those in darkness. Unbelievers must be tormented by the fear that maybe they are wrong, and belief is right. This is the way the lost are saved. But some are so blind they will not see the flaws in their doubt. They believe their unbelief is the final word, and they doubt all that contradicts it. Doubters give doubt such a bad name that we seldom see that it also has a positive side that we must consider.

II. DOUBT IS DEMANDED.

John the Baptist represents the doubter who is just the opposite of the Pharisees. Their doubt drove them to the denial of all evidence, but his doubt drove him to seek more evidence. John was in prison for doing the will of God, and even one so use to being deprived of life's luxuries, can not be happy in such bondage. John began to doubt whether or not Jesus was really the Messiah. This one who said of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the

sin of the world," was now isolated and felt forsaken. His personal crisis led him into the shadows of doubt, and he asked his disciples to go to Jesus and ask Him right out if He was the one who was to come, or if they should expect someone else?

John was saying, I have lost my certainty and lack assurance, and I need some evidence to eliminate the doubts that are creeping into my faith. This kind of doubt can hurt, but it is like the pain of exercise; it hurts, but it leads to the strengthening of the muscle. Doubt that motivates a man to seek for more evidence is not harmful to his faith, but helpful, for it will lead him, as it did John, to get that which supports his faith. Jesus did not say, go back and tell John I've had it with him. If he can't take a crisis like being thrown into a dungeon without doubt, then he is no friend of mine. Jesus did not condemn this doubt at all, but responded with the very thing John needed-evidence. The very things that were to happen when the Messiah came, are happening. The sick are being healed; the blind are made to see; lepers are restored; and the dead are even raised, and the poor are receiving the good news.

The Bible does not call this kind of doubt damnable, but rather, says it is demanded as one of the weapons of warfare in the battle of light and darkness. Paul stated it in I Thess. 5:21, "Test everything, hold fast to the good." The Christian is to face this world of so many false prophets and cults with doubt; a doubt that refuses to accept anything without testing it according to God's Word. Jesus expected to be tested Himself, and said, don't believe me because I say something, believe me because of my works. In other words, talk is cheap, and we need to see the fruit of what is said in action, and until we do, doubt is our ally to keep us from being led astray.

If we care to avoid being tossed about by every wind of doctrine, we must be doubters who question, test, and evaluate, and be discerning as to what is of God and what is not. Doubt becomes a partner with faith in helping us discern the will of God. Tennyson said, "There lives more faith in honest doubt believe me, than in half the creeds." Rosalind Rinker said, "Faith and doubt coexist to some degree within everyone." We are all like the man who came to Jesus and said, "Lord I believe, help thou mine unbelief." He had both faith and doubt, and so it was with John the Baptist, and so it is with Christians all through history.

It is important that we see this so that we corral our doubts and make them servants of faith rather than enemies of faith. It is not wrong or evil when you get overwhelmed by the burdens of life to doubt the workings of God. This can be a time of great growth if you do not fear it, but recognize that the circumstances demand doubt that seeks for more light to support faith. When Rosalind Rinker went through a time of doubt as a Christian author, Bill Stern, the director of Young Life told her, "You haven't begun to know what you believe until you have had a few doubts." She came to the point where she learned not to fear her doubts, for they helped her become a more mature Christian by forcing her to probe and search, and think through her faith, so it could stand up strong under attack. Those who have not faced the doubts can be

overwhelmed and lose their faith, if they have not thought through a crisis before it strikes.

Rosalind Rinker pressed on into the ocean of infinite truth instead of waiting in the shallow water of superficial faith, and she became stronger, and wrote, "There was a time when people with serious doubts and questions about God disturbed me, now I can smile with understanding while assuring them they are on the road to new discoveries."

Young people are notorious for going through a time of doubting all they have heard in church, and what they have been taught at home. They feel they cannot swallow all they have been fed. This is no time to panic and condemn them. They are simply going through the process of developing a first hand, rather than a second hand, faith. This is good, and not evil.

Job was a great doubter, yet God preferred his honest doubt to the superficial faith of his comforters. They were dogmatic believers in orthodox views. They said all who suffer deserve to suffer, because they are being punished for their sin. Job said, I not only doubt it, I deny it, for that is a false view of life and suffering, and I will not let you cram it down my throat, however orthodox and traditional it is. Job refused to join their chorus which went: That old time religion is good enough for me. He said, its not good enough for me, and I want a better understanding of the issue. God responded to this great doubter with favor, and the orthodox believers he condemned.

The book of Job makes it clear that doubt can be, and often is, the key factor in overcoming a falsehood that has gotten a hold of the minds of even the godly. Thank God for great doubters like Martin Luther who said, "I cannot believe God keeps people in purgatory a certain length of time depending on how much their family is willing to pay to get them released." We are not called to have faith in everything that claims to be food for the soul. We are called to test it and evaluate it, and judge it by its fruit. To have faith in everything, or to believe in everything is the same as believing nothing. The most watered down faith you can have is a faith that says one religion is as good as the next. Robert Ingersall, the famous American atheist, had what sounds like a noble faith. He wrote back in 1888, "I belong to the Great Church which holds the world within its starlit aisles; that claim the great and good of every race and clime; that finds with joy the grain of gold in every creed...."

The Christian cannot say this, and so the atheist can sound more noble than the Christian. But the Christian has to be committed to doubt, for error and folly, corruption and deception, are everywhere in this fallen world. It is to be partners with folly not to doubt. We need to doubt that everything said about God, or for God, is true. We need to doubt that God approves of everything people believe and do in His name. Doubt is demanded for those who are committed to the Word of God, for the world is flooded with ideas that are based on human cleverness and deception rather than the mind of God. Jesus warned his disciples to beware of

the leaven of the Pharisees, and beware of wolves in sheep clothing. Test everything says Paul. Nothing should escape the dynamics of doubt, for that is our protection against faith which is folly. True faith needs doubt to protect it, and keep it free of error and nonsense. Doubt is an ally of true faith.

Mike Yaconelli, the editor of Agape Force grasped this truth and expressed it forcefully. "Frankly, I'm bored by so many Christians today. You can't carry on an intelligent discussion because they know everything, have an opinion on all subjects and have no questions." Someone said a Sunday School student only really begins to grow when he stops answering the questions, and

begins to question the answers. That is what he is getting at. So many Christians fear questions, for it implies doubt that we have all of the answers. Doubt is the enemy, and so do not give doubt a foothold by questioning tradition.

Yaconelli goes on, "I am no longer intimidated by those who, because of my questions, have written me off as a spiritual casualty. In fact, I'm beginning to see that having all the answers may deny me the exhilaration of a constantly growing faith that wagers what I know of me on what I know of Christ. Maybe our easy answers have caused us to miss the thrill of discovery, the freshness of uncharted horizons, the excitement of saying, "I don't know" and then trusting Christ anyway. For some reason not having all the answers has become unwritten sin. I am free from that now. I can admit my doubts, my weaknesses, my insufficiency-knowing Christ is sufficient, and trusting him with all my heart, and still feel inadequate."

He is not saying, I doubt Christ, but I doubt that I fully understand Christ, and am being Christlike in all my conduct and convictions. That is good doubt, for what he is saying is that he refuses to believe that Christians have all the answers, and that they, like Job's friends, can set everybody straight on all the issues of life. He has his doubts, and because of his doubts he is compelled to seek for more light, and thereby become a growing Christian. It is a paradox, but the uncertain and doubt filled Job was more pleasing to God than his cocksure dogmatic friends who had all the answers, and no doubts.

That is why doubt is not just recommended, it is demanded by the Bible, for without it man so easily drifts into equating his convictions with the Word of God. This leads to idolatry of man made systems and ideas, and a loss of motivation to constantly seek to get more light from God's Word. Why seek if you think you have it all? But if you doubt that you have it all, you will seek for more. That is what John the Baptist was doing. He was seeking for more light, and that is good doubt that motivates such a search. The Pharisees had none of this kind of doubt. They knew it all, and had all the answers, and were thus blind to God's new light in Christ. Their lack of this demanded doubt led them to the blindness of damnable doubt where they doubted all that was true, and ended in the darkness of disbelief.

Had they only doubted that they had all the answers; Had they only doubted that they possessed all the light that God had; Had they only doubted that they alone could be right, they may have ended up as soldiers of faith, for that doubt would have opened them up to the Christ they rejected. Do not be down on doubt that leads men to search for more light. Charles Spurgeon was a strong Calvinist, yet he was not down, even on the doubt that came into one's life that makes you wonder if you are really a Christian. He writes, "We are told by certain devines, that we should never doubt our safety. Beloved, we should never doubt God, but I am inclined to think that no man who exercises a holy watchfulness over himself, and a holy earnestness to be found accepted at the last, can be at all times without doubt as to his own interest in Christ."

He goes on to say that some who do not doubt take it for granted that they are safe regardless of their life, and they drift from God and holiness. It is better to doubt once in a while, and so to keep examining your life, and make sure you are living in a faith pleasing to God. In other words, doubt keeps the Calvinist enough like the Arminian to keep them from being presumptuous, and thus motivated to strive for sanctification. The Arminian needs to doubt his theology, and find security. The Calvinist needs to doubt his theology, and live an examined life for security. Doubt is what

keeps all theology in balance.

The point is, doubt can always be made a virtue if it is handled right, and used as an opportunity for growth. John the Baptist was using his this way, but the Pharisees were using their doubt as an excuse to not grow, and a shield to prevent their having to see the light. There are doubtless some Christians who never doubt, but it is doubtful they are very strong Christians. It is the Christian who has gone through inner debates of doubt that has grown and become strong in faith. Many can testify with Dostoeveski who wrote, "It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ. My "Hosanna" is born of a furnace of doubt."

We need to stop fearing doubt and recognize it as an ally to faith. People who fear doubt too much are often repressing doubt. The famous Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal said, "He who feareth to doubt, Lord, in that fear doubteth Thee." Progress in almost all realms of life depends on someone doubting that all is known in that area of life. They press on to new discoveries, and so we need to doubt that we know all we can of Christ, and that we are all we can be in Christ. It is this doubt that leads us to be open for growth.

There are many who have had this positive view of doubt. Galileo called doubt the father of invention. Dante said, "Doubting charms me not less than knowledge." Stanislaus said, "To believe with certainty we must begin with doubting." Albert Guerod said, "Systems which end doubt are devices for drugging thought." H. L. Menchen wrote, "Men became civilized, not in proportion to their willingness to believe, but in proportion to their readiness to doubt."

Doubt is a conformation of faith, for it is an indication of the seriousness and value of faith to the doubter. I do not doubt information I receive about the life of turtles on Pacific Islands. I do not doubt what I am told about butterflies in Porto Rico. These and millions of other bits of information are not relevant to my life, and not important enough to doubt. But I do doubt in areas of vital importance to me. The nurse who works with aids patients has to doubt that she is safe from the disease, and take precautions, for her life is at stake. It is healthy to be skeptical in such a context.

If I am being offered a \$300 dollar watch for \$20 dollars, I have an obligation to be doubtful. If I have faith in all I am told, I will be a prime target for the con man. Doubt and skepticism are part of the armor that protects us from much folly. In the realm of religious truth we must be skeptical, and doubt much of what we read and hear. The Bereans were more noble than those in Thessalonika because they searched the Scripture to see if what Paul taught was so. They doubted the Apostle Paul, and none were condemned for this doubting. In fact, they were commended, for they took truth seriously enough to check it out. Some have called this the Protestant Principle: The critical element that says, we do not take pronouncements from anybody as authorities until they can be established to be Biblical, and thus reflect the mind of God. Only doubters can make this principle work.

We must always remember the sunny side of doubt, for doubt is not just aimed at the truth, but can also be aimed at the false, and it is a virtue to doubt the false. It is a virtue to doubt Satan and his lies that say wickedness leads to happiness. It is a virtue to doubt that the world, flesh, and devil have valid answers. Thank God for doubt, for it is the other side of faith that makes faith strong. The sunny side of doubt is the doubt that death ends all, and the doubt that Jesus would lie to us, and

not really prepare a place for us to be with Him forever. The more you get into the sunny side of doubt, the more doubt becomes an exciting virtue. To believe in anything positive, you have to not believe in its opposite. If I have faith in Christ, I must doubt the ways of anti-Christ. All faith is backed up by doubt in its opposite.

Before Columbus launched out into the deep to prove the world is round, he had to doubt the old theory that it was flat. The sinner who responds to the Gospel in faith must doubt that he can save himself, or that there is any other way to be forgiven of his sin. The point of all this is, do not let doubt be your enemy, but make it your friend. Jesus understood John's doubt, and he will understand yours. Come to Christ, as John did, and seek for answers to the mysteries that puzzle you and provoke doubt. It can be painful, but the end result will be the pleasure of a deeper faith. Don't let doubt drag you into darkness as it did the Pharisees, but let it drive you to the light like it did John.

The idea of doubt being demanded has to be seen in the context of an intellectual struggle to acquire insight into truth. It does not fit a situation where the issue is trust, or not trust. When

Peter walked on the water, and then because of his fear lost faith, and began to sink, Jesus saved him and asked, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" The implication is that Peter's doubt was of no value whatever, for it was a sheer loss of faith. He ceased to trust Christ, and relied on his own senses. This is not the damnable doubting of the Pharisees, but it is a dangerous doubting none the less. It is doubt which has made a decision to side with unbelief, and when doubt sides with unbelief, it is unbelief. Peter ceased to trust Christ and he sank. Job doubted his friends theology, and he even doubted God's justice and loving care, but he never ceased to trust God. Job's doubt was good, for it did not plunge him into unbelief. Doubt will not hurt us as long as we always put our trust in Christ. Someone wrote this poem that sums it up

"I will not doubt, though all my ships at sea
Come drifting home with broken masts and sails.
I shall believe the hand that never fails
From seeming evil worketh good for me,
And though I weep because those sails are tattered,
Still will I cry, while my best hopes are shattered,
I trust in thee."

12. FOCUS ON FEET Based on Luke 7:36-50

Centuries ago the Danes decided to invade Scotland. They very cleverly moved their great army in the night so they could creep up on the Scottish forces and take them by surprise. In order to make this advance as noiseless as possible they came barefooted. As they neared the sleeping Scots, one unfortunate Dane brought his foot down on a bristling thistle. He let out with a roar of pain that was like a trumpet blast which rang through the sleeping camp. The Scots were alerted, and quickly grabbed their weapons, and the Danes were driven back.

One could say that they came within one foot of victory, but one foot led to their defeat. The thistle from that time on was adopted as the national emblem of Scotland. Feet are vital for the onward march, but they can also be your foe and lead you to defeat because of their weakness. Not all have the feet of the Kentucky backwoods farmer who never wore shoes. One day he came into the cabin and stood by the fireplace with his callused feet. His wife said, "You'd better move your feet a mite, you're standin on a live coal." He replied, "Which foot?" Unfortunately, most foot soldiers do not have feet that tough. Even Achilles, the great Greek warrior, had one weak spot, and that was the heel of his foot. It was by means of an arrow in his heel that he was brought to defeat. Our feet determine whether we stand or fall in more ways than one.

The statue, or government, or organization, with feet of clay is easily toppled. When we want somebody to become independent, we tell them to stand on their own two feet, and to get both feet on the ground. The unstable position and shaky argument puts a man where we say he doesn't have a leg to stand on. All of the many texts about the Christian walk and the Christian stand make clear that feet are essential equipment for the Christian life, for you

cannot stand or walk without feet.

The feet can bring you to defeat, or they can march you to victory. Either way the feet play a major role in every life, and that includes the life of our Lord. There are 27 references to the feet of Jesus in the New Testament. That is likely a greater focus on feet than you will find in the biography of any other man. Biblical times were times of far greater foot consciousness. There are 4 Hebrew and 2 Greek words for feet. There are 162 references to feet in the Old Testament, and 75 in the New Testament. Feet were just more conspicuous in that world where walking, marching, and cleaning of feet, and sitting at the feet of others, were daily events.

The feet of Jesus were exposed, and so more people beheld the feet of Christ than other great men of history. The feet of Jesus were the center of so much of His activity. In Matt. 15:30 we read, "Great crowds came to Him, bringing the lame, blind, the crippled, the dumb and many others, and laid them at His feet, and He healed them." Mary became famous for sitting at the feet of Jesus and soaking in the wisdom of His teaching. Many were laid at His feet unable to walk, and Jesus lifted them up and stood them on their own two feet again, and enabled them to walk and be restored to the world of folks with feet that would function again. Only those who have lost the ability to walk can appreciate how beautiful it must have been to be laid at the feet of one, who because He created feet could fix them, and make them work again.

"I cried because I had no shoes till I saw a man who had no feet," is a popular saying, but here were crowds who wept for joy, for those with no feet walked away from the feet of Jesus having been made whole. Walking is being revived in our day for health and exercise, but in the day of Christ walking was a necessity, and that is why one of the most frequent miracles of the New Testament was that of making the lame walk. To be put back on your feet was to be given new life. We take our feet for granted, and do not often consider that they are one of the wonders of creation.

Leonardo da Vinci called the feet, "A masterpiece of engineering and a work of art." There are 26 bones in each foot or 52 in both, and that is one fourth of the bones in our body. By means of these instruments the average person by the age of 55 has walked 70,000 miles, or 2 and one half times around the world. Gillette Burgess may sound silly, but he was rightly amazed when he wrote

My feet, they haul me round the house, And hoist me up the stairs.

I only have to steer them, and They ride me everywhere.

Another poet wrote some lines that became more well known.

Lives of great men all remind us We can make our lives sublime, And departing leave behind us

Footprints in the sands of time.

Jesus did so more than any other who has ever lived, and we want to sit at His feet and focus on them, for His footprints have changed the course of history. Every place the feet of Jesus touched have become places of deep interest, study, and research. We cannot look at all 27 references, and so we will only get a foot in the door of this lowly yet lofty subject. We will focus on the feet of Jesus from the point of view of them being instruments of sovereignty, suffering, and of service. First lets look at His feet as

I. INSTRUMENTS OF SOVEREIGNTY.

Many ancient monuments picture the kings with their feet on the necks of the vanquished to show they are sovereign and victorious. They have the enemy in complete subjection. The feet are symbols of power. We see this very thing in Joshua 10:24 where we read, "When they had brought the kings to Joshua, he summoned all the men of Israel and said to the army commanders who had come with him, 'come here and put your feet on the necks of these kings.' So they came forward and placed their feet on their necks." This was to encourage the commanders and give them assurance of victory over the enemy.

We see Paul doing the same thing on a spiritual level for the soldiers of the cross. He writes in Romans 16:20, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." The image of the song Onward Christian Soldiers is very biblical, for Christians are to march forward like an army of foot soldiers conquering territory that is under the power of Satan, and liberating those he holds captive. Our feet are weapons of warfare, and by means of our feet we are to gain victory and sovereignty over Satan. In Epb. 6 where Paul describes the whole armor of God that we are to put on, he does not neglect the feet, but urges us to have our feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel. The point is that foot power was, is, and will ever be, a primary power, for the feet of our Lord will forever be a place where we worship His majesty and glory.

Paul in I Cor. 15:25 says of Jesus, "For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet." The last enemy to be destroyed is death, and when this final foe is fully vanquished the whole universe will be under the sovereign feet of Christ. This is the plan of God that Paul explains in Eph. 1. He says that this is why God raised Jesus and exalted Him to His own right hand, "...far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church." He who has the most powerful feet is the head.

When the Apostle John was caught up to see a vision of the ascended Christ he was very conscious of his Lord's feet. In Rev. 1:15 he says, "His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace."

And in verse 17 he says, "When I saw Him I fell at His feet as though dead." One day all who loved Jesus will experience the wonder and joy of falling before His sovereign feet.

Lo, at His feet with awful joy
The adoring armies fall!
With joy they shrink to nothing there
Before the eternal all.

Whenever you fall at the feet of Jesus you have arrived at a high point in your spiritual life. William Cowper wrote,

Tis joy enough, my all in all,
At thy dear feet to lie;
Thou wilt not let me lower fall,
And none can higher fly.

We many never in time walk where Jesus walked, but all who submit to His Lordship will walk with Him in white, and our feet will walk with His on golden streets, and all over a redeemed and perfected earth. Following the footsteps of Jesus will be forever, for His feet will our guide for all eternity. We will sit at His feet; worship at His feet, and serve at His feet with joy forever and ever. "Footprints of Jesus that make the pathway glow. We will follow the steps of Jesus wherever they go."

When Jesus comes again He will come, not with the feet of the lowly carpenter, but with the feet of a sovereign Lord. His feet will then be instruments of sovereignty as all will bow before His feet and acknowledge Him as sovereign. B. Whitney Allen wrote,

Down the minster aisles of splendour,
From betwixt the cherubim,
Through the wond'ring throng
With movements strong and sweet,
Sounds His victory-trend approaching
With a movement far and dim
The music of the coming of His feet.

He is coming, O my spirit,
With His everlasting peace,
With His blessedness immortal and complete;
He is coming, O my spirit,
And His coming brings release.
I am waiting for the coming of His feet.

No one can fill the shoes of Jesus, for He alone will finally conquer this world, and all will be under His feet, for His feet are instruments of sovereignty. Next, we see His feet as

II. INSTRUMENTS OF SUFFERING.

The feet are a very sensitive part of the body. William Stidger tells of how on one occasion Helen Keller gave a speech to a large crowd. There was a great round of applause when she finished. Even though she was blind and deaf she knew they were clapping, and she fairly danced with joy, and she clapped her hands as well. The chairman asked Miss Sullivan to find out how she could hear that applause. Helen said, "Through the vibrations in my feet."

The feet are feelers, for they can feel pleasure as well as pain. Jesus felt both in His feet, but

the focus of attention is usually on the pain His had to endure. One of the most famous references to the feet of Jesus in all of literature is that of Shakespeare in Henry IV.

In those holy fields Over whose acres walked those blessed feet Which, fourteen hundred years ago Were nail'ed For our advantage on the bitter cross.

It was quite a surprise to me to find that there are no references in the crucifixion accounts to the nailing of Christ's feet to the cross. We only have the reference to the nail prints in His feet in John 20:25. We have heard of it so often, however, that we think it must be there in the accounts of the cross, but it is not. We know His feet were nailed to the cross because that is what crucifixion was, but there is no dwelling on this agonizing fact in the Gospels. Jesus implies that His feet were clear evidence of His resurrected body, however, in Luke 24:39 where He says to the startled and doubting disciples, "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself." In verse 40 it says that He showed them His hands and feet. His nailed scared hands and feet were proof that it was the crucified Christ who was the risen Christ. This has led to His feet becoming symbols of His suffering. Bishop Bradlay of India wrote,

Christ, if ever my footsteps should falter, And I be prepared for retreat, If desert or thorn caused lamenting Lord, show me Thy feet; Thy bleeding feet, Thy nail-scared feet, My Jesus, show me Thy feet.

It was by means of His nail-pierced hands and feet that Jesus shed His blood which atoned for our sins. When Jesus came into the world, He came with the intention of doing more than just getting His feet wet in the human experience. He came to be tempted in all points like us, and to suffer to the fullest the infirmities of man, even to the point of death. He leaped into life with both feet, and He entered death the same way. He could have escaped anytime, but He was determined to follow God's plan all the way until they carried Him out feet first. We seldom think of it, but the feet of Christ were instruments of suffering by which we are saved, and by which Jesus won the victory which made him sovereign over all.

We need to focus on the suffering feet of our Savior as objects of beauty. Feet are not thought of as objects of beauty in our culture. They are hidden and lowly, and out of sight is out of mind usually. Our culture rejects bare feet, and it sees them as repulsive and dangerous, and so one of the most common signs we see is, no bare feet allowed. Or we see such signs as no shoes, no shirt, no service. In other words, we will not respect anyone with exposed feet. The modern poetess Eileen

Logeer speculates as to how Jesus would be accepted in our culture today.

No, no, young man, you can't come in -Your feet all mud like that. Look how your footprints spoil the steps! Don't you ever take a bath? Not mud? You say its blood? It's wounds in both your feet? Then all the worse! Our carpet's new And blood stains just won't vacuum

out. A hospital's the place for you, Most certainly not a church. We can't admit disgusting things -It wouldn't honor God. We aim for things that please Him most. So, no bare feet allowed.

There was no beauty in Jesus when He bore our sins according to the prophet. From head to foot He was bruised and bloody, and there was nothing of His body that any appeal. It is only as we consider that He bore all this shame and suffering for us that we see any beauty. His hands and feet were nailed to the cross because He bore in His own body our sins on that tree. Because He did we will have bodies forever with feet that will walk all over God's heaven. Next we look at His feet as

III. INSTRUMENTS OF SERVICE.

The first thing we note in our text is that instruments of service need service. The feet in that day were the primary means of transportation, and all means of transportation need to be serviced. The feet of Jesus were often tired and dusty as He was constantly going about doing good and meeting the needs of others. Jesus was not like the young lady that Benett Cerf wrote about.

There was a young lady of Crete Who was so exceedingly neat. When she got out of bed She stood on her head To make sure of not soiling her feet.

Jesus soiled His feet daily in traveling the dusty roads to serve. Any good host knew that you had to focus on the feet to be hospitable. It made a traveling guest feel refreshed and comfortable to have his feet cleansed. Simon knew this, but he neglected this hospitable touch because he did not love Jesus.

The former prostitute, however, saw the feet of Jesus as objects of love. Serving the needs of His feet was one way she could say, thank you for the gift of new life. You cleansed me from sin, and the least I can do is cleanse and refresh your feet. How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news is the famous Jewish saying from Isaiah. If this be so, then Jesus had the most beautiful

feet that ever walked his earth, for He brought the greatest news men have ever received. This is how this woman felt, and she was glad Simon had neglected his feet, for it gave her a chance to wash the feet of Him who washed her soul and made it white as snow. To her it was no lowly duty, as Simon would see it, but it was the highest privilege. Tennyson wrote,

All subtle thought, all curious fears, Borne down by gladness so complete, She bows, she bathes the Savior's feet With costly spikenard and with tears.

There is no hint that the woman spoke a single word. Simon on the other hand was a talker, and he had plenty to say. This woman shows by her actions that love is not something you say

only, but love is something you do. Mary of Bethany expressed her love for Jesus on another occasion by doing something similar. The poet put it

Love is the true economist, She breaks the box and gives her all; Yet not one precious drop is miss'd, Since on His head and feet they fall.

Not many feet in history have ever been washing in the mixture of perfume and tears. It is a unique solution nobody has figured out how to market because so few have such a deep love as did this weeping woman. Spurgeon says, "She wept because she had sinned so much, and then wept because He had forgiven her so freely. Love and grief in equal measure made up these precious tears." She had no idea what was ahead for these feet she so much loved. She only knew they had brought His love and cleansing power to her. She could not dream that they would one day be nailed to a cross.

She knew not of the bitter way Those sacred feet had yet to tread, Nor how the nails would pierce one day Where now her costly tears were shed.

It is a pleasure to have the feet service by being cleansed and massaged. It is so relaxing and refreshing, but it can be a pain to use the feet in the service of others. Service can be costly, and the feet often bear that cost. Many, after a day of service, have said, "my feet are killing me," or "Oh my aching feet." The feet bear the heaviest load, for they get all the rest of the body to the place where service is needed. The hands can do little labor until the feet get them to where the need is for their labor. "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel," was our Lord's command, but it cannot be fulfilled without the feet. That is why the feet of those who bring good news are so beautiful. They are beautiful because they get the tongue to the place where the beautiful message of salvation can be delivered.

Except for His brief ride on the colt on Palm Sunday Jesus went everywhere on foot to teach, preach, and heal. People loved the feet of Jesus, for they were ever active in carrying Him where He could meet the needs of others. His feet were the most precious instruments of service.

The patient Christ long ago O'er old Judea's rugged hills, With willing feet went to and fro To find and comfort human ills.

Jesus was not only the Living Word, He was the walking Word, for He was constantly on the move in service. There are over 100 references to His walking in the Gospels. His feet were swift to carry Him about in service, and that is why we have the popular concept of the footprints of Jesus.

Judean hills are holy; Judean fields are fair, For one can find the footprints Of Jesus everywhere. Beautiful feet are they that go Swiftly to lighten another's woe. Author

unknown

This focus on the feet of Jesus is not a matter of trivial pursuit in anatomy. You cannot know Jesus adequately without a focus on His feet, and the role of the feet in His plan. Two of the major commands of Christ were, "Come follow me," and, "Go into all the world." Both of these demand the obedience of the feet. Soldiers of the cross are foot soldiers, and only by means of the feet can we be and do what our Lord expects. The world does not look at your feet. They never sponsor a beautiful feet contest. They look for beautiful hair, eyes, face, hands, and legs, but they pay no attention to the feet. God, however, does have a focus on our feet. Are they swift to do folly, or are they beautiful because they are swift to obey and do His will?

Jesus used his feet for the glory of God, and the good of man. He not only had love expressed to Him by means of His feet, but He expressed His love for His disciples by washing their feet. By this act of love He made it clear that the servant is the greatest. D. L. Moody had a pastor's conference at Moody Bible Institute, and he came upon some guest rooms where the pastors from Europe had put their shoes outside the door. This was the custom of their land. It was expected that a servant would clean and polish them for the next day. Moody spotted some students and asked them to polish the shoes. They protested that they came to school to study for the ministry, and not to be cleaning shoes. So Moody did it himself. He followed His Lord on the focus of feet. He recognized that Jesus did not come to be ministered to, but to minister and give His life a ransom for many. He was to be a saving servant who would focus on feet, and we never fully understand the love of Jesus until we too are willing to be a servant and focus on feet.

13. A MOUNTAIN TOP EXPERIENCE Based on Luke 9:28-36

It is not likely that anyone here would know that August 6th was the day on which the first human being was electrocuted in Auburn, New York, or that it was the day on which the first American woman swam the English Channel, or the day on which the first printed copies of the Constitution of the United States were made, or the day on which the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. But what is strange is that it is also unlikely that anyone here would know that August 6th is the day on which millions of people celebrate the Transfiguration. In the East this day is equal to Christmas and Pentecost and other great days, with only Easter above it. In the West this great experience in the life of Christ is neglected, and in many churches it is ignored all together. It could very well be that some of you have never heard a sermon on the Transfiguration of Christ.

One reason may be because of the mystery of the experience. It is the most unique and other worldly event in the whole of our Lord's earthly life. The disciples were so confounded by the sight they saw that they didn't know what to say. Peter tried, but he only said something foolish. We know that this event is not recorded in three Gospels for no reason, but that like all

else it is meant for our instruction, illumination, and inspiration. We do not have to dive to the depths of this great pool of mystery to find treasure, for there are many precious pearls laying even on the shore, and lovely lessons like lilies floating on the surface. In other words, all we have to do to appreciate this experience of Christ is to open our eyes, and with the help of our imagination put ourselves in the proper setting. The one thing that is clear is that Jesus is the central figure in the drama of 7 personalities. We want to look at three scenes showing Christ's relationship to the other persons involved. First

I. JESUS IN RELATION TO THE FATHER. vv. 28-29.

Jesus was a man of continuous mountain top experiences, for as the Son of Man He knew that the source of His strength came through communion with the Father. Jesus spent a good deal of His time praying in the mountains. Before He chose the 12 He spent the night on the mountain in prayer, and right up to His capture in Gethsemane we find Jesus in communion with the Father. On this occasion Jesus felt a need for communion. The previous days had been tense, for after Peter made his great confusion that Jesus was the Christ the Son of the Living God, Jesus began to make it clear that He was going to the cross to die.

Peter wanted nothing to do with such talk as that and he said, "Not so Lord." Jesus had to rebuke him and say, "Get thee behind me Satan." Jesus told them to take up the cross and follow Him, and that those who save their lives would lose them. Many feel that the weak of silence which is skipped over here were days of tenseness and loss of affection between Jesus and His disciples because of these hard saying. Jesus, therefore, felt the need to go apart from his life of activity into the mountain to pray, and so with His inner circle He climbed the slopes of Mt. Herman, and while the 3 disciples slept Jesus communed with the Father. Luke tells us that it was while He prayed that He was transfigured. We learn that mountain top experiences can only come to those who meet God on the mount.

Jesus had no sin to confess or forgiveness to seek, but He felt the need to draw apart from the rest of the world. How much more do we who are so earth bound need to find that solitude, "Where we are most alone?" How much more do we need to breathe that mountain air of communion with God to keep our face shining? Moses came down from the mountain with his face all aglow because he had been with God. The face of Jesus shown like the sun as He communed with God. The spiritual oxygen needed to keep the flame of joy burning brightly in our hearts and on our faces can only be found on the mount of communion.

Here may the faithful find their life, It's bitter sorrows and its strife, It's hours of dull,
unchanging gray Shot with the glories of the day. Author unknown

If we smother our flame in the damp and darkened dungeon of worldliness, we ought not to be surprised if we lose the brightness of our joy. Paul said not to be conformed to the world, but be transfigured by the renewing of your mind. He uses the same word as Luke uses for the

transfiguration of Jesus. When the world is at its worst Christians must be at their best, and this can only be possible by a regular communion with God.

We do not need to go to a literal mountain, but separation is essential. It is not the altitude but the attitude that counts. It is not the distance we go but the devotion we show that makes the difference in the way we glow. Devotion and attitude can be aided greatly by nature. It is true we can worship God while we shave and hang out the wash, and Jesus might have as easily prayed in the valley, but the mountain gives a view of God's creation that inspires and fans the spark of devotion into flame. Look at the stars in the heavens, and let your eye take in the grandeur of God's handiwork. Consider the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, and the beauty of the natural forest, and these will be great aids in the renewal of our minds that brings transfiguration.

As Jesus prayed, Mark says His face did shine as the sun, and Luke says that His raiment became white and dazzling. Weatherhead tells of a boy who drew a picture of Jesus stilling the storm. He had high waves, black clouds, and frightened men in the boat. The teacher said, "But you didn't draw Jesus." He said, "No, I couldn't make Him beautiful enough." How much more difficult would it be to describe His beauty here. What more can human language say than that He was as dazzling as the sun? Some things just cannot be explained, but have to be experienced. Robert Browning has Paul say of his experience with Christ:

Oh, could I tell you, surely you would believe it. Oh, could I show what I myself have seen. How can I tell, and how can you receive it, How till He bringeth you where I myself have been?

Even with all that Paul had experienced he saw through a glass darkly. We will never be able to conceive of the glory of Christ that broke through the veil of His humanity and showed Him to be deity, until we too shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of the Father. Meanwhile we can reflect the glory of Christ as we relate to Him through communion. Adoniram Judson, the famous missionary, reflected that which he stored up in communion. Once when he was home on furlough he walked down the street in a New England town. A boy saw his glowing face and never forgot it. When he grew up he became a spiritual leader and wrote an article called what a boy saw in the face of Adoniram Judson. The glory of the Christian life is not found in clothes or cosmetics, but in communion with God. It was true for Jesus, and it is true for us.

Paul wrote, "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the spirit of the Lord." A growing Christian will become a glowing Christian who eventually lets the light of Christ get through, and the beauty of

Jesus will be seen in them. Newman tells the story of the process by which true saints are to reveal the glory of Christ.

I saw thee once, and naught discern'd For stranger to admire; A serious aspect, but it burn'd
With no unearthly fire.

Again I saw, and I confess'd Thy speech was rare and high; And yet it vex'd my burden'd breast,
And scared I knew not why.

I saw once more, and awestruck gazed On face, and form, and air; God's living glory round thee
blazed A Saint-a Saint was there!

When we commune with the Father as Jesus did, we will have some of that glow of transfiguration which He had because of His relation to the Father. Next we see

II. JESUS IN RELATION TO MOSES AND ELIJAH. vv. 30-31

The presence of Moses and Elijah on the mountain with Jesus makes this one of the most fascinating events in the Bible. The presence of any two men who were 1500 and 900 years old would be amazing, but the fact that they were two of the greatest men of the Old Testament makes it even more so. Because of this scene we can look into the cave of immortality and see that it is not so dark as it was before this event. We were not sure what the Old Testament saints were doing all this time as history rolled on, but now we see that they have not been sleeping. They have been servants of God all along. God is the God of the living. He does not draw men to him and then let them lie in sleep as some teach, but takes them to Himself for higher service and fellowship.

Elijah, of course, never did die physically, but his body must have been changed when he was taken up in the chariot to heaven. He could now appear on earth in the service of Christ. He and Moses were not so changed, however, that they could not be recognized for who they were. In heaven we will maintain our identification so that all who knew us in time will know us in eternity. They are not angels but men, and we can be assured that we will all maintain our identity for ever.

Both of these men had great mountain top experiences in their lifetime. Moses received the law from God on the mountain and Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal on the mountain by the power of prayer. Both of them suffered great discouragement. Moses almost gave up because of the stubbornness of the people, and Elijah got so discouraged that he wanted to die. Jesus needed these two who knew how hard it was to live in obedience to God's plan. Jesus was alone and could not communicate with his disciples. They would not hear of him going to the cross and dying. He had no one who understood what he was facing. Now on this mountain he has two who do understand.

In v. 31 Luke tells us they talked about what he was going to endure in Jerusalem. The cross was

the theme of their conversation. The word is exodus in the Greek. They were talking of His exodus which was what he did on the cross. Here is Moses the leader of the people of God in the first exodus talking and giving comfort to Jesus before the last exodus, in which Jesus would lead all the captives of hell to freedom by means of the Red Sea of his own blood. The Old Testament saints were not fully saved until the atonement of Christ was accomplished and so it makes sense these two great representatives were there to encourage Jesus as he paid the price for the sins of all mankind. Next consider

II. JESUS IN RELATION TO PETER, JAMES AND JOHN. vv. 32-36

Why these three were granted a glimpse of His glory we do not know. It was probably to give them greater assurance as they were to be the key leaders of the early church. There were dark days ahead and they needed all the assurance they could get. Someone said, "These rough uncultured natures were like precious marble not yet polished, but from which the great Master would bring forth a monument to His praise."

They just about missed the whole experience, however, because of their lack of expectation. When we go aside to be quiet before God and do not expect anything we will not be disappointed. We will get just what we expected. We need to come to God with high expectation. Our motto should be that of William Carey, "Attempt great things for God-expect great things from God." Many commentators feel that they woke up just in time to see Moses and Elijah departing. That is why Peter urged the idea of building three tabernacles. The idea being that he was saying don't be in a rush but stay and talk awhile. It was a marvelous experience they almost missed and they wanted more.

Simple Simon has done it again. James and John remain quiet before the mystery and majesty they beheld, but Peter has no neutral in his transmission, and so he rushes forward with his brilliant suggestion about building tabernacles. Both Mark and Luke tell us that he did not know what he was saying. He was just being his impulsive self, but he was honest enough to admit it for we know that Mark got this story from Peter. He confessed he did a foolish thing. Jesus chose Peter because he was willing to act rather than do nothing. Henry Van Dyke said, "I would rather have a man who sometimes caught fire at the wrong time, than one so damp and flabby that you could never get a spark of enthusiasm out of him." Jesus felt the same about Peter.

God gave His answer to what He thought of Peter's idea. A cloud came over them and God said, "This is my beloved Son, hear ye Him." They fell on their faces and when they looked up they saw Jesus only. In other words, do not idolize Moses and Elijah, for Jesus is all you need. Jesus alone; Jesus only, Jesus absolutely is to be the center of your attention. Turn your eyes upon Jesus and do not have saints that you venerate, for they are all His servants. They can be listened to, honored, and appreciated, but do not build any tabernacles for them, for Jesus alone is to be worshiped. Ruskin said, "The greatest thing a human soul ever does is this world

is to see something." The message of the transfiguration is that the greatest thing you can ever do is to see someone, and that someone is Jesus. When we see who Jesus is and are committed to Him, then we have the greatest and highest mountain top experience.

14. DEFECTIVE DISCIPLES Based on Luke 9:46-50

It is not without good reason that many people say they never argue about politics or religion. The ignorance and intolerance of men in relation to these subjects is such that they almost always lead to contention and anger rather than helpfulness and understanding. The average person, who does not delight in verbal wrangling, and who does not enjoy seeing what he feels to be precious dragged through the mud of controversy, feels that the best thing to do is just be quiet. The ignorance with which men attack brothers in Christ is almost unbelievable, and if we did not have examples of the same foolishness in the Bible we could easily be led to doubt their salvation. Some have not only admitted their ignorance, but have bragged about it. One such man said to John Wesley, "I thank God for my ignorance." Wesley simply responded that he certainly had much to be thankful for.

Contention has characterized Christianity from its conception. This may sound like an awful thing to say about those who claim to follow the Prince of Peace, but it needs to be said and understood, for the Bible both portrays it and predicts it. Practically every one of the Apostles, including Paul, is pictured as being wrong in an argument at some point. The 3 best known are specifically mentioned as being out of God's will in their attitudes toward others. Peter, Paul and John were all wrong at some point. Peter was wrong in his attitude toward Gentiles, and God had to rebuke him and teach him that Gentiles were not unclean, but equal with Jews in His plan of salvation. Paul had to rebuke Peter for his narrowness.

Paul in turn was in a controversy with Barnabas over John Mark, who was the author of the Gospel of Mark. Paul did not think he was a fit person to travel with them on a missionary journey, but Barnabas was willing to give him another chance even though he failed on the first try. Paul did not agree and would not give in, and so they split up and Barnabas took Mark with him. Mark proved himself to be a loyal servant of Christ, and later Paul received him as his fellow servant in the Lord. Paul was wrong, and if he had gotten his way we may never have had the Gospel of Mark. John was wrong on several occasions. He was one of the quick tempered sons of thunder who was ready to call down fire from heaven to destroy those who did not respond as he thought they should. He is the one in our text who hindered a man from doing good because he was not following with them.

The disciples had defects, and the Bible does not attempt to hide them, but openly reveals them that we might recognize the dangers of pride, ignorance and selfish ambition. They are real for all of us, even as children and saints of God. Their defects are recorded that we might learn how to more quickly arrive at the goal of Christ-likeness by avoiding their mistakes. To learn the hard way by going through the same experiences, causing the same problems, and

needing the same rebukes, rather than heeding the Word of God is one of the Christians greatest sins. We are going to examine the defects of the disciples, and not that we might gloat at their weaknesses, but that we might avoid them and be less defective in our discipleship. Our text indicates two reasons why they were defective disciples.

I. DEFECTIVE BECAUSE OF IGNORANCE. v. 46

Here was a group of men who were going to be used of God to change the course of history. Three of them had just seen the deity of Christ displayed in his transfiguration, and yet they are

arguing like a group of immature boys over who has the strongest father. They were debating as to who of them was going to be the greatest. There was certainly no lack of pride among them, for each apparently felt he had some good claim to be the greatest among them. It is difficult for the Holy Spirit to lead men to higher ground when they are already convinced that they are the king of the mountain. The whole thing could have been avoided if they had not been so ignorant about what true greatness is in the sight of God. Their ignorance on this, and on the plan of Christ led them into this foolish dispute.

Jesus was heading for the cross, and here they are debating about who will wear the crown. They expected Jesus to set up an earthly kingdom and make them the rulers of the world. Not everyone, of course, could be equal, and so there was a power struggle among them as each tried to maneuver his way into the seat of the highest office. On one occasion the mother of James and John came to Jesus and requested that her two sons be seated on His right and left hand. All of this business of gaining power was based on a false concept of the kingdom of Christ. His kingdom was not going to be of this world, and so all of their arguing was vain from the start. They were debating over a matter that was non-existent, and it had no part in the realm of reality. It was all a matter of their imagination and misunderstanding, and yet they spent their time debating it. Christians often spend their time debating issues that have no relevance to the kingdom of Christ.

Nothing strikes me as being more foolish than when believers will waste their time and energy in controversy over matters of which they have little to no knowledge. Often they have strong convictions about things that are mere opinions and speculation. One exhorter announced his outline to the congregation and said, "My beloved hearers, I shall in the first place speak to you of things you know; second of what I know and you do not know; third, of things that neither of us know." He at least had a balance, but there are some who specialize in that which no one knows, and they pretend to fill us in where God has chosen to be silent.

If the disciples had listened to Christ and weighed his words carefully instead of blindly following their own preconceived opinions about the kingdom, they never would have gotten into such a foolish dispute. Likewise for us today, if we give heed to Christ and not the

speculations of men we will avoid foolish controversy. There are too many things God has made crystal clear for us to be wasting time in controversy over petty and obscure issues. The best defense against all error and fruitless speculation is to know the truth. Learn what is clearly taught and let others who have time to waste fight about fantasies. John Wesley urged this upon believers: "If you desire to be extensively useful, do not spend your time and strength in contending for or against such things, as are of a disputable nature, but in testifying against open and notorious vice, and in prompting real spiritual holiness. Let us keep to this, leaving a thousand disputable points to those who have no better business than to too the ball of controversy to and fro..."

Thousands of believers are split over issues dealing with the return of Christ, even though they all believe in literal, visible and bodily return. They do so because men of God, like the disciples, strive for superiority. There are those who believe that holding their particular system of teaching about the second coming makes them superior to others who have not been so enlightened. They even forbid other views to be discussed. They have already reached the top and are on the highest ground, and so every one else has to be beneath them.

To strive for superiority rather than for truth is to be guilty of willful ignorance, and this is a serious defect in any believer. Jesus was very kind in the way He handled His defective disciples, and we must learn also that you do not help people overcome defects by crushing them with condemning words, but by enlightening them as to their error. Jesus rebukes them by showing them a true concept of greatness. He does so by taking a child and setting him by himself. Tradition says this child was the son of Peter who grew up to become the famous Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch.

Jesus makes this surprising statement in verse 48: "Whoever shall receive this child in my name receives me." What does this have to do the disciples dispute over who was the greatest? They were thinking in terms of power, ability, skill, ambition and places of authority for themselves, but Jesus directs their attention along a totally different channel of thought. He is proclaiming to them God's attitude about what is great, and it has very little similarity to what they have been disputing about. They were not thinking about service to others, but about being served by others. Here is the difference between the secular and spiritual view of greatness. Jesus came to minister and give His life a ransom for others, and not to be ministered to. He came to give, serve, to accept and to save. He became the servant of all, and in so humbling himself He reached the top, for God exalted Him and gave Him a name above every name.

The disciples were on the wrong track, and going the wrong direction by hoping to be great in their concept of greatness. The only way to true greatness is by way of humility and service. Just the receiving of a child in Christ's name is an act that cannot be surpassed in terms of doing

what is truly great, for in so doing one receives both Christ the Son and God the Father.

Jesus is showing them that they are following a line of thinking that is contrary to His. The ambitious man of the world who seeks to be great does not bother with the poor and the unknown lower classes of society. He tries to associate only with the rich and influential. He tries to build up his own image. The world's concept of greatness leads to a division of men into those who count and those who do not. By the use of a child Jesus makes it clear that from God's view there is no such division. Even a child who cannot add in any way to your prestige is of eternal value, and is on a level of equality with any prominent personality. Being great in the eyes of God is open to all men, and not just to the few, for it consists in concern for and service to anyone and everyone, and especially to the acceptance of children. Ministry to children is a road to greatness that anyone can travel. We need to avoid the ignorance of the disciples and not think and act on the basis of the world's concept of greatness.

We ought to have the ambition to be great, and we need to desire to be somebody important. Everybody has a hunger to be recognized, and to feel wanted and significant. Every person wants to be great in some way, and this is a good thing, but like all desires it can be perverted and lead to much evil. In a biography of Mussolini he is seen pacing in his palace bedroom saying, "I am obsessed by one wild desire. It consumes my whole being. I want to a mark on my era with my will. A mark like this...", and with his fingernails he scratched the back of the chair, "like the claw of a lion." He made his mark all right, and the whole world had to bear the scar. This self-centered desire for greatness is just the danger the disciples were falling into before Jesus made it clear that greatness is not in rising above others, but in lifting others.

A child lifted by your love will make you greater than any man who has had to step on others to rise to a place of power. It will make you greater than a greatness attained by popularity, position or possessions. A child is equal in importance before God to any great theologian, scholar or

preacher. Those who are wise enough to see it gladly invests their lives in serving youth. Many, however, never learned the lesson Jesus taught here, and they go on in ignorance as to what true greatness really is. They continue to strive and fight for places of prominence and superiority.

People cannot believe the paradox of Jesus that the way to the top is down. The way to exaltation is humility, and the way to greatness is to be the least, and to be, like Him, the servant of all. The disciples were defective at this point because of ignorance, and this is what led them to their foolish striving. It is possible that many disciples of Christ are still defective because of their ignorance about true greatness. That can never be our excuse, for we have now heard the word of Christ on this matter. We can go on trying to be great by the world's standard, which will lead to futility, but it should be our prayer that we will follow Jesus in

finding our greatness in service and not be a defective disciple.

15. APOSTOLIC INTOLERANCE Based on Luke 9:49-50

It is not intolerant to expose and oppose error. If a newspaper prints an article naming you as a spokesman for the Ku Klux Klan it would not be intolerant for you to write them and tell them of their error. Likewise, if a man preaches that God's Word teaches a man can be saved by works, it is not intolerant to tell him of his error, and that it is by the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ alone that we are saved. It would be the worst of all possible worlds if toleration meant that truth is to give way to error without resistance.

This would lead to sheer indifference in which there would be no distinction between truth and error, and all would be completely relative. Some people are very tolerant just because the truth means nothing to them, and so they have nothing to defend. This can never be true of a believer in Christ, for in Him there is very definite truth and right in contrast to error and wrong. The problem that a believer faces in relation to error is two fold. First of all he is in danger of sinning in his opposition to evil if he uses evil means to do so. The Christian must be intolerant of evil in himself as well as others. He must refuse to employ bad manners and false logic in his fight against evil. Paul said, "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." If we use evil means to overcome evil, we are in the camp of error whatever be our end.

The second danger of a believer in opposition to error is that he tends to think that he has the whole truth, and, therefore, anyone who does not see truth just as he does is in error. This is where the vast majority of sinful intolerance enters into the Christian life. Tolerance does not mean we accept error, but it does mean we accept that there are more aspects of truth than that which we know. Not to admit this is to claim omniscience. William Gladstone defined tolerance in a way that a Christian must understand it. He said, "Tolerance means reverence for all the possibilities of truth; it means the acknowledgment that she dwells in diverse mansions, and wears vestures of many colors, and speaks in strange tongues."

It is interesting that we find the Apostles falling into both of these dangers and becoming intolerant in a non-Christian way. As to the first danger of using evil means to oppose evil, you recall how the sons of thunder wanted evil men to be destroyed immediately, and also how Peter wanted to fight with a sword those who came to capture Jesus. They were all rebuked by Jesus for their willingness to use such force against others. Paul understood that our weapons are not to be carnal but spiritual. If the truth is attacked with bitterness, hate and violent language, we are not to respond with the same evil weapons. The disciples had not yet learned this.

Newman Smith was the author of a widely used book, "Come To Jesus." Later in a

controversy with Robert Hall, the famous Baptist author, he wrote a bitter pamphlet. He did not know what to title it, and so he asked a friend for suggestions. His friend read the fierce pamphlet and said he would call it, "Go To Hell By The Author Of Come To Jesus." The inconsistency made him see how obvious it was that he was not displaying a Christian attitude. Our text is an example of how the Apostles were also being intolerant by limiting truth to their own group, and it is this kind of intolerance we want to examine. We saw how the disciples were defective because of ignorance, and now we want to see how they were

DEFECTIVE BECAUSE OF INTOLERANCE.

John's conscience was apparently bothered by what Jesus had just taught. He had just said that the least is greatest, and it made Him think of a man who was casting out demons that He had stopped because he thought he was not worthy, for he did not follow them. In other words, he was, in their minds, unqualified and unimportant. He was the least. The disciples were under the impression that they had a monopoly on God's power, and so they forbid this man to carry on in his service to others in the name of Christ.

Many commentators agree that John feels a sense of guilt about this incident after what Jesus has said about the greatness of one who receives even a child in His name. The man they had stopped was aiding people in distress in the name of Christ, and now John wonders if they did act too hasty in forbidding him. He brings it out into the open to get an answer. It might never have been answered if Jesus had not made his conscience sensitive by revealing his pride. Pride is what started them arguing in the first place about greatness, and pride was the cause for their hindering a man who was doing good in the name of Christ. Imagine this, of all people to oppose the work of Christ we have the very Apostles themselves.

This has an important lesson for us. Let us never assume that because a man is a Christian that all he stands for or against is the will of God. If pride and a sense of exclusiveness and spiritual privilege could lead the Apostles to go wrong, it is not only likely, but inevitable that the same will be true of all of us. None of us are beyond being intolerant and even bigoted because of pride. There are so many who do not dot their I's and cross their t's as we do, and it is so easy to feel that this is more important than serving Christ. It had to be pride that blinded the disciples, for what other cause could their be for stopping any good work being done in the name of Christ?

There was likely some jealousy mixed with pride also, for the disciples had just failed in being able to cast out a demon in a young boy. Their weakness in contrast to this man's power would cause them to be jealous, and the best defense of the ego is to stop the success of others so that your own failure does not stand out. What would it look like, and what kind of reputation

would we get if some stranger, who does not even follow us, has more power than we do as the

disciples of Jesus? They wanted God to only work through them so they alone would get the credit. There are parallels of this today. Christians want to forbid people to be involved with ministries that are not connected with their denomination. They are often like Job's friends who felt that we are the people, and wisdom will die with us. It could well be that we are guilty of sinful intolerance. No one has a copyright on the name of Christ, and so just because people do not follow us does not mean they do not follow Christ.

Jesus said to John that he should not forbid that man, for he that is not against us is for us. If the man had been opposing the truth then it would not be intolerant to forbid him, for then it would be a valid defense of the truth to do so. Since he was doing what was consistent with what you are doing in casting out demons, you did wrong to forbid him. Van Doren said, "True love approves good, whensoever, and by whomsoever, done." The disciples were defective at this point, for they hindered good just because the man was not a part of their group.

Jesus did not say that that man was saved. He just said that He was not against them. He may have been saved, but the point is, even if he was not, he was not to be stopped from doing good. Jesus taught in Matt. 7:22 that there would be those in the day of judgment who would be rejected even though they had done many mighty works and cast out demons. Jesus will judge them, but meanwhile, even they are not to be opposed if they do good. Jesus is trying to impress on us that we never advance the cause of Christ by hindering the good work of any man. If a group of atheists were doing a good service to people, we would be out of God's will if we tried to stop it. Let all who do not oppose the Gospel do all the good they can, and encourage them to do so, for they can do much for the cause of Christ indirectly, even if they are ultimately lost. Many unsaved people do much good, and we are not to oppose it.

One of the best illustrations of how we ought to be in this area is found in Acts 18. We read there of how Apollos began to preach the Gospel. He had not yet completely understood all that he should about the New Testament. Priscilla and Aquilla did not condemn him for his shortcomings, but they took him aside and expounded to him the way of God more perfectly. This is the only attitude worthy of a Christian. If you see a man serving Christ in any capacity, even though he is doing it with inadequate theology, or an inadequate attitude, do not hinder, but help. Complete his understanding and encourage him.

If more believers in the history of the church had been like Priscilla and Aquilla, there would be far more to be proud of, and far less to be ashamed of in Christian history. Men have repeated the same mistake as the disciples over and over again. They have wasted their powers in fighting with those going in the same direction rather than using their combined forces to oppose evil. The history of the Baptists and Methodists on the early American frontier is filled with rivalry. A young Methodist pastor was called on to conduct the funeral of a Baptist person. He was not sure what to do, and so he wrote to his Bishop for instruction. The Bishop wrote back, "Bury all the Baptists you can." This sounds like a joke, but the fact is there was

serious opposition between these two groups, and they fought in earnest. James H. Addison said in all seriousness that in one area Methodists were gaining strength and now—"The combined powers of the Baptist and the devil will be unavailing towards shaking the fabric thus reared."

In spite of the defects of the disciples being openly rebuked for the benefit for all succeeding

generations, and in spite of Paul's admission that even he only saw in part, men have had the audacity and the pride to demand that all who do not follow them are wrong and should be stopped. J. C. Ryle wrote, "Thousands, in every period of church history have spent their lives in copying John's mistake. They have labored to stop every man who will not work for Christ in their way, from working for Christ at all. They have imagined, in their petty self-conceit, that no man can be a soldier of Christ, unless he wears their uniform, and fights in their regiment."

In the light of both the Bible and church history we are forced to admit that all of us are in danger of displaying the same defect of intolerance as did the disciples. May God grant us the wisdom to see this danger and refuse to let it guide our lives and attitudes. Let us listen to our Lord and follow His spirit and avoid all the foolishness we see in Apostolic Intolerance.

16 MAKE KINDNESS THRIVE Based on Luke 10:25:37

Back in 1991 Glamor Magazine had an editorial about a woman who drove up to the toll booth of the Bay Bridge in San Francisco and said, "I'm paying for myself and for the 6 cars behind me." One after another the next 6 drivers came up to the booth with dollars in hand only to be told, "Some lady up ahead already paid your fare. Have a nice day." This random act of kindness was inspired by an index card the woman saw on a friend's refrigerator. It said, "Practice random acts of kindness and senseless beauty." The friend saw the saying spray painted on a warehouse wall. Her husband liked it so much he put it on the blackboard of his 7th grade class. One of the students was the daughter of a columnist. She took it home to him, and he put it in his column in the paper.

Soon, random acts of kindness were being done by people all over the country. Bumper stickers were made, and people were putting the idea on letters and business cards. Articles came out in Reader's Digest, Ladies Home Journal, Red Book, and People's Weekly. The idea was so simple: anything you think there should be more of in this world-do it randomly. It is a great idea that was a fad for the world, but it is to be a way of life for the Christian. It is not a motto merely, for kindness is to be a basic ingredient of who we are, and not just a temporary program.

Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan because the religious scholar He was talking to

represented the religious establishment who thought that all that really matters is having the right beliefs. Jesus used a Samaritan, who had some wrong beliefs, to show him, and all religious people, that right beliefs without practical behavior do not make you pleasing to God or to anyone else.

The priest and the Levite were professionals who had all the right answers to theological questions, but they were not kind to the man in need, and, therefore, their being right was of no practical value. Better is one who may have some wrong ideas of the truth, but who is kind, for he is more likely to be a tool of God in the world. Jesus is dealing with people who think that if the

head has it all together, they are really in the favor of God. Jesus is saying by this story that the head is not enough if the heart is not right. Knowing truth is good, but doing truth is a must to make truth practical and relevant to real life. What good is it to know the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself if you do not do it? Better use the student who does not know, and misses that question on the test, but who does in fact show love to his neighbor.

I must confess that I am part of the old school that was trained to believe that if you teach the Bible and help Christians grow in their understanding of its truth, they will respond by reaching out to touch the world around them. Now I know this is not how it works at all. Christians get so involved in learning the truth of the Bible that they forsake the world, and do less and less to show the love of God to the world. Christians get just like the Jews got that Jesus is dealing with. They became fanatical for studying the laws of God, and were experts in the law, but they lost their compassion for people. All they cared about was legal technicalities. They did not care that people were hurting and needed help. They criticized Jesus for every loving act of kindness He did because He broke one of their laws in doing so. They were very unkind, and Jesus fought this terrible state of mind. To think that God cares more about rules and regulations than about people is the greatest heresy of the religious leaders of Judaism.

Jesus made them very angry by using Gentiles and Samaritans as heroes, for this was heresy to them to even suggest these kinds of people could be more favorable to God than they were. Jesus used them, however, to teach that what was really heresy was to think that having a good grasp of the law was all that mattered, even if you did not practice the spirit of it. Judaism failed God because it ceased to be kind. Jesus said the Pharisees were to be listened to, for they had a correct understanding of the law. They were valid teachers of what God wanted men to hear and understand. They were condemned, however, because they did not practice it. They were cruel to widows, and they laid burdens on everyone making the law of God a pain to man rather than a pleasure. Jesus said His burden was light, for He came to make the law a pleasure, and to free man from legalism. He came to give life and life abundant, and that is found by being agents of kindness. This is how Christians become the light of the world.

Kindness, like cruelty, reproduces itself. An experiment in the college library in Madison,

Wisconsin demonstrated this. A stranger was sent into the library and gave out delicious cookies to 26 of the students studying there. A little later another stranger came and asked if they would become helpers in an experiment the school was conducting. They responded with a willingness to do it, but those who did not receive cookies were not willing. Kindness produced kindness.

College women were interviewed, and then as they walked away about 50 yards a male college student would say that he lost his wallet, and could they give him money for a bus ticket. When the interviewer was kind and considerate 60% of those women gave the male student the money. When the interviewer was not warm at all, and gave no approval for the answers he received, only 30% offered the needy young man assistance. Many such experiments revealed the obvious. If you make people feel good by being kind to them, they are more likely to be kind to others. If you are negative, thoughtless, or indifferent to another's need, you start a chain reaction that will produce more of this cold spirit, for they will pass it on. Every act we do is like a rock thrown into the pond of life. It creates ripples of either kindness or coldness. Everyday we altar the sum total of the world's kindness or cruelty by how we deal with people.

A Christian is to be one who is daily creating chain reactions of kindness. Lucy Larcom said, "If the world seems cold to you, kindle fires to warm it." That was the practical goal Jesus was aiming at with this story of the Good Samaritan. Go and do likewise He said to the Jewish lawyer who thought he could be all he needed to be by his intellect alone. Not so said Jesus. The fallen world has too many needs to be met by the mind alone. You have got to get your body involved in action to make the kind of difference God expects from you. If you read the life of Jesus, you will observe that He was constantly interrupted by people with a need. Sometimes He didn't have time to eat because the needs were so numerous. He would be going someplace and be interrupted by someone else's need. It was not always convenient. That is the problem all of us struggle with-the inconvenience of being kind. So often an act of kindness is going to throw you off your schedule.

Look at the Good Samaritan. He was on his way to somewhere, and now he is confronted with a situation that will demand considerable time. He has to minister to the physical needs of this injured man. Then he has to get him to the inn, and there negotiate a plan for his care. Who knows what he had to give up in his own plans to help this man? In our day, stopping to help a stranger in trouble could mean you would miss a ball game, or your favorite TV program. The point is, acts of kindness often cost you the loss of something in your own life. Mary Webb said, "If you stop to be kind, you must swerve often from your path."

The priest and the Levite refused to pay the price of being kind at an inconvenient time. They were not just out there for exercise, or a nice Sunday walk. They had things to do and places to be. They were religious leaders, and many suspect that they had obligations to

perform at the temple in Jerusalem. To stop and help this man would cost them a price they were not willing to pay. It was the wrong time for them to be loving. It was the wrong place for them to be loving. They had to get back to town where their love could be seen as they prayed or gave alms, or some other religious function. To stop and help this stranger seemed irrelevant to their goals, and they would not let his need interfere with theirs.

The Good Samaritan, on the other hand, had to sacrifice his plans, and possibly miss an appointment that was a great business opportunity. He had to use his own supplies of oil and wine to help heal the man. He had to pay for the man's room in the inn, for he had been robbed and was completely broke. He then went beyond the call of kindness and offered to pay for any further cost of the man's care when he returned. Up to this point I could conceive of myself being the Good Samaritan. The cost would not be enormous, but now he has taken on the role of the man's medical insurance. He is committing himself to pay for all expenses needed to nurse this man back to health. One would have to be very wealthy in our day to make this kind of commitment. I don't think Jesus is trying to tell us we should mortgage our home and go into major debt to care for strangers. The point he is making is, there is a cost to kindness.

If you are going to obey the second great commandment of loving your neighbor as yourself, it will cost you something. It costs to love yourself. It takes time and money and energy to be kind to yourself, and to make life easier by balancing out its burdens with pleasure. Obedience to God has economic implications everywhere you turn. Love and money are linked in very strong ways. For all we know the priest and the Levite prayed for the injured man, and vowed to add him to the prayer list as soon as they got back to the temple. But they never spent a dime to help the man survive. They were examples of what James refers to as a dead faith. Faith without works is dead. If a brother or sister comes and is without food and clothing, and you say, "Go, be warmed and filled," but you do not add some cash to your kind words, your verbal kindness is really a form of cruelty.

God could not love without paying a cost, and Jesus could not love without paying the ultimate cost, and we cannot love without cost. Kindness that never costs is a sham. The reason we have a benevolence fund is because we know there are many situations where you cannot really care without cash. Recently I was able to take groceries to two families who had been eating poorly for weeks. One family was eating out of cans only, and the other was living on the bread they got from our bread ministry. As a church we were able to give them the joy and pleasure of some meat and nourishing food. There was no way to do this without cash.

This is an often overlooked aspect of this story of the Good Samaritan. He did all he could do for the man, and he had to get on with his own life and business, but he paid others to care for the man. Here you have institutional kindness. The inn keeper was paid to continue to minister

to the man. The world is filled with organizations and institutions that do for people what we cannot do. They need cash to do it, however. The Good Samaritan gave so others could carry out his desire to be kind. By our giving to the benevolence fund we help kindness thrive, and by our giving to countless other groups we make kindness thrive. It is not just what we do, but who we support that adds to the kindness of the world. We can't help people in the many complex ways they need help, and so we need to support those who specialize in helping others in specific areas. That is what the Good Samaritan did.

Listen to this contemporary version of the parable: "A certain woman driving alone from Washington to Richmond, ran over a spike which punctured her tire and left her stranded. In distress, she raised the hood of her car and tied a scarf to the door handle; then she locked the doors and sat in the car praying for the Lord to send help.

By chance there came a limousine with a bumper sticker that read, "Smile, God Loves You." When the occupants saw the stranded woman, they passed by in the far lane without even smiling.

Also, there came a sports car with a CB radio and a bumper sticker saying, "Honk If You Love Jesus." Driver passed by in the far lane without even honking, or using his CB to tell the highway patrol about the woman's dilemma.

A certain workman, when he saw the raised hood and scarf, came to the spot where the woman was, with compassion. He stopped his old pickup, which had no bumper stickers, crossed the four-lane highway and offered to change the tire.

The woman tried to pay the workman, but he refused the money saying, "If my wife were stranded on the highway, I'd want some good Samaritan to stop and help her out." And again he crossed the four-lane highway, got into his bumper-stickerless truck, smiled and honked at her, and went on his way to work. Which now of these three was a neighbor unto her that had a flat?

This modern version of the Good Samaritan illustrates that a great deal of the Christian faith is like that of Judaism which Jesus condemned. It is superficial sloganism. Faith without works is dead; love without deeds is dead, and words without actions are dead. No amount of religious knowledge has any practical value if it does not make you a kinder person in the way you respond

to all human need.

The big mistake Christians make is thinking they only need to be ready to be a Good Samaritan when they come across a person stranded and facing a major crisis. The fact is, we show our love for God and neighbor most often in the acts of kindness we can show everyday. I know from recent experiences how uplifting and healing small acts of kindness can be.

Wordsworth wrote, "The best portion of a good man's life is his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love. Every happy home or church is made loving by little acts and words of kindness."

Amy Raabe wrote,

Scatter seeds of kindness, Everywhere you go. Scatter bit of courtesy-Watch them grow and grow. Gather buds of friendship-Keep them till full-blown, You will find more happiness-Than you have ever known. Gather every bit of love-All that you can find; With it bind the broken hearts-For love heals all mankind.

You can only be a blessing to God and all mankind by being kind.

17. THE STRUGGLE WITH STRESS LUKE 10:38-42

Gipsy Smith was one of the great evangelists in England in the last half of the 19th century. He had the largest congregation in England outside of London. They met in a building that once housed the Imperial Circus. One Sunday night the pre-service prayer group was meeting in a side room used by Circus people as a dressing room. Three hundred people were there singing and praying. All of the sudden the floor collapsed sending them sprawling into the stables below. 75 people were injured with broken arms, legs, and a few skulls were fractured. All were bruised, but not a life was lost.

The people gathering in the large auditorium heard the loud crash and were terrified, but there was no panic. Doctors were sent for, and the injured were taken home in cabs. Gipsy Smith got himself out of the debris, and rushed back up to the platform to explain the accident, and assure people that all possible help was being rendered to the injured. He begged them to keep calm. Some urged him to cancel the service, for though he had no injuries his nerves were in a state of shock.

He was not alone. When he asked for the lights to be turned up, the nervous caretaker turned them out, and there was a scene of fear and confusion. A Mr. Brown saved the situation by starting to sing the hymn, Jesus, Lover Of My Soul. The people calmed down and joined him in the hymn. The lights came on and the service went on, but Gipsy Smith was so weakened by the stress of that evening that he had to be carried home. For months after this he had after effects of fear and trembling, and many years later he wrote, "Even now, occasionally, when I am face to face with a large crowd, something of that feeling of that night comes back to me." He went on to

win thousands of people to Christ in England and America, but he never completely escaped the impact of that traumatic event.

The point is, just as Christians do not escape the storms of nature, so they do not escape the

storms of their human nature: The storms stirred up by stress, tension, and anxiety. The Christian is in the world with a physical body and nervous system just like everyone else. When it is 99 in the shade the Christian body sweats. When it is 30 below the Christian body freezes. When it steps into an open elevator shaft the Christian body falls, and when the Christian feels the friction and grinding gears of a fallen world that will not run smooth, the Christian body and mind records the stress, just like everyone else. Nobody escapes the reality of stress, and that all inclusive statement does cover our Lord as well.

In Matthew 26:38 Jesus said to His disciples in Gethsemane, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." His disciples did not say to Him what some Christians have said to others under great stress, "Christians never need to be under the circumstances, but can always live above them." Such positive thinkers would have a hard time facing the reality that even the Son of God felt the crushing power of stress. He was already feeling a foretaste of being forsaken by God.

Dr. Luke writes of this same scene of super stress in Luke 22:44, "And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." If we saw a Christian brother or sister sweating with anxiety, we would be appalled by their little faith, and would feel compelled to rebuke them, even if their sweat was just normal body moisture and not blood. But here we have such stress that blood vessels are broken, and blood is mixing with the sweat. We are talking about a breaking point here. The human body has limitations as to how much stress it can bear without breaking down, and Jesus was on the edge of that limit.

It makes sense that He would be, for He was facing a trial which makes all other human trials minor in comparison. He was facing the burden of the world sin and hell: That is separation from the Father, and He was innocent. The only man ever to never deserve hell was going to endure it for all those who do deserve it. We can understand that the cross puts stress on Jesus that was beyond anything we can imagine, but it is a mistake to think Jesus did not feel the stress of normal life as well, for he did.

We read in John 11:33, "When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews that had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." The stress of the sad emotions around Him was more than He could bear, and two verses later comes the shortest verse in the Bible: Jesus wept. It is short, but it speaks volumes about the stress of life and what is consistent with Christ-likeness. You have two choices: Either stress is not a sin, or Jesus was a sinner, for He had stress. If you are a Bible believer, you have only one choice, for Jesus was without sin, and yet He had stress, and so stress cannot be sinful.

The Bible is often a puzzle to us because we try to force a Biblical precept into places where it does not fit. For example, we see a Christian friend in sorrow and we feel an obligation to cheer them up with a, "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice." But we forget that the man who said those words, Paul, was also a man who felt deep sorrow, and wept with a

troubled heart

over the problems of believers. We forget he also said, "Weep with those who weep," as well as, "rejoice with those who rejoice."

We have gotten it into our heads that the Christian is not to feel the negative side of life, and have the down emotions that come with the stress of life. We quote our Lord in John 14:1, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me." We take this out of its context of rejoicing in our hope of life forever with Christ in that place where He has gone to prepare for us, and try to apply it to the Christian who is distressed over a problem in this life, and by so doing, we are going against the grain of Scripture.

The Greek word for troubled is the same word used by Jesus back in 12:27 to describe His own emotions. "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say, Father save me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father glorify your name." John uses the same word to describe Jesus in John 13:21. "Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, I tell you the truth one of you is going to betray me." We take the words of Jesus, to not be troubled, which apply to worrying where we will spend eternity, and make it say, don't be troubled about anything, and that is folly, for Jesus was troubled about plenty.

What all this means is that to be troubled and disturbed because you are full of anxiety about your heavenly destination is to be in a state of disbelief in the promises of Christ, and therefore, under the impact of sinful stress. On the other hand, if you are working with a boss who is godless, and who is just looking for an excuse to fire you if you try to have a Christian perspective about life-style, and you have a troubled spirit-this is not sinful anxiety and satanic stress, it is the normal reaction to life's frustrating pressure. It is not good to have such stress, just as it did nothing good for Jesus to have it, but it was not sinful, and is not sinful for us. The point I am establishing is, life is full of stress that is not sinful, and there is no need for a Christian to feel guilty for having it. Jesus did the will of God on earth as it is in heaven, but while on earth He suffered the same stresses and anxieties that trouble us.

This is important to see so that we do not get involved in the foolish effort of trying to persuade ourselves and others that we should never feel the stresses of life. When we do this, we only add more stress to our lives, for we are trying to do something that even our Lord could not do. To pretend we can escape the stress of life is to put ourselves above our Lord. It is sinful to think God expects us to be more than Christ-like. God's goal is that we be Christ-like, and in a fallen world that means being subject to stress that must be manifested in a appropriate manner.

It is nothing but sinful pride that makes a Christian try to pretend they do not feel the normal stresses of life like Jesus did. He got exhausted to the point of collapse. He was heart-broken with sinners who rejected Him, and walked away into darkness. He was deeply disturbed by

those who betrayed Him. He wept over the sadness that sickness and death inflicted on people. A Christian who does not feel these things is like a Pharisee who stands in the temple and says, "I thank God that I am not as other men." It is sinful not to feel the stress of compassion for the fallenness of man.

When Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled," He was not saying that we should cease to be caring persons, and to get our heads so far above the clouds that we can't feel the stress of this world. Jesus came into the world to feel these very things, and to taste to the depth the reality of

human stress. There is nothing Christ-like at all about escape from life's stress. Jesus sought it, and so did Paul. Paul gave his life to reach the Gentiles with the Gospel, and in so doing, he went through every negative emotion and stress we can imagine. Those who preach that the Christian life can be stress free are preaching a message not found in the New Testament.

And that brings us to our text finally. I know this has been a long introduction. It is like building a five room entry way to a four room house, but all of this is important as the foundation for a valid study of stress.

In this home in Bethany we find three of the favorite people in the life of Jesus. They were all single like himself. The setting shatters the idea that only brothers fight and live in conflict. Cain killed Abel, and Joseph brothers sold him into slavery, and the elder brother would not even go in to say hello to his long lost younger prodigal brother. These and other brothers in conflict blind us to the fact that sisters have conflict as well, and they add stress to each others life also.

It makes clear that being single is not a stress free way of living. No family in the New Testament had to endure more tension than did this lovely trio of singles. Lazarus was sick unto death, and the two sisters were frantic, for they knew Jesus loved him, and they knew He could heal him. But they could not reach Jesus and persuade Him to come. You talk about frustration and anxiety and super stress. There is more weeping recorded in that home than any other in the New Testament.

But before this major crisis, we see the minor crisis of our text where it is revealed that they had to deal with the same old stresses of life everyone else has to deal with. The stress of work, cooking, cleaning, and entertaining of guests. The tension of different values and goals within the family. Here are two sisters who are both very loyal in their desire to serve Jesus as their Messiah. But their differences create a scene of stress that we want to examine, and see in it two valuable truths about stress. The first is,

I. SOME STRESS IS INEVITABLE.

If Jesus could not escape it; if His disciples could not escape it; and if His best friends in the

world could not escape it, there is something very unrealistic about any Christian who expects to escape from the stresses of being human. In other words, if you are not a pet rock, you can count on stress, for it is an inevitable part of life. Even Adam, an ideal man in a paradise could not escape stress. It was not good for him to be alone God said. He felt the stress of lacking companionship. There was stress even before sin, and so we see, that stress is inevitable in a world that is anything less than absolutely perfect. This means stress will not end until the new heaven and new earth, which will never pass away, and where all that is less than absolutely perfect will be excluded.

The good news is, if stress was a part of life before sin then there has to be a good side to it. That is, it has a place in God's plan, for God planned for Adam to begin his life with stress. It motivated Adam to seek for a companion, and it motivated him to do some self examination as to his own feelings. Stress made Adam want even more from God than a beautiful, wondrous world. It made him want love, and whatever makes us want the highest is good for us.

Look again at the stress between Martha and Mary. It grew out of love. Martha so loved Jesus she would labor the day away to make sure He had the best hospitality a man could enjoy. She was a fanatic for her strong point which was domestic excellence. That was her gift, and she wanted nothing short of the best for her Master. But Mary loved Him too, and showed it by eager listening to the Master. This is why stress is inevitable. Not everybody has the same gifts, perspective, interests, and time schedule. The only way you can make stress not inevitable is to make all people carbon copies of each other, so they always act as one with no differences. Since God did not choose to create a world of such carbon copy clones, and instead, made it so that even two sisters with the same parents, and the same environment are radically different personalities, stress is inevitable.

But remember, it is not all bad. A world where all are Martha or all are Mary would be a bad world. We need both, and both learning from each other, and both benefitting from each other. The stress produced here by their differences led Jesus to point out the need for balance. We are certainly guilty of extremism if we interpret this passage to mean Jesus expected Martha to become a Mary, or that Martha should cease to be a good cook and care about hospitality. If you read this into the account, then you produce enormous stress. That would mean Jesus is rejecting Martha's gift and personality, and is asking her to stop being herself, but be her sister. Jesus is the author of individuality and not its destroyer. He had no such intention. His point is, neither should Martha expect Mary to conform to her.

Martha had let stress become excessive, and this was making her a problem. Stress was good to a point, for it was making her be the best of who she was. But excessive stress was bringing out the worst in her. Stress is like the oil in your car. It is vital to the engine, but if you overfill it, it becomes a problem. Too much of a good thing is a bad thing. So it is with stress. Dr. Hans Selye is considered the worlds leading authority on stress. He has written many books

and sixteen hundred articles on the subject. He says this, "Stress is the wear and tear of everyday life; it is part of everything we do. We can't avoid it, nor would we want to, because the absence of stress is death. The idea is not to try to avoid stress, but to make sure we live with beneficial stress." He goes on to explain that beneficial stress is basically the proper amount.

Martha was not wrong for being under stress. That is what made her a great hostess, and why Jesus kept coming back to her home for more. He loved it when He could get back there for a home cooked meal. We don't want to knock this lady whose gift gave Jesus a good taste of human pleasure. Her problem came because she allowed stress to build beyond her level of control. She cared so much to make this event perfect that she spoiled it. Here is a paradox. The one most concerned that it be perfect is the one who blots it with imperfection. That is what stress does when it becomes excessive. In proper amounts it is the energy to achieve your goal, but then when it is excessive it becomes the enemy that undermines your goal. Stress is a dangerous necessity, for like electricity, it can bless you or burn you.

Dr. S. I. McMillen was for many years a medical missionary to Africa, and later became the college physician at Houghton college in New York. He tells of how he developed the habit of generating ten dollars worth of adrenaline over a ten cent incident. A college nurse called him and said she was sending a girl with a dog to his office. The dog had a fish hook in its ear and she did not know how to remove it. Dr. McMillen says he would react with lightning like hostility, and his head would begin to pound, and he would develop a terrible headache. Here was a man called

to fulfill the great commission, and he was spending his time taking a fish hook out of a dogs ear. He was angry that people would not cooperate with his goals, but instead interrupt his life with such trivialities. His over-reaction to stress, and the reading into this minor request a major catastrophe was a symptom of his lack of stress management. Stress poorly handled led him to develop a bleeding ulcer, and had he not learned to deal with stress more wisely he could have died, or been incapacitated and out of commission in his service for Christ. Like Martha, he cared so much to be useful that he almost became useless. The more you care the more likely you will be excessive, and allow stress to become a friend turned traitor.

Time magazine did a study of stress and discovered that the highest incidence of stress related sickness came to people who felt little sense of control in their lives. They did not have the power to make things happen like they wanted, and the result was enormous stress. Martha could not control Mary and get her on her band wagon and this led to her excessive stress. The world is filled with Martha types who just cannot get the Mary types of the world to do their thing. The Mary types have their own thing, and the result is frustration and stress.

If you wonder why a lot of prayers are not answered, here is the reason. Notice, Martha came to Jesus and said, "Tell Mary to help me!" It sounds more like a command, but she was

asking Jesus for help. That is what prayer often is, a plea for help. But Jesus did not grant her request, for she was doing what people tend to do under stress: They want to use God to help them get control of the situation. Mary is not cooperating with her agenda, and so she is asking the Lord to take her side and help her get control of Mary. Such prayers are seldom answered because they are a selfish request to strip others of their freedom of choice. If God answered such prayers we would all be somebody else's puppet.

Jesus rebuked Martha for being so worried and upset about many things, and He said that Mary has made a good choice, and I will not take that which she has chosen away from her to satisfy your need for control. So Jesus thus, taught her that some stress is inevitable in a world where nobody can always have their own way, and where others are free to choose their way. But we see also,

II. SOME STRESS IS NOT INEVITABLE.

Martha did not have to be upset, for she had the same choice as Mary, and she could have made the better choice as well. It was not ordained that she be a worry wart fussing over every detail of a meal and miss the joy of fellowship with her guest. This was a choice nobody needed to make. This is self induced stress which is so harmful to life.

The fact that some stress is inevitable does not justify preventable stress. Paul said in Rom. 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all." The implication is clear: A peace maker can prevent a lot of stress in life if they really work at it. According to Dr. Selye not only does your Christian life depend on it, but your physical life depends on you being one who prevents stress. In his book, *Stress Without Distress*, he reveals his discoveries as the worlds leading stress researcher. He says the evidence shows that all of us are born with an adequate supply of what he calls "adaptation energy." It is enough for a lifetime, but it is a bank account from which you can only withdraw. You cannot deposit, so every time you withdraw from your account you deplete it. When your reserve is gone, so are you.

It is like airplane fuel. It is expected to be enough to get you to your destination. But if you use it excessively by radical climbs and dives, you will run out before you arrive, and you will crash. Why do Christians crash and have all kinds of problems like mental breakdowns? One of the primary answers is, there choice to cling to stress related living rather trust related living. In other words, if a Christian pilot tries to fly over a hundred and twenty gallon mountain range with only one hundred gallons of fuel he will crash. We can all agree it was a foolish decision. But it is what many Christians do when they go beyond their capacity and take on more stress than they can control. People with a Martha complex, who have to have everything perfect, and everyone under their control will have a higher likelihood of a heart attack, than the Mary types who can love to work as well, but who know how to let it go and relax, and let their minds and souls be fed.

Mary was living in the same stressful world as Martha, but she was spending her quota of adaptation energy moderately. Martha was a spendthrift and was depleting her resources rapidly. Jesus was teaching it is not necessary to handle stress like Martha. We can choose to handle it like Mary and live the balance life where some stress is not inevitable. We can prevent it, avoid it, and eliminate it.

Stress brought Jesus to the breaking point, and if you are bearing the sin of the world you have a perfect right to be so stressed. But if you are getting all bent out of shape over a meal, or fish hook in a dog's ear, or one thousand and one other trivial things of life, you are mismanaging your stress. Ps. 34:19, "A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all." God does not promise escape from stress, but He does promise to help you manage stress so you can take advantage of its positive side and control its negative side. May God help us all to be good stress managers in this stress-filled world.

18. THE LITTLE FLOCK Based on Luke 12:22-34

The world is full of interesting stories about numbers. For example, why does the President get a 21 gun salute. It all began in 1776 when Francis Hopkinson, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, noticed that if you add up the numbers in 1776 they come to 21. He said to himself, why not a 21 gun salute to our President? He submitted his idea to congress and they liked it. It has been in use ever since.

David Barrett set out back in the 60's to find the answer to a question. How many different Christian denominations are in the world? He estimated that the number would be around 5000. By the time he traveled to almost every country on earth he came up with a number exceeding 20,800. In 1982 his massive book, World Christian Encyclopedia was published, and for 95 dollars you can find numbers for every kind of Christian in every land on the planet. His numbers show that a decade ago there were 780 million dedicated Christians in the world, or about 18% of the world's population.

We have come along way from the day when Jesus said to His followers here in Luke 12:32, "Do not be afraid little flock." The flock has grown to the point where Jesus the great Shepherd needs hundreds of thousands of under shepherds to keep the flock from straying. When Jesus spoke these words His flock was indeed little. If the second coming would have taken place shortly after the resurrection, and if Jesus would have taken His bride to heaven with Him in the ascension, it would have been just a little flock. But Jesus died for the sin of the whole world, and His plan involves big numbers. Peter says that the second coming is delayed because Jesus wants everyone to come to repentance. He is not anxious to come and end the chance of millions more coming into the kingdom. His goal will not be achieved until there are people out of every tribe, tongue and nation who are a part of His flock.

So what we have in the Bible in both the Old Testament and the New Testament is a great number paradox. The paradox is this: God loves and chooses the small rather than the big, and yet His goal is to reach large numbers. So which is the best—the big or the small? The answer is both. Of course it is impossible for two opposites to be true, but God specializes in the impossible, and the biblical facts make it clear that God's plans are always big, but His means for getting His big plans achieved are always small. The David and Goliath battle is in God's mind all the time. He loves to achieve big victories through small resources.

A major theme of the Old Testament is God getting His will done through the small group. Every time God's people got to be a large flock they forsook Him and went after other gods. He had to judge His people and reduce the flock to a faithful remnant, and then start over with that small group. The flood story is repeated over and over with variations. The masses are eliminated and God starts over with the few. The tree is pruned way back, and with a few small branches God begins again. It never bothered God to work with the small group. It was His delight in fact, for the small group was always more faithful in responding to His will.

I can remember being captain of the team and getting to choose the people who would play. I always went for the biggest guys first and the little guys last. This is called the desire to win, and it is a part of my cultural conditioning. But God is apparently un-American, for He is not so conditioned. In fact, He leans the other way and deliberately chooses the little, the weak, and the ones least likely to win. God says in Deut. 7:7, "The Lord did not set His affections on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples." Now be honest, what would you think of a captain of a team who got first choice and he by passes Mr. America and chooses Casper Milktoast?

Someone trying to psychoanalyze God might conclude that he has a shrimp fixation and a fear of success, for he seems to specialize in sure losers. After all the folly of the Old Testament you would think He would have gotten over that fixation on the inferior, but not so. We come to the New Testament and its rerun time again. Paul writes in I Cor. 1:26-28, "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are."

God is certainly in a rut. He enjoys nothing better than sponsoring an underdog. God could have chosen the Babylonians to be His people. He could have chosen the Persians, or the Greeks,

or even the Romans. God had His choice and He could have chosen any of the great people who built world wide empires. But instead, He chooses none of these Great Danes, German Shepherds, or Alaskan Huskies, but rather, a mere Poodle to carry out His plan in history. If God

only did this occasionally, you could say He was just experimenting, but God does this habitually. There is no other area of life where God's ways are not man's ways more conspicuously. Everybody except God knows this is not a good strategy. Nobody could convince God otherwise, even though they tried.

When God came to Gideon and told him to go and save the people of Israel out of the hand of the Midianites, Gideon thought it was important to point out a flaw in this plan. He says in Judges 6:15, "But Lord, how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." With any other General planning a war this would have created a crisis and an emergency meeting of the Chiefs of Staff to figure out what confounded computer error advised putting this pip-squeak in charge. But with God it was no problem at all, but just a conformation that He had the man who met His qualifications, for he was the least likely to succeed. Had Gideon said that he was next to the weakest God may have reconsidered replacing him with someone who was in last place, but since he was the weakest, he was God's man.

To get a job with God your resume needs to convince Him that you are the most unqualified of all the applicants, and the least likely to do the job well. Samuel knew God's strange ways, and that is why he knew he had found the right man to be the first king of Israel when he heard Samuel respond in I Sam. 9:21, "But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin?" Men are always using their insignificance for an excuse not realizing that from God's point of view that is their chief qualification. Everybody who is nobody can be somebody with God. In fact, Jesus made it a point to identify with nobodies. He said in Matt. 25:40, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." And in verse 45 he said, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

This preference for the little and the least was inherited by Jesus. Like Father-like Son, and so Jesus made it clear that the value system of the New Testament is not different from that which we see all through the Old Testament. The small is significant with God. You can't spell it out any plainer than Jesus does in Luke 9:48. "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all-he is the greatest."

Therefore, it ought not to be surprising to hear Paul, the man most considered the greatest of the Apostles, saying what he does in I Cor. 15:9, "For I am the least of the Apostles and do not even deserve to be called an Apostle..." By now, of course, we know that is what made him qualify for the job in God's eyes. Had he deserved it he would have been passed over. It was his being the least that made him so great.

Now the reason I have pursued this theme through the Old and New Testament is because it is a theme so contrary to our culture and the value system that guides us in our thinking, and

also plays a major role in our sense of worth and self esteem. To get a better picture of the contrast between the biblical and our cultural value system let me share with you why the bigger is better theme came to dominate the American way of life.

As a nation we have moved from a rural to an urban culture. As people left the farms and gathered in the large cities everything went from the small to the bigger. The small school for the few went to the large school for the whole community. The banks got bigger; the stores got bigger; and the gas stations got bigger. You name it, and it got bigger, and so did the churches in the big cities. So the church just went along with the changes in the culture. As the malls across America have developed, and bigger and bigger centers for shopping were the in thing, so church growth became the in thing. The idea of masses of people all going to one spectacular church where every need could be met fit right in with the American way of doing things. Nobody asked if this was the biblical ideal, for all that mattered was that it was the American way, and it was working. People flocked to the malls and to the mega-churches. Big was king.

Before this the small was in and all through history most stores, most schools, and most churches were small. David Ray in his book *Small Churches Are The Right Size* writes, "History is on the side of a small church. Bigness is the new kid on the block. Historically, Protestant denominations in the United States have been comparatively small. At the time of the Civil War, the size of the average Protestant church was less than 100 members. A few large churches were in the center of the city, or at the center of the ethnic community. By the turn of the century, the average congregation still had less than 150 members."

His point is, the modern trend toward the big church cannot change the historical reality that most churches will always be small. The big is in and that is a fact, but there is no escaping the fact that there is a value in the small church that cannot be replaced. The big church movement has not made Christianity a stronger force in our land. If anything, it has weakened it, for the more people you have in one church the more of them are inactive and uninvolved. The more big churches we get the higher percentage we have of non-involved Christians. It is a paradox, but as the church grows the Christian impact often weakens because the majority are forced by the very nature of things to be spectators. The small church demands a higher level of commitment, for everyone is aware of your presence and your participation. In a large church you can be gone and never missed.

The need for bigger churches was also caused by an economic factor. As denominations became large corporate structures with vast headquarters and huge payrolls, the expenses became such that there was a need for larger churches to pay for it. Small churches do not give as much as large churches, and so there was a need to push for big churches to pay the bills. Again, nobody asked if this was good for the people, and if Christians were made stronger by this. Money talks, and money said bigger is better. Don't start 10 churches of 100 each, for

they need most of their money to minister to the 100. Start one church of a 1000, and then there will be a pile of money left over to give to headquarters. One big church will give more than many little churches, and so go for the big.

Preachers knew also that there is a larger salary in a 500 member church than in a 100 member church, and so money spoke to them too and said, go for the big. Big means more money for everybody. It is the American way. You give up some intimacy, but you buy more to balance out that loss. But its not just the money. In our culture size is linked with success. So what if the corner grocer makes a nice living and is happy with his life. He is no success, for he is too small. The big time is the only time that rates the label success. So what if the big executive is on his third wife and has kids who hate him. If he is big, he is successful, and that is what matters. Size

is the name of the game, and small just won't cut it.

We all play this game for we can't help it. It is a part of our culture. We ask how large is your church and we judge the value of that church by its size. If somebody tells us their church is 57 people, we assume that it is a group of losers. But if they go to a church of 780 people, we feel they are a successful group of noble souls from all walks of life. It is a terrible judgment, but it is the way Americans evaluate worth. Size alone is the key without knowing anything of the character and commitment of the people. All we need to hear to judge a church a success or failure is the number of people in it. This is prejudice of the worst sort, but it makes life easier when it comes to making snap judgments. You don't have to know anything but a number to come to a quick value judgment.

This affects all of us, and the impact on the suburban church that is small is even worse than on the small rural church. When there is a large church just down the road with a large staff and budget, and a commanding presence, it is easy to feel you are of little value in comparison. In the small town usually all of the churches are small, and so there is not the comparison issue. The only way to maintain a sense of self-esteem as a small church is to recognize that being small does not mean that one has to be any less successful. In fact, it may be are more successful in achieving the goal that God has for the church.

None of can escape being products of our culture, but we need to be aware that culture can lead us astray. Back in the 1930's and 1940's the educational reformers urged the small public school districts to become consolidated with others into much bigger unites. This became the craze and in one generation the small school was eliminated. Now after a few decades of big is better education the authorities are changing their tune. Lyle Schaller in his marvelous book *It's A Different World* quotes the prominent child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim as saying, "The one room school was the best school we ever had." It was like family, and older children helped the younger, and there was more one to one interaction.

Some are so convinced it was the best that they are trying to bring it back as a superior environment for learning. From Nebraska to Manhattan the one room school is making a comeback. The greatest growth is among the Amish and Hutterites, and by a growing number of fundamentalists churches. Liberal Protestant churches in the inner city are also moving in this direction.

The big is better theme was carried to extremes in our culture, and the result is that we have damaged many of the values that made us the great nation that we are. The big is better value system is one of the reason for man's loss of self-esteem as a person. When science began to reach out and discover just how big and vast this universe is, it made our planet a puny speck of dust. There are stars out there so big you could put a million of our earth inside and they would rattle. If big is better, then the logical conclusion is that our earth is of no more value than a fallen leaf in a vast forest. In other words, we are worthless. We are among the least of all heavenly bodies, and this has led men to conclude that it is ridiculous to think that God would have any concern about this infinitesimal speck. It would be like a man devoting his life to try and communicate with a bacteria.

Man lost his self-esteem and this led to his loss of faith in God. He concluded that he was too small to matter, and if size is the measure of worth then he was right, for we are just a puny part of reality. Many of the great leaders of our nation became Deists. A deist is one who thinks that God is too big to be bothered with the insignificant likes of us. He made all that is in its vast wonder, but he has no care or concern for the minor details like man. We have better things to do than get involved with the insects in our lawn, and God has better things to do that get involved with us.

These great men are just following the logic of their value system that says big is better. They do not see that this is the very thing they laugh at when the small child chooses the big nickel rather than the small dime, or the big marble over the small diamond. Einstein was once asked what he was thinking, and he replied, "I am thinking that, after all, this is a very small star." He was right, but it is a very small star that produces an Einstein, which as far as we know, are not produced by the very big stars in our universe. Size just cannot cut it when it comes to the values that really matter. If matter is all that matters, then size is the only measure that matters. But if mind, spirit, and relationships matter, then size is no longer the issue.

The self-esteem of man is not based on the size of his planet, but the size of his God in whose image he is created. Likewise, the self-esteem of a church is not based on its size, but on the Savior to whom it is committed. There are tens of thousands of small churches where love for Christ and obedience to His will is the supreme good, and I defy anyone to find a text in the Bible that says these least in size are not as loved by Christ, and as useful for His cause, as those greater in size. In fact, unless God has recently changed His ways from the Old Testament and New Testament days, He may be using the small and the least even more. In Luke 12:32 Jesus

says to His followers, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for the Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." It pleased God to give the biggest and most everlasting kingdom of all time and eternity, not to the massive forces of Rome, or the lesser legions of Israel even, but to the least likely of all groups, the little flock of Christians.

Is all of this to be seen as a justification for not growing? Not at all. God chooses the small, but for big goals, and the goal of the little flock was to reach the whole world. The church has an obligation for all time to reach as many people as it possibly can, and to grow as large as it can. There is no anti-big spirit in the New Testament. Big can be beautiful and better if the values of the small are preserved, and it has been proven that they can be even in the biggest church. The point is, no church needs to feel a sense of worthlessness just because they are small. The whole Bible rejects size as the measure of worth. If a small church fails, it is not because of the size, but because it ceases to care about doing the will of God, and it stops trying to reach out and grow.

It is important to understand the facts about the small church because the majority of churches are small, and if this is a sign of failure then the whole plan of Christ is a failure. Lyle Schaller is a leading authority on church statistics. He says that one fourth of all churches on this continent have fewer than 35 people in attendance. One half of all churches average less than 75. Ninety per cent of all churches reach their peak by their 15th birthday, and seldom grow beyond that level. All of this means that the odds are against any body of believers becoming a large body of believers.

It is not smallness of size that should bother us, but smallness of our commitment to love God with our whole being, and our neighbor as ourselves. A small church with a greater degree of such love honors God more than a large church without

such love. Just as we love the puppy more than the elephant, and the kitty more than the lion, not just because they are smaller, but because they show us love back. So God loves those churches regardless of their size where their love is expressed in their commitment to Him. The church in Ephesus in Rev. 2 is scolded by Jesus because they had forsaken their first love. The little flock that is a loving flock is doing the biggest thing that can be done on this planet, for it is pleasing God and giving pleasure to the Savior. May God help all small churches to be such a loving little flock.

19. DRESSED FOR THE SECOND COMING Based on Luke 12:35-48

Paul Harvey in, For What It's Worth tells of how Ann Connolly used modern technology to foil a crime. She was in Red Food Store in Knoxville, Tenn. When a man snatched her purse from her cart. She is a real estate broker and has a talk back beeper device in her purse. She ran to the manager's office and dialed herself. Then she spoke into the phone knowing her voice would be transmitted through the beeper in her purse. The produce manager said, "You should

have seen that surprised man standing there with a talking purse." The voice was saying, "Take this purse to the manger's office immediately." It spoke with such authority that he did it.

This example of the power of the voice dims like a candle before the noon day sun when compared with the voice of Jesus. In John 5 Jesus gives two examples of the power of His voice. In verse 25 he says, "I tell you the truth, a time is coming, and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." You would think that would be the ultimate in the power of the voice, but Jesus was referring here to hearing the Gospel, and being saved from spiritual death to life. This is going on all over the world everyday. But Jesus goes on in verses 28-29 to reveal a day when His voice will be more powerful than all the energy in the universe, for it will accomplish the supreme miracle. He says, "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear His voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

Every human being who has ever lived and died will be awakened by the voice of the Son of God. Lazarus came forth when Jesus shouted, and this dead friend of Jesus walked out of the tomb. When Jesus comes again He will say, "Everyone come forth," and all the dead, both good and evil, will come back to life to face reward or judgment. Even Hollywood with all of its spectacular special effects would not be able to match this grand finale of the Lord's miracles. Contrary to those who say, "When you are dead you are dead forever," Jesus says, "Nobody is dead forever," for all the dead will be compelled by His voice to rise and live.

The Second Coming of Christ will be the greatest demonstration ever of His Lordship over all. He was despised and rejected in His first coming, but in His Second Coming He will be King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and the first true ruler of the whole world. The world is the field, and the farmer makes two visits to his field. The first time he plows the soil and plants the seed. That

is what Jesus did in His first coming. Then the farmer comes again to reap the harvest, and that is what Christ will do when He comes again. The analogy breaks down, however, for farmers go back several times to spray and weed, but Jesus said to His disciples, "Let the tares grow with the wheat till the harvest." Jesus only comes to His field twice in bodily form. He comes often in spirit, for where two or three are gathered in His name He will be there. We want to focus our attention on His second bodily appearing for all mankind.

David Koresh by his fanatical focus on end times has propelled the vocabulary of the Second Coming events into the media so that words like Armageddon and Apocalypse are in every paper and magazine. Fanatics have, all through history, caused by their fanaticism the view that only Christian weirdoes, out in left field, are into the study of end time themes. The fact is, the New Testament refers to the Second Coming over 300 times, and the early church from the

start had this as a major focus.

John Wesley White, a partner evangelist with Billy Graham, in his book *Re-entry II* quotes the great Alexander Maclaren, "The primitive church thought more about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ than about death or about heaven. They were not looking for a cleft in the ground called a grave, but for a cleavage in the sky called glory. They were not watching for the "Undertaker," but for the "Uppertaker." White goes on to add, "In other words, they were not druggies looking for a cocaine high. They were believers looking for Christ from on high. They were not gamblers waiting at the Hialeah Course. They were Christians listening for the Hallelujah Chorus." Jesus teaches us a number of things about His coming again, and we want to focus first of all on His teaching to

I. BE WARY.

The world is full of experts who will tell you they have read the signs, and they know when Christ will return. The one thing we can know for sure about the Second Coming is that we cannot know for sure when it will be. Jesus did not just make this point in passing. He stressed it over and over again. Listen to the voice of our Lord, and the many voices of the so-called experts who think they have found a way to decipher the time of His coming.

"Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come." Matt. 24:42.
"Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh." Matt. 24:44. " Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh." Matt. 25:13. "Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is. Mark 13:33. "Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cock-crowing, or in the morning: lest coming suddenly he finds you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, watch." Mark 13:35-37. "Be ye therefore ready also: for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not." Luke 12:40.

The key word in all that Jesus says is the word watch. This means it is legitimate to focus on the signs of His coming, and to join the multiplied millions who look for evidence of His coming. The danger of this focus will be that we forget Jesus said we cannot know when He will come, and that it will be when He is not expected. This means Jesus could come at any time, and not when men calculate that He should come. The fact is that it is part of God's plan to keep the time a secret so that all generations are equally responsible to live in expectation. If Jesus would have taught that He would return in the 20th century, the Christians of the centuries before could just forget watching. Once you let the secret out, you lose the power of the secret to hold all Christians in expectation.

It was just as likely that Jesus could have come in the second, third, fourth, or fifteen century. It has been an obligation for every Christian in every age to obey Christ and watch in expectation. Jesus could have come anytime, and He can come at any time now, and there is no

way to predict when it will be. The New Testament Christians expected Jesus in their lifetime, and it has always been so, and should be so for us today. To pretend that we know something that Christians of other centuries did not know is to ignore His clear teaching that His coming could be at any time, and not just when we think the signs are most evident.

I like the way John R. Rice the fighting fundamentalist put it. He angered a lot of his fundamentalist friends by robbing them of the pleasure of thinking they had figured out the signs of Christ's coming. He wrote, "The coming of the Lord might have been at any time from Pentecost on until now. For that reason all the signs of the second coming are left indefinite in degree. Wars grow worse and worse, but the Scripture never says just how much war must occur before the Savior comes. Worldliness and unbelief in the churches grows worse and worse, an accelerating and increasingly weighty evidence that the Savior's return is "even at the door." But some of this worldliness has been in the churches from the beginning, and how far wrong the church will go before the Savior's return is not revealed in the Bible. There is not one single sign for which Christians have needed to wait before they should expect the return of the Savior. And not one single event has occurred or will occur definitely enough that any person can know the day or hour of His return."

Knowing this is our only protection from self-proclaimed prophets. They are not always fanatics, but sometimes very sincere Bible students who feel they have found the key to the mysteries that have been locked up. It is very presumptuous for men to say we now know what Jesus said cannot be known, but they do it all the time, and history is filled with sincere Christian scholars who feel they have gone over the head of Jesus and figured out what He said we can't know. 1988 was the date for which a popular book was written proving that was to be the year of Christ's return. Like all other such books, it was also wrong.

Be wary and listen to Jesus, and not men. In the 40 days between His resurrection and ascension Jesus would come and go, and His disciples never knew when He would appear. G. Campbell Morgan says of this: "Have you ever tried imaginatively to enter into the experience of those men during those 40 days? They never knew where they would see Him next. Suddenly appearing in their midst, no door opened, no bolt shot, not preparation made; but He was there with them. His presence, parousia, nearness, they were made conscious of! With equal suddenness He disappeared. The appearances and disappearances of the 40 days were but to train these people to the consciousness of His constant presence, and to the fact that at any moment He

might appear. That is the teaching of the New Testament about the coming of our Lord. Nothing in human pomp or pageantry can express the true idea of this great truth of the New Testament as to our Lord's second Advent." The second thing Jesus says is

II. BE WATCHFUL.

I read of an estate in the land owned by a man in Milan, Italy. It was kept up beautifully by a full time caretaker. The grass was cut, the trees trimmed, the flower beds all neat and in bloom. It was post card beautiful, but nobody was around but the caretaker. A visitor asked him when the owner was last here, and he said, "12 years ago." "Yet you keep it so trim as if he was coming tomorrow." The gardener said in response, "As if he were going to come today."

One of the major points of Jesus is that His servants must be watchful and ready at all times, for there is complete uncertainty as to the time of His return. It could be the second or third watch of the night even, which means late in the middle of the night. The second watch was from 10 at night until 2 in the morning, and the third watch was from 2 until 6 A.M. Anybody could be alert and ready to open the door on the first watch. That is prime time, and everybody is alert and ready. But as the hour gets late, and you have to stay awake all night, that is a real test of loyalty and readiness. It was on the third watch that most guards were found sleeping. If a thief is smart he will wait until the third watch, for this is when the response is likely to be the lowest from those who are to intercept you.

Notice verse 38: "It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he come in the second or third watch." What is the point? Jesus is saying the Christian life can get hard, and Christians get tired of waiting and watching for Him to return and make all things right. There are endless delays and disappointments. In our lifetime it was Hitler who was to be the anti-Christ, and then the end was near. Then Russia was to be the power to invade Israel and start the beginning of the end. Now Russia has fallen apart and the end seems to be delayed again. Hope for the Blessed Hope to be a reality, and for the church to be raptured out of this world, is dashed time and time again, and Christians can become weary of it all, and begin to sleep, and cease to watch as they enter the midnight to morning hours. Jesus knew this would be the challenge, and that is why He teaches that we must watch and not faint.

To be ready for His coming is one of the great works for which Christians will be rewarded, for Jesus will be most pleased with those servants who are ready when He returns. The reason for rewarding them who are watching is that they put the Master's service above their own personal pleasure. They would rather be sleeping, or engaged in their own all night party, but instead they stay dressed and ready for His return from the wedding banquet to open the door and minister to Him.

Here is a picture of loyal servants who deny themselves for the sake of the Master. But note, it is a good investment of their time, and the sacrifice is worth it, for in verse 37 Jesus says the Master will be so pleased He will become their servant and be their waiter at a feast for them. The point is quite clear. If you are a watchful servant who makes the Master your priority until His plan is fulfilled, He will make you a priority and lavish on you more pleasure than you ever could have achieved by forsaking His plan to do your own thing. The bottom line is, every sacrifice you make to do the will of Jesus is an investment in your own future reward.

But what do you wear for the Second Coming? Jesus says to be dressed ready for service. If you want to please the Master you will be in your work clothes when He comes. All of this is analogy, and it means the truly watchful Christian who is always ready is the one who is always involved in Christian service. This does not mean they never get away from it all. Even Jesus had to escape the constant demands and pressure and get away. But the Christian is one who is a servant, and this is one who is ever seeking for ways to do the Master's will. He is ever in work clothes seeking first the kingdom of God.

Being watchful is not gazing into the sky looking for the glory of Christ to burst through. That would be very impractical and non-productive. It is to be busy preparing the world for His return. He has gone to prepare a place for us, and meanwhile, we are to prepare the world for His coming back to take us to be with Him. How do we prepare the world? We make it a place where His will is done on earth as it is in heaven. We make it a place where His commands are obeyed; where His love is displayed; and where His Gospel is conveyed. Watching for the Second Coming amounts to using your gifts and talents for the kingdom of God. Charles Wesley wrote several thousand hymns, and 5 thousand of them included the theme of the Second Coming. He was busy using the gift God gave him as he looked for his Lord's return.

The idea of watching means there is to be a consistency about one's commitment to Christians service. The parable Jesus tells here of the manager of his servants shows him being okay at first, but after he sees the Master is long delayed he starts abusing others, and getting drunk and becoming totally irresponsible. That is unacceptable behavior, and it leads to judgment. A loyal servant does not get slipshod, but is consistently committed to doing what he knows is the Master's will. If your motivation comes from quick reward, or the gratitude of man, you can easily grow cold and slip into indifference. A watchful servant is one whose primary motivation comes from pleasing the Master. They are moved to obedience, not to please man, but Jesus, and this keeps them from growing weary in well doing. The third thing Jesus stresses is

III. BE WARNED.

Jesus uses some strong language here to describe the judgment of the servant who knows his Master's will, but says, "That's tough, let him do his own will, I've got other things to do." That servant is not ready for the Second Coming, and if the Lord returns before he repents and shapes up, he will suffer severe punishment. Jesus uses words like cut to pieces, and beaten with many blows. The Second Coming is not all peaches and cream. There is blood and bruises in the picture in part, for there will be slipshod servants who forget the Master can return unexpectedly and surprise them in a state of disobedience. A serious consideration of the Second Coming is a key to motivating Christians to be consistent and persistent in obedience.

When Lavonne and I would go away and leave Mark to care for the house, several times we came home a day early. We find the sink full of dirty dishes and the house generally messy. He

would not get it cleaned up until the last minute, for he thought we would be gone another day. Procrastination is in all of us. If Jesus would have told us when He would return, we could be negligent until then. But the time is a secret, and so we never know. We have to keep the dishes washed everyday, that is, keep current in our Christian service. This does not mean you are in trouble if Jesus returns when you are on vacation, or if it is your day off. It means, if you live a life with no concern for Christian service and doing the Master's will, you will be judged.

Jesus adds an element of fear to the Second Coming. Jesus says that He will come ready or not, and if you are not ready you will lose reward, and pay a painful price. In a very real sense the purpose of the church and all we do in Christian education, worship, and service, is to get Christians dressed and ready for the Second Coming. It would be easier if we knew it was in a specific year, for then we could wait until the year before and spend that year cramming for the finals. But Jesus says this is the kind of information we do not have on purpose. No matter how many think they have figured out God' schedule, this is information that will never be released from the mind of God.

Jesus will come, as He said, like a thief in the night. If you knew just when the thief was coming, you could prevent him from breaking in. But thieves just do not have the courtesy to post the time of their breaking in. If you came home some night and found a note saying I intend to rob this house at 3:00A.M., you would be ready for that event, and fully prepared to thwart it. But thieves are not inclined to release this information, and so you cannot plan to be ready at any particular time to catch the thief. You have to be ready at all times, for you just can never know when one might come. So you lock your doors, and keep valuables hidden, and you prepare the best you can to prevent any surprises.

The point is, Jesus is coming again like a thief in the night. Peter says in II Pet. 3:10, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief." Paul says in I Thess. 5:2, "For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." Jesus says to the church of Sardis in Rev. 3:2-3, "Wake up!" "But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you." Again, in Rev. 16:15 He says, "Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." This is not a Biblical basis for not sleeping in the nude, it is a warning for all Christians for all time to not be careless about their Christian life and service. Be dressed and ready always to do the will of your Lord.

"Let not the sun go down on your wrath." Why not? Because it is the will of Christ that you forgive and be reconciled. If you go a night in rebellion against His will, that could be the night He comes like a thief, and you will be caught naked and not dressed for His coming. We dress properly for the Second Coming by living in obedience to the Master's will. Have you ever been undressed when someone knocks at your door? You try to quickly get prepared, but nothing seems to go right. The button won't button, and the socks won't go on right, and there is

general panic, for in such a hurry you make a lot of mistakes. By the time you are ready, they have left. So when the Master returns it is a little too late to get dressed then. You need to be dressed and ready at all times. The main question about the Second Coming is not when will it be, but are you dressed for it?

20. THE REALITY OF ACCIDENTS Based on Luke 13:1-5

No doubt everyone of us has had our share of accidents. If not in a car, or with a knife, or some other sharp object whereby we cut ourselves, then all of us have at some point in our life fallen down. It is a part of growing up to fall down, and so it is hard to conceive that even baby Jesus did not fall down at sometime, or fall against some piece of furniture that Joseph had made. It would not be a normal childhood to grow up without some kind of an accident. But whether Jesus did or not is not the issue, for nobody else does escape all accidents. We all have them, and the longer we live the more we have.

In the battle of Sockett's Harbor during the War of 1812, David Sockett had his hand blown off at the age of 76. Most men had no such accidents at 76 because most men never lived that long in that day. Some years later a tree fell on Sockett's head and fractured his skull. A few years after that he was standing by when a cannon misfired and both his eyes were damaged by the blast. After this a horse kicked him in the face causing permanent disfigurement. You have to conclude that he was accident prone, but it was something he learned to live with for he lived to be 115.

In contrast was our 17 year old neighbor. She was riding with her brother when a Christian man in another car had an epilepsy attack. His foot froze on the gas pedal, and he ran into their car. She was thrown into the windshield where glass cut her jugular vein, and she died in just a few minutes. At 17 one accident ended her life. In another church I served an army officer had a wife and three children who were hit by an oncoming car, and the wife and two of the children were killed instantly. The third child was thrown out the back window and survived. It was the first and only three casket funeral I have ever seen.

These accidents didn't last very long, but the suffering they left behind still goes on. I have had my own share of accidents, and have wrecked a couple of cars quite severely but have suffered no bodily injury. My children cannot say the same. My oldest son was hit by a car while on his bike and ended up in the hospital for a month. My youngest son fell down the stairs and was taken to the hospital. My daughter once rolled down an embankment and smashed up a truck and broke her neck. She had to spend weeks in the hospital and months in traction, and with a lifetime of side effects.

I read the same statistics that you read, and know that ten of thousands of people a year die in car accidents, and hundreds of thousands suffer injury, but cold statistics are not why I

believe in the reality of accidents. It is my experience of accidents that convinces me they are real, and also my study of God's Word. But there is always this wide spread saying that keeps coming up that says, "With God there are no accidents." This is one of those popular theological sayings that people use to cut off debate on a sensitive issue. What can you say to such an absolute statement? It seems sacrilegious, or at least futile, to argue with such a statement. After all, who is going to have the audacity to challenge the competency of God to run the world? The result is that this little phrase quite effectively cuts off both debate and thought on the subject of accidents. But we cannot escape the fact that our experience suggests that accidents are a very real part of the world in which we live.

Some pastors I have talked to about accidents feel that they have to support the idea that there are no accidents in the life of a Christian. I tried to argue with one Christian leader that that view doesn't seem to fit the facts, and he became emotionally upset and did not want to pursue the issue. So I am aware that this is an emotional topic, and you may not like questioning one of the strong convictions of many Christians. But I decided that the best way to deal with a dilemma is to look

it square in the face, and ask some serious questions. People make a lot of claims for God, but what does God claim for Himself? What does the Bible really say about accidents, and the things that happen by chance? Is there such a thing, or are these pagan ideas that do not belong in the minds of God's people?

Philip P. Bliss, who wrote so many of the songs Christians love to sing, such as Hallelujah What A Savior, Wonderful Words Of Life, The Light Of The World Is Jesus, Almost Persuaded, Dare To Be A Daniel, And Jesus Loves Even Me, and many more, was on a train with his wife heading for Chicago for a series of meetings. A bridge gave way and more than 100 people on the train were killed including the Blisses'. He gave so much of what we sing, but his accident did not lead to more praise to God, but less. Bliss wrote the music to It Is Well With My Soul, but the words were written by H. G. Spafford. He sent his family to Europe, and the ship sank, and all four of his children went down with it.

Amy Carmicheal went to India as a missionary in 1895. She did much to alleviate the suffering of children, but in 1931 she took a serious fall, and for the next 20 years she was confined to her room. She was in constant pain, but still managed the mission and wrote 13 books. She gained many victories, but not because of her pain, but in spite of her pain. When David Livingston went to Africa and devoted his life to reach those people he faced constant danger. A lion attacked him and left him wounded. He was handicapped for the rest of his life on one side. A mad buffalo almost killed him, and a hippopotamus tipped his boat, and he nearly drowned. He suffered more fevers than anybody I ever read about, and spent a major part of his life recovering. There seemed to be no end to the problems, injuries, and suffering he endured.

R. G. LaTorneu gave millions to the cause of Christ. He crashed his car through 8 sections of a fence and broke his neck. He spent two months with his head laying useless on his shoulders. Later on in 1937 he and his wife and their quartet were on their way to share the Gospel in word and song at a special meeting. They had a head on collision that killed all three in the other car and two of their quartet. LaTorneu had both hips and a leg broken, and his chest was crushed. His wife was severely injured as well, but they both recovered and went on to serve the Lord, and gave millions more to His cause.

We could go on and on, but the point is that the children of God, as far as the record of history and the record of God's Word goes, do not have any promise that they will escape the suffering that comes through accidents. Godly people and leaders frequently die in accidents. Some Christians think that all of these accidents are really good because they are a part of God's plan. But I do not see this supported by Scripture at all. My study of the Bible has led me to see that all of the events of life fall into four categories. You may see other categories, but here is how I see the breakdown of all events.

1. EVENTS WHICH GOD PLANS.

These events have to happen because they are a part of God's purpose, and they are predestined. They cannot not happen. The cross is a good example. It was planned before the world was even created, for God could not, or would not, create such a high risk being as man with his freedom to fall without committing himself to pay the price to redeem and restore him. The cross was the most necessary event of history.

2. EVENTS WHICH GOD PREVENTS.

These are things that would have happened if God had not stepped into history and by His providence prevented. Pharaoh took Sarah because of her beauty, but God prevented his having her, and got her back to Abraham unharmed and unused. The same thing happened later with Rebekah. The killing of baby Jesus by Herod was also prevented. There is no way to know how many terrible things never happened because God prevented them from happening. These two kinds of events-what God plans, and what God prevents, represent God's will in the world. They happen or don't happen because God's plan demands it. But there are two other kinds of events also that we want to look at.

3. EVENTS WHICH GOD PROHIBITS.

These are all the things that God forbids. He forbid Adam and Eve to eat a certain fruit. He gave commandments of what men should not do. These things do take place, however, because God has given man the freedom to disobey Him. God does not will these events, nor does He prevent them. They happen against His will. All such events are what we call sin and evil.

4. EVENTS WHICH GOD PERMITS.

These are events which God has not planned, but neither has He prohibited, or prevented them. They may cause a great deal of suffering, but they are not events of choice, and so there is not the same guilt connected with them as with those events which God has prohibited. This fourth category is where we put accidents. Accidents are events which God did not plan to happen, nor did man choose to happen. They happen because of mistaken judgments, carelessness, and unawareness of the consequences of what is being done. They are necessary possibilities in a truly free world. They are events that do not need to happen, for they are preventable. That is the whole purpose in teaching and training. It is to provide knowledge and wisdom so that we can prevent what is dangerous and damaging. This is the process you go through in raising a child so they learn what is to be avoided so they do not have accidents. But all prevention is not possible because no one is ever fully and completely wise.

The Old Testament law had a very clear distinction between an act of violence which was chosen, and an accidental act of violence. In Ex. 21:12-13 we read, "Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death. However, if he does not do it intentionally, but God lets it happen, he is to flee to a place I will designate." The first is what we call first degree murder. It is a willful planning to take another's life. The second is what we call manslaughter. There was never any willful desire to take another life. It happened because of unforeseen events which we call accidents. There are all kinds of degrees of responsibility for these kinds of events.

A ferry heading for Dover, England sank and a couple of hundred people died. It was because of avoidable human error. Someone was careless and forgot to close a certain door, and it led to the tipping of the ferry. Hundreds of examples of this sort of thing happen. Is human error God's will? If so, then there is no such thing as mistakes and human error, for if they are God's will, and what he has ordained, then they had to happen, and man is not responsible for them, for God made them make those mistakes. God alone then is responsible for all human error. This takes away the responsibility of man and puts it all on God, and this is false theology. We are responsible for our

own mistakes, and we cannot throw them back on God. It is part of the risk of a free world where we can make choices. We often make bad ones, and they are our choices and not God's. If we make bad choices on purpose it is sin, but if we make them out of ignorance they are accidents. Either way, we are the ones responsible.

Before you ever say there are no accidents again, let me share with you the implications of what you are saying. An accident is something that is not planned by God, or foreseen by man. But if it is a high risk situation where it should be foreseen, then we hold those responsible for the act to a higher degree of responsibility. For example, when a boy is throwing a hard ball against the side of a house where a window is just a few feet away. This scene gives us a good

illustration of the difference between determinism and freedom. When the boy lets go too soon and the ball goes flying through the window, you do not get angry at God or the ball. You know the ball had no choice in the matter, and so you do not get a hammer and pulverize it. On the other hand, the boy who chose to throw it so near the window does have a responsibility for what happened. If he has been warned before not to play there, he is even more guilty. If there has never been any warning, his guilt will be less for this first offense, for in ignorance he did not realize the risk involved. His punishment will be in accordance with the degree of his knowledge. If this is the third offense, he is in deep trouble.

But now let us look at this event with the assumption that it is true that there are no accidents. If this broken window is no accident, but is the will of God, then the boy becomes identical with the ball. He is now equally without choice, and had no more of an alternative than did the ball. To punish him is the same as pounding the ball, for the boy is merely a tool in the hands of God, just as the ball was a tool in the hands of the boy. The no accident theory traces all apparent accidents back to the only one with a choice, and that is God. This means God is the one who chooses all of the bad, foolish, and ignorant mistakes that make the world so full of accidents. This is bad theology.

If there are no accidents, there is nobody to blame for the evils of life but God. You cannot blame the devil or man, because they only do what God has planned for them to do. This reverses the revelation of God's Word, and makes Him the cause of all evil, and the devil and man are mere victims. The Bible says just the opposite, and that Satan and man by their choices made the mess that God had to pay a great price to clean up by the sacrifice of His own Son. If there are no accidents because all is God's will, then it is no wonder that people get so angry at God for all of the terrible tragedies of life. You do not even need a devil or evil forces, or even the free will folly of man, for God alone can be the cause of all we hate about life. But once you admit that all is not God's will, and that evil forces and man can do what is not His will, then you open the door to the reality of accidents. You can't have it both ways. If God's will is not always done on earth as it is in heaven, and why pray this prayer that Jesus taught if it is, then accidents have to be a part of reality in a world where free choices are made every moment by imperfect beings.

People like the theory of no accidents because it becomes a sort of magical way to get rid of evil and responsibility, and all of the things that are disturbing about life. It is a form of escapism. Dr. Paul Tournier, the author of numerous books, says in his book *A Doctor's Casebook In The Light Of The Bible*, "The spirit of magic lies in wait for the Christians as much as for the agnostics and the pagans. It arises, in fact from an inherent tendency in human nature, and none of us can boast of being proof against it wiles. It is the longing for the fairy tale, for the magic wand that will

charm away the difficulties of life, the suffering, the limitations, and the uncertainties of our

human condition."

Most of our superficial ideas about suffering arise from our desire for a magical simple answer. What could be more simple than to believe that there are no accidents, but that all is a part of God's plan? This means that all is good, and there is no real evil in life. It is true that God can and does work in all things, even evil and foolish mistakes, to bring forth good, but to say that the evil and foolish mistakes are good is going beyond Scripture and common sense. People do get comfort by believing that all is part of God's plan, but I get more comfort by not believing that all of the suffering in the world caused by accidents is the will of God. You can take your choice, but I choose that which is based on the Word of God, and not a traditional saying.

Now, at last, we come to our text in Luke 13. Jesus is dealing with some of the tragedies of his day. He chooses one from the world of suffering caused by the inhumanity of man to man. Pilate had mixed the blood of some Galileans with their own sacrifices, and the implication is that they were violently killed. The other tragedy he deals with comes from the perversity of inanimate objects. Murphy's law comes into play, and things like apartment buildings collapse and people are killed. Jesus refers to the tower in Siloam which fell and killed 18 people.

The main point Jesus is making is that the victims were not meeting such a tragic end because they were being judged for their sin. They were just at the wrong place at the wrong time, and they suffered the consequences. They were not worse sinners than anyone else. They did not deserve their violent end anymore than those who escaped. Neither of these events were planned by God. They fall into the category of events God permits, but does not will. When a plane goes down and kills all who are on board, those people who die are not any worse than those whose plane does not go down. People who die in auto accidents are not worse than those who do not. The whole idea of suffering and death being connected with the sinfulness of the victims is rejected by Jesus. This is a false view of suffering to link it to the sinfulness of people as if all suffering and death were in some way a form of judgment. Jesus is saying that suffering and tragedy can often be accidental, and not a part of some plan to punish or discipline.

There is all kinds of discipline in life, and plenty of punishment, but to look at an accident as one of these two is superficial and contrary to the teaching of Christ. Spurgeon, one of the greatest preachers in history, and a strong Calvinist, speaks very openly about the reality of accidents. He said, "It is very customary among religious people to talk of every accident as if it were a judgment. The upsetting of a boat upon the river on a Sunday is assuredly understood to be a judgment for the sin of Sabbath-breaking. In the accidental fall of a house, in which persons were engaged in any unlawful occupation, the inference is at once drawn that the house fell because they were wicked. Now, however, some religionists may hope to impress the people by such childish stories as these, I for one, forswear them all. I believe what my

Master says is true, when He declared concerning the men upon which the tower of Siloam fell, that they were not sinners above all....They were sinners, there is no doubt about it, but the falling of the wall was not occasioned by their sin, nor was their premature death the consequence of their excessive wickedness."

Common sense tell us this is so, for accidents happen to the innocent so often. Children fall, and children get into poisons, and nobody suffers more accidents free of all sinful and wicked intentions than do children. There is no connection between sin and accidents as a necessity. It is equal folly to say there never is a connection, for people who drive and drink kill thousands every year, and their suffering is a direct result of their sin and folly. It is not the case with their victims, however. Pilate was doing evil when he killed the Galileans. They were innocent victims of his evil, but there is no record that he suffered, just as the drunken driver often escapes injury as he kills others.

You cannot find a connection between sin and suffering that fits the whole world of innocent and accidental suffering. To even try is to reject the Lord's rejection of the whole idea, and try to make all suffering some form of judgment. Jesus says this tragic suffering and death is not judgment, and it is obvious that it cannot be for discipline. Discipline is for teaching so as to correct bad behavior. Death is definitely overkill for this purpose, and so we are left with a form of suffering we put into the category of accidental.

What does this mean? An insurance agent once asked a cowboy if he had ever had an accident, and he said, "No, none to speak of. A bronc kicked in my ribs and busted my collar bone, and a rattlesnake bit me last year." "Good heavens," said the agent, "Don't you call them accidents?" "No," said the cowpuncher, "They done it on purpose." There are accidents which are done on purpose. We have all seen a movie where the bad guys fix the brakes on the good guys car so they will go out when he is driving down the mountain, and thereby have an accident. Technically this is not an accident, but a plan event to look like an accident. God prohibits such events, and so it is no accident, but an evil act done by choice.

An authentic accident is an event that takes place without God willing it to happen, and with no human foresight or expectation. It is not the result of a plan, but the result of chance. Anything that happens as a result of a plan is not an accident. This is why many Christians say there are no accidents, for they believe that everything that happens is a part of God's plan. If that was the case then everything is planned, and there would be no accidents. Other Christians find this intolerable for it makes God responsible for all that we find most evil about the world of suffering. The innocent who suffer and die in war; because of alcoholic drivers, and because of all the foolish mistakes adults make are all a part of God's plan, if this theory is correct, and that is not acceptable to most Christians.

It would be easy to believe that Satan is responsible for all this evil suffering, but to call it

part of the plan of God blurs the distinction between good and evil. The Bible says that God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. It is hard to believe this if one also believes that all of the accidents of the world are really planned by God. The issue of responsibility is what we are dealing with. I once pulled into an intersection as it was getting dark, and a car without its lights on tore the front end of my car off. When the police arrived they did not give me a ticket even though I pulled right in front of the guy. It was because he had a responsibility to have his lights on at that time. He got the ticket because he failed to do what he was responsible to do.

I have made mistakes in driving also, and I could have caused an accident by these mistakes. If I would have, it would not be God's responsibility, but my own. To throw blame back on God for all human error, carelessness, and irresponsibility is passing the buck. We don't like it, but we have to accept the fact that God has given us a great responsibility in determining what happens in this world. Most accidents are because we fail in our responsibility. God permits this because He

permits us to be free.

21. HEAVEN-LIKE HOSPITALITY Based on Luke 14:12-14

Earl M. Finch became one of the most popular bachelors in Hawaii because he had the gift of hospitality. It all started in Hattiesberg, Mississippi when he saw a Japanese soldier reading the menu on the window of a drugstore. He felt the impulse to go over to the G I and say, "Are you hungry son?" "You bet," came the reply. He started talking to the soldier and discovered that there were a number of Japanese soldiers in nearby Camp Shelly, but they were not welcome anywhere in town because they were Japanese.

Earl said, "How would you like to bring a couple of your buddies to my place for supper tomorrow." He said, "Yes," and the next day when Earl got home from work he found flowers. The soldiers were so grateful for his hospitality even before they experienced it that they said thanks by means of flowers. Soon Earl had 100 Japanese soldiers over for a barbecue, and he became so popular that he rented a store downtown and turned it into a club for them. As they sailed off to war he began to write letters to them. New soldiers came and he wrote letters to them. In all he wrote 15 thousand letters. Earl kept getting letters back from them, and as they married and had children he got letters saying they named their son Earl in his honor. We are not talking about one or two, or even 5 or 6, but 15 hundred babies were named Earl because of this man's hospitality.

When the war ended a large number of the soldiers went home to Hawaii. They got together and invited Earl to come and visit them. When he arrived the band began to play, and there was a big parade to a park where 5000 Japanese gave Earl Finch a barbecue. The governor and

mayor were there, and one by one the mother's brought their babies for Earl to see. Earl was one of the most popular names in Hawaii because of this man. He never married, but he felt like the biggest granddaddy on earth. He moved to Hawaii where he enjoyed the hospitality that was a reaping of the hospitality he had shown.

This true story is an historical illustration of the power of hospitality to determine one's destiny. Jesus taught this very thing in Matt. 25 where He said, "I was a stranger and you invited me in, and the righteous ask, when did we see you a stranger and invite you in?" Jesus replies, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." They were welcomed into the kingdom God had prepared for them because they were hospitable to strangers. The Greek work for hospitality means love of strangers.

Why was Jesus so concerned that we have a love for strangers? It was because Jesus came into this world as a stranger, and he knows what it is like to be rejected. He came unto His own and His own received Him not. There was no room in the inn at His birth, but this was a problem easily overcome and the stable was a satisfactory substitute. But when you find no room in people's heart and lives for you, there is no substitute. Jesus was not even welcome in His

hometown of Nazareth. It was one of His greatest sorrows in life to experience a lack of hospitality in prejudice people. Jesus knew the burden of being alone and being a stranger that is unwelcome. That is why Jesus loved to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan, for it is the story of hospitality in action. The love of and care of a stranger in need is what it is all about.

Paul portrays the whole outreach of the Gospel to the Gentile world as a ministry of heaven's hospitality. Paul says in Eph. 2:12 that the Gentiles were separate from Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But he goes on to say that they were by Christ brought near through His blood and made one so that they are no longer strangers and aliens, but members of the household of God.

They were strangers, but God took them in, and by His loving hospitality made them His own, and adopted them as His children. Hospitality in the heart of God is the heart of our salvation. Jesus expects that we will respond in kind and be hospitable. He says in Rev. 3:10, "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and eat with him and he with me." Salvation begins with a hospitable heart that invites Christ in. Jesus has no greater joy than that of being invited into our lives in a spirit of hospitality. His next greatest joy is when we express hospitality to others. In Heb. 13:2 we are reminded, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."

We never know who it is we may be blessing by our hospitality, but the one we know we will

always please is our Lord. He is pleased when we are hospitable because that is a form of service, and the servant is the highest class in His kingdom. Jesus in our text makes a special point of urging His followers to go out of their way to show hospitality to the stranger. He urges us not to invite those in who can invite you back, but to focus on the poor and those who cannot repay you. This is a troubling passage to read, for it seems to go against the grain of our nature. It is not a popular text for preaching. I have indexed many thousands of sermons and found only a couple who have preached on this passage.

Part of the problem with this text is that it is so easy to misunderstand. It could be taken to mean that Jesus is opposed to family fellowship and friends and relatives getting together to share in a meal. We know this is just a part of life to have friends and relatives over for all the major holidays, and all of the special occasions in life. It is so much a part of life that we don't want to hear anything that even suggests that this is not important.

It is obvious that Jesus was not saying anything against this universal custom. He loved it Himself and it was a part of His heritage. The Jews were famous for their family feasting. Jesus treasured the time He could get away to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He loved the hospitality of family and friends, and He would not want to convey the idea that we ought not to cultivate the relationships of our friends and relatives by means of hospitality. Jesus would not condone the spirit of Richard Armor's poem called *Relationally Speaking*, even though he would, no doubt, chuckle at it because it contains a grain of truth. Richard Armor writes,

I've relatives living near me, I've others who live afar. I've relatives I'm at peace with

And others with whom I war.

I've relatives who are wealthy And some who are very poor. There are those who are fairly decent And others I can't endure.

Two kinds of relatives please me, But few of either I've known: The kind who leave me money And the kind who leave me alone.

Jesus is not supporting this put down of relatives. He is simply saying that when we use hospitality exclusively for the purpose of entertaining friends and relatives we are limiting this gift for service and relationship building to the natural level. In other words, even the world does this. The most ungodly people on the planet have their relatives and friends over, and there is probably a pagan or atheist alive who has not had the virtue of hospitality on this level. The Christian is to learn how to use all of life's natural gifts and virtues in such a way as to go beyond the natural man and be a blessing to the world. This is not to say that hospitality is not Christian when it only serves those within the kingdom of God. We are to do good to all men, but especially to those of the household of faith. Hospitality to those in Christ is a very precious virtue.

In 3rd John the Apostle writes to his dear friend Gaius, and says in verse 5, "Dear Friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you." He gained a reputation of helping travelling Christians get their task done by providing for them. John adds in verse 8, "We ought to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth." It is a wonderful ministry to show hospitality to those within the Christian family.

The Bible no where hints that the natural virtue of hospitality is not among the highest of values. It is very good, but Jesus is challenging the Christian to go beyond the natural, and to go beyond eros love, which all normal people have, and phile love, which all normal people have, and on to agape love, which is above the normal and exercised only by those who are open to be used as channels of God's love in the world. All love is good, but most love is self-pleasing love, but agape is self-giving love. It is not natural to invite strangers to your home for dinner. That is why the vast majority never do it. We are just normal and natural as anybody else. It is abnormal to so love the poor, helpless, and forgotten people to the point of doing anything with them socially. The idea of fixing a nice meal for people we don't even know is completely foreign to us.

But this is the point of Jesus. You haven't experienced the full joy of hospitality until you take it beyond the natural level and give yourself to entertain those who cannot be of any value to you. That is Christ's way of pointing out that most of the natural virtues of life are based on selfishness. We do good things because when we do we get good things done for us. I scratch your back and you scratch mine. I have you over for dinner, and then get my free one when you have me back. It is not evil, it is just life as it is. But the abundant life in Christ is to go beyond this and do things that are really acts of love with no catch. Humanistic love always needs a payoff but heavenly love is free grace. The grace of God does not need to be repaid. It is unconditional favor. We do not have to spend all eternity paying for our salvation. It is a free gift of infinite worth, and we

will be praising God for it forever, but we don't have to pay for it.

Jesus is saying to go and do likewise in the world. Do acts of love and kindness out of grace just because you love people and desire to be part of the answer to life's problems. Just have people over or take them out, and don't expect anything in return. Your greatest reward will be that it pleases God, and what pleases Him has eternal reward.

What a challenge for us as Christians to rise above the natural level. If Jesus is truly present in our home, and we are conscious of His presence, one of the things that will happen is that we will want to use our home and other resources as means of hospitality on the highest level. That is only possible when we are able to love those who can give us nothing in return. Let's face it, a challenge like this makes most of us feel like babes in Christ and not mature disciples. We live primarily on the natural level, and when it comes to an issue like this we are basically

carnal Christians.

I confess it myself that the few times we have had total strangers in our home for a meal it was not very pleasant, and we were not encouraged to repeat the experience. But you see, I am looking for pleasantness, good results, and fruit, and all of things that make it rewarding, and all of the things that make hospitality enjoyable. I expect some sort of pay off, which is the very thing Jesus says makes my hospitality only natural and on the level of the carnal man. Jesus is saying that as long as we are looking for a present payoff we are operating on the level of the natural man. Only when we choose to show hospitality regardless of the payoff have we risen to the level of agape.

It is so hard for us to follow Jesus to this level of love because we are conditioned by philosophy of success that says if it doesn't pay forget it, and we do just that. No matter how right and good something is, if it doesn't pay off we drop it. That just seems like common sense, but because we follow common sense, which is the level of thinking common to all natural men, we do not rise above the common man.

Jesus calls us to do good things just because they are good and loving things to do whether they pay off or not. Do them just because they ought to be done and God is pleased when they are done. Show hospitality to those who do not deserve it, and who will never be able to respond in kind, just because it is a act of grace. God's grace to us is new every morning, but there is little grace between men that is freely shown for no other reason than the desire to be loving. It is so rare because we resist it. We have a host of objections to this idea of being a host to strangers, or to people outside our class, or to those who will never become our social friends.

One of the strongest objections to this call to heaven-like hospitality is that we are not all made alike, and some people just do not like company. They are loners and creatures in love with solitude. They are shy and awkward even around friends, let alone strangers. John Greenleaf Whittier, the great poet, did not like society, and he had to be tricked into not slipping away when houseguests were to arrive. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the same, and he justified it by saying, "What God hath put asunder why should man join together?"

There are many Christians who feel the same. They are just not gifted with a personality that enjoys hospitality. I think it is important for us to recognize individual differences and realize that

not all Christians will be able to be equal in their obedience on this point. Jesus was speaking to one who was having a dinner party, and He was letting him know how to be more effective as a channel of God's love and grace. We can't assume that Jesus meant this to be applied by people who have even a hard time enjoying a social event with people they know.

I think the important thing for us to focus on is not all the reasonable and legitimate excuses for not practicing what Jesus is saying, but rather to focus on the principle of grace and areas of life where we can apply the principle in our lives. The principle of grace is that of the higher reaching down to lift and encourage the lower. It is the Gospel of God's plan of salvation applied on the human level. It is the imitation of Christ by being Christ to someone who needs it.

This leads us to make an important distinction between humanistic and heaven-like hospitality. The humanistic is good, but it is all on the natural level. It deals with all forms of relief and welfare. Christians should be involved on this level, for this is a minimum level of compassion. But heaven-like hospitality offers to needy people the luxury of being accepted. You do not need to accept anybody by sending them food and clothing. It can be done even as a put down to make them feel inferior. But heaven-like hospitality implies acceptance. If you eat with a person you are doing something far different than if you give them something to eat. Sadler writes, "Partaking of food in common has, by the absolutely universal consent of mankind, been esteemed a very different thing to a mere gift of food."

The gift of food is an acceptance of your responsibility to care about the needs of others. The gift of your hospitality is an acceptance of the person with the needs. Both are good and necessary, but the second is the higher calling to which Jesus is calling. Someone said, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Jesus is challenging us to be involved in the ministry of accepting those who have every reason for loss of self-esteem and non-acceptance of themselves.

Low self-esteem seems to be one of the primary effects of the fall. It is a key factor in almost every deficient life-style you can imagine. Why are people alcoholics? It is low self-esteem. The same is true for why people are prostitutes, why they commit suicide, why they become drug addicts, and why they become criminals. We could go on and on, but we can wrap it up with this statement: Why do people do all the sinful and foolish things they do that are so destructive to themselves and others? The answer is almost always found in low self-esteem.

Loving people is, in essence, lifting their level of self-esteem. Giving them things may have no effect on this whatever, and could even push them lower. The most effective way to lift any persons self-esteem is by acceptance. Heaven-like hospitality is one of the most powerful ways there is to give this luxury of acceptance. A Scottish proverb says, "Welcome is the best dish in the kitchen." But its the principle that counts. If you can find other ways more consistent with your personality to convey acceptance, then by all means do it. A Persian proverb says, "Kiss not thine own child if an orphan is standing by." That is being sensitive to the feelings of others. But heavenly hospitality would not be content with mere refraining, but would give the orphan the kiss of acceptance.

The early church took this concept of hospitality and developed the hospital where the sick

could be cared for in Christian love. And also the hospice which met the needs of strangers traveling, much like modern hotels and motels. Chrysostom, the golden mouth preacher, between 400 and 402 A. D. built several hospitals, and Jerome founded the first orphanage in Jerusalem. St. Augustine founded a hospital in his own home, and the monasteries became hospitals and hotels, and also nursing homes as well as shelters for orphans, cripples and the destitute. St. Bernard's great monastery became famous for its brave men and dogs who rescued thousands of people from certain death in the mountain passes of France.

There are numerous ways we can apply the principle of grace, but none is so powerful as heaven-like hospitality. It is so much more personal than Christian institutions. Asking someone into your home says something you cannot say in any other way. Arthur Guiterman wrote,

Hail Guest! We ask not what thou art; If friend, we greet thee, hand and heart. If stranger, such no longer be. If foe, our love shall conquer thee.

May God help us to choose the higher way and by hospitality or some other means convey to strangers the love and grace of God which offers them acceptance.

22. THE GREAT SUPPER Based on Luke 14:15-24

An ancient Eastern story tells about a prince who fell in love with a very beautiful girl. All of the people rejoiced to see them united in marriage. The whole life of the prince revolved around this girl of rare beauty, but one day she sickened and died. So great was his grief that he became ill and lingered between life and death, but finally he recovered. He determined to build a perfect memorial to express the great love he had for his wife. He sent craftsman over all the world to find the best pieces of marble. On a wide plain surrounded by trees he built in its center the most magnificent shrine his people had ever seen. Almost all of the working hours of his day he spent outside this beautiful tomb thinking of his great love.

After some time passed he began to feel he had not done enough to express his love, and so around the tomb he erected a beautiful shell of matching marble. People came and admired it, and they joined the prince in his expression of grief at the loss of such a great love. Soon even the shell became even inadequate, and so over the tomb and the shell he began construction of a magnificent circle temple. It took years and millions of dollars, and the skill of the best craftsman to complete it. One day when it was finished the prince sat for days gazing at it. People came from foreign lands to see this most beautiful expression of love on the earth.

The prince was still filled with despair, for he felt he had not done enough. He resolved that over the tomb, shell and temple he would build the most marvelous building the world had ever seen. He impoverished himself, and the vast resources he had were not enough to bring the most beautiful things he wanted to put into this structure. At last when the prince was old the

building was completed. The old prince climbed the high tower to admire this memorial of unbelievable beauty. As he looked down he spied the tomb which held the beautiful girl he had loved. It didn't fit into the total picture. It was a plot that marred the beauty of it all. In a fit of anger that anything should be allowed to mar the beauty of his memorial, he sent his servants to remove that thing.

It is only a story, and we know that no man is such a fool that he would sacrifice the center of his life for the sake of its fringes. We all know that no one gives up the essential for the trivial. Certainly nobody would ignore the eternal to indulge in the temporal. Who would even dare to suggest it? Who would even dare to claim that

intelligent creatures could be so blind that they would refuse glory and remain in gloom, or that they would trample on heaven and travel to hell. Jesus not only dared to claim the truth of this folly, but He accused those who were doing it right to their face. He did it to those Pharisees who had build such an elaborate religion with beautiful ceremonies and volumes of pious wisdom, but left no room for the Messiah. Christ did not fit into their system. He marred their perfect religion, and so they, like the foolish old prince, had that which was of central importance removed in order to preserve their structure they considered of such beauty.

Who can cease to wonder at the folly of it all? No wonder Jesus wept over Jerusalem. As we look at his parable of the great supper we begin to suspect that Jesus must continue to weep over the cities of the world, for the folly He portrays here is as up to date as the calendar. We want to consider it in 3 sections: The expression of God's invitation, the excuses for rejecting God's invitation, and the extension of God's invitation.

I. THE EXPRESSION OF GOD'S INVITATION. v. 16-17

Jesus was at the home of one of the chief Pharisees eating supper. In His conversation He spoke of the resurrection of the just, and just like a Pharisee one of them thought that it was him and said, "Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God." Jesus never did like pious prattle, or what William Taylor calls "Holy humbug." He rebukes him by telling a story that says that he will be blessed who eats in the kingdom of God, but are you sure you will be there? Let me tell you a story that shows how little some people really value in their heart what they pretend to hold so highly with their tongue.

The story begins with a great supper prepared, and many guests are invited. It is agreed by all that this represents God's invitation to enter His kingdom. I call your attention to the way that invitation is expressed. It is expressed in terms of an invitation to a great supper. In other words, God calls us to a feast and not a fast. Eating is an universal pleasure, and Jesus constantly expressed the joys of His kingdom in terms of the joys of a banquet. The story of the Prodigal ends with a joyful feast, and Jesus says in Rev. 3:20, "If any man hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and eat with him and he with me." Revelation also indicates that

eternity begins with the great marriage supper of the Lamb.

The fact that God's invitation is expressed in these terms is significant. It signifies the positive nature of the Christian life. The Old Testament says so often, "Thou shall not." In the kingdom of God the motto is positive and says, "Blessed is he who shall." God invites us to a great banquet, which implies that nobody should have more enjoyment than Christians. Our feasting on the things of Christ and His Word ought to make us the most joyful creatures under the sun. Something is lacking until a Christian realizes it is fun to be a Christian. One of the most serious charges against fundamentalism is that it is all dam with no fun or mentalism. Many have had to endure a background like that of John Ruskin, who says when he was a child he was given a jumping jack for a present, but it was immediately taken from him by his pious aunt who said toys were no thing for a Christian child. We ought to be continually asking ourselves, where is the feast? Where is the joyful banquet? We should be thrilled with the ultimate and captivated by the infinite. Next we see

II. THE EXCUSES FOR REJECTING GOD'S INVITATION. v. 18-20

The very first reaction of fallen man to God's presence was an excuse. The reason Adam ate of the fruit was because he wanted to, but his excuse was that his wife gave it to him. The reason the Pharisees wanted Jesus crucified was to save their own position and system, but their excuse was that he was a danger to Caesar, and that he blasphemed God. When Holman Hunt's picture "The Light of the World" was thrown on a screen for a congregation in England, a little boy leaned over and whispered to his father, "Why don't they let him in?" That is one of the most profound and puzzling questions ever asked. There is no good reason. There are only excuses.

As we consider this parable, we see the same mysterious behavior as God's invitation receives ridiculous rejection. It is so unnatural and unreasonable that men would ever refuse to go to a feast when there was no good reason for not going. It doesn't make sense to turn down such an invitation. What would you think if you met a

friend coming rapidly down the sidewalk and he said to you, "Man that was close. I was just invited to be a guest at the finest restaurant in town for a free steak dinner, but I managed to get out of it." You would naturally ask him why he got out of it, and you would wonder at his sanity if he replied, "I just bought a new shirt and I want to try it on."

That is just the impression Jesus wants us to get of those in this parable, for the purpose of it is to show the sheer folly of those who reject God's invitation. F. W. Farrar calls it the "Parable of short-sighted folly." It is unbelievable, but we see it everywhere. People refuse the grace of God, the love of Christ and the joy of salvation in order to be absorbed in a world of trivialities. Bishop Kennedy says that as he watches people in their weekend activities it looks

like a deliberate attempt to seek the worst and ignore the best.

The excuses of men are legion for not going to church, for not reading the Bible, and for not committing their lives to Christ. The reasons they give are similar to those in this parable. They do not like the host and so they do anything to avoid his presence. Let's look at their excuses a little closer.

1. He is preoccupied with his property. There is something strange about this excuse. One would think he ought to have looked at the land before he bought it, but now that he has, what is to prevent his going to the supper? Certainly his land will be there tomorrow. The point is, his excuse is suppose to be unreasonable, for he represents the folly of those who devote themselves to the second best and have no time for God. Will you come and find forgiveness of your sin? Please have me excused. Will you come and be restored to God? Please have me excused. Will you come and receive a life of joy? Please have me excused. Will you come and find hope for the future? Please have me excused.

He represents the man who says I will attend to this world first, and the next one if there is one when it comes. His thinking is real-estate before righteousness. Why gamble on a hope when land is right here and now. He has missed the whole point that the joys of the kingdom of God are also here and now, and one can grow old knowing that the best is yet to be.

We see a tinge of the miser in this man. He is greedy for more and more land, but Jesus says that you can gain the whole world and have no profit if you lose your soul. Property can never ultimately satisfy. A man once put a sign up on his property that said, "I will give this land to anyone who is completely contented." And applicant came to take it, and he asked the man, "Are you really contented?" He answered, "Yes." Then he asked him, "Why then do you want my land?" A man will never be content as long as he puts the second best in first place, and excuse himself from the kingdom of God for the sake of property.

2. He is preoccupied with possessions. Again we wonder at such a poor example of Jewish thrift. He buys oxen before he sees them. His excuse is about the same as the first, for he is too busy being successful to be saved. Five yoke of oxen is quite a purchase, and it indicates a large farm to plow. He is bidden to share in the benefits of the kingdom of God, but he is too busy. He is the man who will be a Christian when it is convenient and fits his schedule. He is the perfect example of the modern man who is too busy for God. There is no time to be wasted in worship.

The strange thing is that the man is too busy for God, but he never seems to stop and consider the purpose of it all. He lets the drive for success sap the springs for life dry without ever asking why. One of the best illustrations of this race of thoughtlessness is an incident told by Clovis Chappell, the well known Methodist preacher. A boat was carrying a cargo of meat to New Orleans to Memphis when another boat tried to pass it and the race was on. The captain

ordered full steam ahead, but it was not sufficient to stay in the lead. He then ordered some of the fat meat thrown into the fire. This worked so well that he kept repeating it. The whistle was blowing and the flag flying as he arrived in Memphis way ahead of his rival. But when the merchants came to get their cargo, they found it had all been burnt up in the race. The captain was a great success in racing, but he failed completely in his central purpose. He was a successful failure because he sacrificed the essential for the trivial.

Such is the case with those who are preoccupied with possessions and do not have time for God. Success with God is terrific, but without God it is tragic. Augustine said, "God wants to give us something, but He cannot, because our hands are full, and there is no where for Him to put it." If men would yield to God and make Christ the supreme loyalty in their lives they would have the spiritual and moral greatness to use their success in every area of life for good, but instead, they excuse themselves from the kingdom of God, and the result is material progress in the hands of moral pigmies. Man has so out done himself in scientific success that he hardly knows what to do with all the power he has in his hands. He has been so successful in getting ahead of his capacity to deal with his discoveries that one man said, "Modern man is obsolete." Modern man is so busy dealing with his success that he says, "I would like to be a Christian, but I am too busy right now. I pray thee, have me excused."

3. Preoccupied with pleasures. Here is a great piece of logic, for he says I have married a wife and so I cannot come. This one takes the prize. D. L. Moody said, "Why couldn't he take his wife with him?" What Jesus meant to teach by using this example is that not only property and possessions, but pleasures and persons must also take second place to God if one is to be a true Christian. Verse 26 says he must hate, which means to love less. There is only one throne in your life, and only one supreme loyalty, and it must be Christ and not anything or anyone else.

It is amazing how many refuse the master for the sake of their mate. So many young people get married who previously went to different churches, and then they end up going to neither. They are happy together and so they get preoccupied in their new life and have no time for God. The significant thing about all of these excuses is that there is nothing wrong with any of the involvements in themselves. Business and pleasure are legitimate, and marriage is ordained of God, but all of them can keep people from God. We could title this as, "The parable of what is wrong with what is right." We have here the paradox of the wickedness of the worthwhile, the vanity of the valuable, the madness of the meaningful, and the deception of the delightful.

Often the great conflict of life is not between evil and duty but between duty number one and duty number two. It is a duty to be successful and happily married, but the first obligation people have is to God. Jesus said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." Jesus is saying that an excessive attention to the second rate is a sure road to the neglect of God. It is utter folly to do so since all things become

more glorious when one is dedicated to Christ. We learn from this parable that worldliness is a whole lot more subtle and deceiving than the traditional taboos. There is not one of us who is free from the danger of putting a good on the throne in the place of the best.

III. THE EXTENSION OF GOD'S INVITATION. v. 21-23

The historical setting of this parable makes it clear that what Jesus was referring to was the fact that these Pharisees were too busy to enter the kingdom of God, and so He would extend His invitation to the Publicans and sinners, and all the needy masses, which would even include the Gentiles. They asked to be excused and Jesus answers their prayer and excuses them. They are excluded from the kingdom, and have the worst answer to prayer they ever had.

Robert Lewis Stevenson said, "Everybody, soon or late, sets down to a banquet of consequences." So those who refuse the joys of God must suffer the wrath of God. A great privilege is a great peril if neglected. Jesus makes it quite clear that there is a point of no return where a deliberate choice in refusing God is equal to guaranteed exclusion from His kingdom. The main emphasis here, however, is the wideness of God's mercy. All are invited, and yet there is still room. These were comforting words to John Bunyan who feared it was too late for him until he saw these words, "Yet there is room." Moody said this is one of the mottos of the kingdom of God.

God says to compel them to come in. It means to constrain them, or strongly persuade. What a challenge for us as servants. We are to urge men to come to the banquet of God, and what a joy

to know he will not be satisfied until the banquet hall is full. Bengal said, "Neither nature nor grace can endure a vacuum." A Sunday school teacher was telling the story of Abraham taking Isaac as a sacrifice. One girl said, "O please don't go on, for it is terrible." Another child said, "Don't be silly. This is one of God's stories, and they always come out right." There is folly in the parable, but it ends with a note of optimism. How the story of our life will end is to be determined by what we do with God's invitation that we have had extended to us. Will you make excuses, or will you come to the great supper?

23. LETTING GO OF YOUR PAINFUL PAST Based on Luke 15:11-32

Neil Armstrong was the first man to set his foot on the moon, but long before that momentous event he was a dreamer. As early as age 2 he fell in love with airplanes, and for the rest of his life that was a focus for him. He made model planes as a child, and at age 14 he got a job at a small airport. He worked 22 hours to earn the 9 dollars he needed for one flying lesson. One day a 20 year old friend, who was also taking lessons, crashed in a field and Neil ran to help him out of the cockpit. He died in Neil's arms.

This was a challenge to the dream of his life. That night his mother came into his room and

saw Neil with an old Sunday School notebook with a picture of Jesus on the cover. It was next to his model airplane. "What have you decided about flying?" she asked. He said, "With God's help I must go on flying." He went on to fulfill his dream even beyond his expectations. But he had to get beyond this painful experience to fulfill his dream.

There are no end to the painful experiences that become obstacles to the fulfilling of our dreams. Millions know the story of Joni Eareckson Toda, who as a teenager broke her neck in a diving accident. She became paralyzed and felt her life was over. Had she been able to do so she would have taken her own life. Her dreams were over, and she was forced to live a nightmare. But as you know, she has had a world wide ministry to the handicapped and to all of us by movies, books, songs, radio, and by art. She is one of the most creative people on the planet even though severely handicapped. She had to let go of a terribly painful past in order to be used of God, but she did it, and she proclaims to the handicapped of the world, "God's grace can overflow from a half-broken cup."

Some are broken in body, but others are broken in their spirit, and the cause for it is more directly related to their sinful behavior. This was the case with the Prodigal Son and his older brother. We don't think of the older brother as prodigal, because the word so clearly describes the younger brother who went off and wasted his fortune in riotous living. The extravagant wasteful use of resources is what a prodigal does. The older brother did the same thing in a different way. He wasted his fortune by not using it and enjoying it. He wasted his resources more like the miser, but the fact is, both boys blew it and created a painful past they had to let go of, or they would be enslaved to it.

The younger son created his painful past by rebellion, and the older son by resentment. These

two barriers hold back millions of people from fulfilling God's dream for their life. But there is a third person in the story also with a painful past to overcome and that is the father. He had two boys who turned his hair gray prematurely. We don't know where his wife was, for she is not mentioned, and so he was likely a widower who had to raise these boys on his own. In the parable he represents God, and so we can assume he was a good father. He did not abuse his boys and treat them unfairly. He gave them love and all that adequate wealth could provide. But still they were both a pain in the neck and all parts lower. Here was a father who had the painful past of regret for the way his two boys turned out.

This text is very appropriate for looking at barriers that hold us back, for most of the barriers that create a painful past are like those in the parable. They are family related, and includes such things as broken families, dysfunctional families, parental abuse, parental conflict, sibling feuds, rebellion and resentment. There are literally millions in our culture and churches that have a painful past to overcome because of these factors in their lives. Some will break free and dream again, but others will be bound by their past. The goal is to be among those

who break the barriers that hold them back and dare to dream again. This is an easy task for those who have a traumatic experience like the pastor who told this pathetic tale.

His father had been a politician and they lived in a large house and had everything, but no real family life. As a teen he came home late one night and heard a splash in the swimming pool. He went to see what it was, and he found his mother at the bottom of the pool. She had tied some of his barbells around her neck and thrown herself in seeking to take her own life. He was able to rescue her and call for help. Her life was spared, but he did not feel like a hero. His father said to him, "If you hadn't left your barbells out, this wouldn't have happened." Dad threw the responsibility onto him, and he had to fight his way through this load of guilt to get on with his own dream. He did it, but many do not. The pain hurt so bad that they become slaves to it and never break free.

The older brother of the Prodigal is an example of one who could not break free. He was so resentful of his younger brother that the logic of his father could not penetrate his heart. It was hardened by his bitter resentment that the younger brother was still loved by the father even after he lived the life of a fool. He represents the Pharisees who resented Jesus for loving the lost and sinful Gentiles. They were the good guys, but Jesus loved the bad guys too, and they despised Him for it. They could not break free from this self-erected prison of resentment.

This parable reveals that the family, which is the best thing God ever gave to mankind for their pleasure, is the key tool Satan uses for producing pain in the world. You have so much conflict between parents and children, and between the children themselves. Then you if go into the extended family and include the family of God, you have the arena where most of the pains of our past originate. Listen to the list that David Mains gives in his book *Never Too Late To Dream*.

A split of close friend within a church. The failure of a spiritual leader you trusted. Betrayal by a Christian friend you went to for help. An experience where you tried your best to serve, but failed. Embarrassment by a harsh authority figure.

Criticism from class members you were teaching. Having your best efforts sabotaged by a ruling board. Being left for another by your mate. Horrible memories of childhood abuse.

The Christian who has never been hurt by family, friends, or church leaders has led a charmed life. One of the leaders of the seminar I went to told of his sister who was hurt in church, and now never goes to church. She has been a Christian for years, but she is missing out on God's best because she is letting a painful past bind her. The world is full of Christians like this who are imprisoned by the past.

One of the reasons the Bible is full of the sins of its heroes is for this very reason-that God's people can see the past does not need to bind them. Moses blew it and became a murderer.

He had to flee Egypt, but God dared him to dream again, and led him back to take his people out of Egypt. David blew it and fell into the sin of adultery and murder, but God led him to repent and to dare to dream again, and we now sing the praises of God by means of the Psalms of David.

The Prodigal is even a better example for he is a nobody. He doesn't even have a name. He is not a king or a leader in the community. He is just another kid on the block, and an average Joe. He blew it big time, but he had the good sense to dare to dream again, and he broke through the barrier of his painful past and got back into a life of pleasure with his father. He felt alienated from his family, and as out of place as a salmon in the Sahara, but he soon learned the problem was not dad after all. It was himself. When he finally told himself the truth that he was loved by his father, and that he had it made at home, he swallowed his pride and went back.

The paradox is, it is the kid who ran from home and blew it who ends up reconciled to his father, and the kid who stays home legalistically doing everything right ends up out of fellowship with the father. The bottom line is this: Get right with your father and you can break through the barrier of your painful past. This principle applies to a great deal more than just father and child conflicts.

Dr. Neil T. Anderson, the leading authority on Christians in bondage to a painful past, uses this principle in many situations. In his book *Victory Over The Darkness* he tells of counseling a couple who were active leaders in the church. They were in his office 2 minutes and he was already thinking they were hopeless. He could tell by their bitterness toward each other that he could not save their marriage. So he persuaded them to each just try to get away alone for a retreat where they could listen to his tapes on who we are in Christ. Each was to go their own way and reflect on their identity as Christians. They did it, and like hundreds of others of his clients they got right with their heavenly Father. They were then in a state where they could deal with other broken relationships. This marriage was saved and harmony was restored.

Dr. Anderson wrote, "This couple discovered that getting right with each other began with getting right with God. In getting right with God always begins with settling once for all the issue that God is your loving Father, and you are His accepted child." This is the essence of all of his excellent writing dealing with every kind of bondage. Get right with God and tell yourself the truth about how the Gospel applies to you. If the Gospel is true for you, and you are reconciled to God, then you have no business being kept in bondage to any sinful past. "If the Son shall make

you free you shall be free indeed." The only thing that keeps a child of God in bondage is their own unbelief. The Prodigal said, "I'm a child of my father. I am not worthy and I'll tell him so, but I am going home." He did just that and gave the world another happy ending to a tragic

story of human folly.

He could have spent the rest of his miserable life in the pig pen feeling shame and guilt, but he didn't do it. He dared to dream again, and he left the slop behind. Many a child of God gets locked into a pattern of going nowhere because they won't move on. Janette George, who played the role of Corrie Ten Boom in the movie *The Hiding Place* wrote a fascinating book called *Travel Tips From A Reluctant Traveler*. She tells of a Christian friend who went to every godly speaker who came to town. She made decision after decision for Christ. She wore herself out trying to be born again.

Finally Janette got sick of her complaining that nothing worked. She said to her, "Your trouble isn't a lack of salvation, its a lack of knowledge. Stop struggling for birth. You're born! Start growing up!" She held her breath as she awaited her friends response. Her friend just said that you may be right. In the next year she grew like a well-watered flower. She broke out of that bondage of a vicious circle of trying to feel something, and get on with her life by believing God's Word rather than her feelings.

Feelings are wonderful, but they can also be terrible when they are under the control of a painful experience. Dan and Cindy were a fine young couple preparing for ministry on the mission field. Then tragedy struck when Cindy was raped. The event tore the couple up inside. They moved away from the community where it happened, but Cindy could not break free from that past event. Six months after the rape they attended a church conference where Dr. Neil Anderson was speaking. Cindy came to him in tears and said, "I just can't get over this thing. I know God can turn everything into good, but how is He going to do that?" He told her that God will work for good, but He does not make a bad thing good. The good is coming through a bad crisis and becoming a better and wiser person for it.

Cindy responded, "But I can't separate myself from my experience. I am a rape victim, and will be so the rest of my life." Anderson said, "No, you are a child of God. The evil does not change your identity. You are a child of God and your tragedy does not change that." That is where healing begins. The second step after you establish who you are is forgiveness. This is a vital but complex step. Part of the problem is quoting texts that do not fit the situation. The Bible is loaded with the commands to forgive. The problem is, if the rapist does not repent and seek forgiveness for his evil, even God does not forgive him. So how are we to rise to a higher level and say, "Okay God, you won't do it, but here I go-I forgive the man that raped me." How superficial, for you are saying in the back of your mind, "I hope God never forgives and that he burns in hell for his wickedness."

Simply telling Christians they have to forgive terrible offenders only produces guilt and hypocrites. If she had a chance to put the guy behind bars, it would be a Christian obligation to do so. So what in the world does forgiveness mean? I haven't read anyone who has dealt with the subject to my satisfaction, and so I am sharing with you the best that I have learned from

Scripture. Forgiveness in this situation means letting go of the past in the sense of relinquishing your right to revenge. It means saying to God, "I let go of this sinner and leave him in your hands.

He may get by this evil in this life and never pay. I'll not grieve over this injustice, but leave him to your final judgement. I will refuse to let his evil dominate my mind or my time. I let go and move on to live my life for you, and make this only a memory."

You are not saying its okay, and I'll just forget it and never press charges if I find the man. You are just saying that you are letting go. If you hold on to it, it will dominate your life and you will be in bondage to his evil. If you cast this burden on Jesus, you will be free of it. Until you do you will be in bondage to your past, and not free in Christ. If you are holding on to any sort of revenge and desire to get even, you are hurting yourself, and you are still in their power. No matter what you are a victim of you need to let go of that painful past in order to move on to dream again.

Dr. Anderson writes, "In time you will be able to think about the people who offended you without feeling hurt, anger or resentment." If you still do after a long time, you have not let go, and it is no longer they who are your enemies, but you are holding yourself in bondage. Now you are adding your own sin to theirs, and you are a curse to yourself. You are a prisoner of your own jail. You have the key, but you won't let yourself go free. Dr. Anderson who has counseled thousands says that 95% of the people he has dealt with put down father and mother as the two people they have to forgive most.

What a tragic world it is where life's greatest enemies are parents and children. But facts are facts, and Christians need to deal with it. Forgive your parents and let go the pain they inflicted. If you don't, you will likely be as bad or even worse to your own children. Those who hold to the pain keep on feeling it, and then they keep on inflicting it. Abused children become abusive parents. Alcoholic parents produce alcoholic children. The vicious cycle can only be broken if somebody lets go.

The father in the parable of the Prodigal is the ideal example of letting go. If anybody had good reason to hold on and resent the past, it was him. He had been a good father, and yet his rebel son rejected his love and guidance, and he went off to waste what the father had labored so hard to provide. You talk about painful experiences. What parent would not be devastated by such rejection and rebellion? And yet, when his rebel son walked back into his life, he let go of that painful past as quickly as he would let go of a red hot iron.

The father did not say, "You hurt me so deeply son. It's going to take months of counseling and family therapy before I can accept you again." He just wrapped his arms around him and kissed him. If he felt embarrassed because the neighbors would all be talking about his rebel son, he let it go. If he grieved because all his love and care did not change his sons rebellion, he

let it go. If he resented being taken advantage of, and his resources being used to promote evil in the world, he let it go. He let go all the negative and painful emotions of the past. He broke into the world of the positive immediately. It was the world of forgiveness, reconciliation, and celebration. He refused to let the painful past rob him of one more minute of his life. The father and the Prodigal both let go, and they are the heroes of the parable.

The elder brother held on to his painful past, and he became the fool who made his own life miserable, and added pain to the rest of the family. People who do not let go of their own painful past are the people who make life hard for others. There are millions of Christians in bondage to

their past, and they are a pain themselves and to other believers. That is why the first step to a victorious Christian life is to let go of your painful past. Dr. Anderson has learned that this often takes a lot of patience and guidance, but he also has learned that it can happen instantly if Christians will believe God's Word and accept the completed work of Christ for them. Jesus died for all sin, and all sin can be forgiven and cleansed. All of life's negative experiences can be overcome, and peace with God and men can be achieved. Every Christians is either a pleasure or a pain in the body of Christ, and the key factor that makes the difference is letting go of a painful past.

24. GOD IS OUR FRIEND Based on Luke 15:11-32

Martin Luther spent a major portion of his life looking for a God who liked him. He was devoutly religious from his childhood, but religion was more a burden than a blessing, for his God was not his friend. He knew God hated sin and demanded perfection and so he was obsessed with trying to be perfect. As a monk he went beyond the rigorous rules of the monastery. He fasted and prayed longer than any of the others. He denied himself the normal allotment of blankets and almost froze to death. He punished his body and devoted every ounce of energy to being super-spiritual.

He once wrote, "I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work." Suicide by super-spiritually was the direction he was heading. It sounds like such deep devotion, but in reality it was all based on fear. God was not a father he loved and a friend he served. God was a tyrant he feared.

Luther was so obsessed with his sin that he made his confessor a nervous wreck. Others would confess their sin in a few minutes, but he would stay for hours, and once even stayed for six hours confessing the sin of the previous day. On and on he went for everything he did was a sin in his eyes. He even confessed that he stayed up after the lights were to be out to read his Bible by candlelight. That was one of his sins. Staupitz, the leader of the monastery, finally got

fed up with Luther and in anger said, "Look here, if you expect Christ to forgive you come in with something to forgive-parricide, blasphemy, adultery, instead of all these peccadilloes. Man, God is not angry with you, you are angry with God."

When the truth finally sunk into Luther's head and heart, and he saw that he was the problem, he found the greatest treasure a man can find-he found God was his friend. He was a loving Father who provided for us what we needed in order to be forgiven. We do not have to earn our salvation, but freely receive it as His gift of love. When Luther stopped working to save himself, and took salvation as a free gift from God by faith in Christ, he made a lot of new friends, but the greatest of them all was God. He found a God who liked him. Luther was losing friendship on both the earthly and heavenly level because he was blind to the fact that he was the problem. When we are full of misconceptions and misunderstandings, we are in bondage, and only the truth

can set us free.

A prominent American writer read the book *Forgive Us Our Trespasses* by Lloyd C. Douglas. She wrote to the author and said, "As I read your book I saw myself as I really was. I finished it late at night and the next day I went out and recaptured five friendships I had lost because of my unforgiving spirit." The truth had set her free. The fact is, most of the broken relationships in life, and the loss of friendship with men and God, are based on our false conceptions. Like Luther, we are often angry with God and with others, and we misinterpret this as their anger with us. If you examine most of the conflicts you have in marriage or with children and others, you will see they usually start with your rotten inner mood at someone else's behavior. We create God and others in our own image when we are full of hostility and we blame them for being what we are.

The ancient world is full of myths that portray God as the foe of man. Zeus, the king of gods in Greek mythology was so portrayed. Prometheus was a god who took pity on man and tried to warm and cheer his life by giving him the gift of fire. Zeus became very angry because of this grace and love expressed by Prometheus. He had him chained to a rock in the Adriatic Sea. He was tortured with the heat and thirst of the day and the cold of the night. And then for an added touch of sadistic pleasure he prepared a vulture to tear out his liver. Zeus was very creative in his bitterness. He made it so the liver would keep growing back so the vulture could tear it out over and over again. This was the picture of God that many people had, and, of course, the only reaction to such a tyrant is rebellion and hostility.

When I read the writing of famous atheists like Robert Ingersal, I see this anger at God. He is so mad at God that he blames God for all that is awful and evil in life, and this justifies his anger. You have a right to be angry at a God who is responsible for all that is evil. Believers sometimes fall into this same trap. They start with a false view of God and His relationship to a world of evil. It looks to them like God does not care about them and they are angry. This is where we

see the elder son in the parable of the prodigal. He is mad at his father and his anger blinds him to the fact that he is the problem. Instead he tries to justify his anger by making the father look like the culprit, and the cause for his hostility.

The first thing we see here is that it is not enough to know that God is our Father to have a right relationship to Him. The elder brother had no doubt about the fatherhood of his father, but he did doubt the friendship of his father. In other words, being a father does not guarantee that one is a friend. The world is full of fathers who are not friends. Knowing that God is a father does not help many people who have fathers who abuse them, reject them, and refuse to give them love and attention.

Jay Kessler, for years the president of Youth For Christ, says the idea of the fatherhood of God is not adequate to appeal to a generation of kids who have been rejected by their fathers. He says imagine what it is like to a child who has been abused, beaten, scorned, and rejected by a father to be told by Christians that now what we have is an even bigger and stronger one of these for you to get to know. Is it any wonder that they would say, no thank you? God as father is not always the greatest truth to reach people.

The elder brother did not need to know that his father was his father. He needed to know that truth which the younger son discovered, and that was that his father was his friend. In his anger

the elder brother felt like his father was his foe. The younger son felt the same way earlier. He felt he had to get away on his own to experience the best of life. He felt that his real friends were somewhere out there in the world waiting to be found. It was not until he had lost all and had hit bottom that he came home to discover that his father was his greatest friend. This is what Luther had to discover about God, and this is what all men have to discover about God. Joshua Liebman wrote

In this vast universe There is but one supreme truth-That God is our friend! By that truth meaning is given To the remote stars, the numberless centuries, The long and heroic struggle of mankind-.... O my Soul, dare to trust this truth! Dare to rest in God's kindly arms, Dare to look confidently into His face, Then launch thyself into life unafraid! Knowing thou art within thy Father's house, That thou art surrounded by His love, Thou wilt become master of fear, Lord of life, conqueror even of death!

If this be the peak of truth, and there is abundant of evidence to support it, then, like all other peaks, it is not arrived at with a step, but is a hard climb. And like any other climb, there are hindrances and helps. If we are to know God as our friend, we have to be aware of the hindrances to be overcome, and of the helps to aid us in arriving at this pinnacle of truth. We cannot cover them all, but I think the greatest hindrance and the greatest help can be seen

clearly in this Parable of the Prodigal.

I. THE GREATEST HINDRANCE.

The greatest hindrance to believing God is our friend is God's permissiveness. God as represented by the prodigal's father let him take his share of the estate and set off for the far country. This is one of man's major problems with God. God does not run a very tight ship. He let's men do the most foolish and stupid things, and it fill the world with evil. If God was not so permissive, the world would not be in such a mess, and so it is basically God's fault. The father could have said no, but he let his son go off and make a fool of himself. Sure he would have hated his father had he not let him go, but it would have been for his own good. But he just let him go his own way to do his own thing.

Men came to Jesus in Luke 13 and told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices, and about the 18 on whom the Tower of Siloam fell. The question in their minds was, why did God permit these tragedies? The popular answer, in the tradition of Job's friends, was that these people must have been worse sinners than others, and so deserved this judgment. Jesus rejected this answer and said they were not worse sinners, and that unless they repented they would all perish. Jesus made it clear that God permits good things to happen to bad people as the sun shines on evil as well as the good, and the rain falls on the unjust as well as the

just. God also permits bad things to happen to good people. All of the Apostles died violent deaths, and so suffering and tragedy does not mean at all that God is judging someone for their sin.

Jesus rejected the concept of God as the judge, jury, and executioner who stands ready to exact his pound of flesh like a Shylock eager for revenge. Jesus portrays a God who is temporarily tolerant of evil. He is the father of the prodigal who tolerates and permits him to do what is almost certain folly. He is the sower who sows good seed in the field, and then permits the enemy to sow weeds in his field, and then permits the weeds to grow with the good seed until harvest. The critics of God do not go for all this permissiveness. This, to them, is only proof that God has his priorities out of order. Instead of wasting his time in the trivial business of counting the hairs on our heads and noting the sparrows that fall, God should be preventing all that His permissiveness allows. He should be stopping falling towers and weed sowing, and stubborn sons from going off half cocked with the family savings.

God should be more repressive and not so permissive is a basic human criticism of God's governing of the world. None of us can escape this obstacle to our faith in God as a friend. We live in a world where evil is no longer hidden. The tyrants who keep masses of people imprisoned and oppressed are on the front page, and we wonder how God can permit such evil men to have such power. Why does God permit the drug trafficker to ruin millions of lives?

Why does God permit so many dens of iniquity that rob the world of justice and righteousness? The world is full of people angry at God for allowing so much evil, and it puts a strain on our conviction that God is really a caring friend.

The number one cause for Christians getting angry at God is His permissiveness. Isobel Kuhn and her family were missionaries in China when World War II broke out. Her children had to be sent away to school, and her husband was off to gather remnants of his scattered people. In her loneliness she vented her anger on God. "I am a family person-I need my family," she railed at God. Her anger was destroying her health and her relationship with God, and she came to realize the folly of blaming God for the folly of men. She was reconciled to God and regained her peace, but the point is, God permissiveness was a great hindrance to her conviction that God was her friend.

Soren Kierkegaard was right when he said, "God is our greatest anxiety." When we do not understand Him, we do not understand ourselves or others, and we are in a wrong relationship to everyone. The villain of the parable of the prodigal is the elder brother. He did not understand the father's permissiveness. He not only permitted the younger brother to take off with his share of the estate and blow it, he permitted him to come home again with dignity, and he even threw a party for him. The elder brother was so full of anger at the father's permissiveness that it was destroying his relationship to everyone he once loved.

I have a hunch a large proportion of broken relationships can be traced back to this kind of hostility toward God. The inability to grasp and cope with God's permissiveness leads to the breakdown of all relationships. Harold Kushner is the Jewish Rabbi of a congregation of 2500 people. He has become famous in America for his book *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. He wrote the book because his 3 year old son Aaron developed that rare disease progeria. It makes the child age rapidly. He died of old age 2 days after his 14th birthday. He never got to

live as a child, but only as an old man. He and his wife went through the battle of anger at God for permitting such a thing, but he came to a wiser conclusion than the elder brother. He wrote

I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason. Some years ago, when the "Death of God" theology was a fad, I remember seeing a bumper sticker that read "My God is not dead; sorry about yours." I guess my bumper reads "My God is not cruel; sorry about yours."

We could go on for hours showing that God's permissiveness is the greatest hindrance to our believing he is our friend, but we need to move on to find a solution, and so we want to look at

the second point which is

II. THE GREATEST HELP.

The greatest help to believing God is our friend is God's permissiveness. Needless to say, but I'll say it anyway, we are dealing here with a paradox; a two point sermon with one point, which is the paradox of permissiveness. I'll admit that the second point sounds like a rerun of the first, but let me assure you that the same thing can be seen from a radically different perspective. This which can make men so angry at God can also be our greatest assurance that He is our friend.

Ordinarily the cause and the cure of a problem are two different things, but this is not an absolute necessity. Vaccination is an illustration of how the cause of a disease can also be a cure. The virus that causes the disease is actually put into the body in a controlled form so the body can develop an immunity to it. It is a paradox, but nevertheless true, the cause and the cure are the same thing. So it is with the permissiveness of God. It is the cause of a great deal of doubt about God's love for man. It is bad enough that He permits the prodigal to live in sin, but this is mild compared to what else is permitted.

The prodigal's sins were sins of pleasure, and he did not leave a trail of blood behind him as have the tyrants of the world. How God can permit the Herods and Hitlers of history to stay on the stage for even a few years is cause for great agony of soul. But lets look at the other side of the coin of permissiveness. We all have the same options as they did. We are as free to abuse God's gift of freedom as they were. We can choose to be prodigals too, or we can choose to learn from his folly and take the shortcut right to the father's love, without the degrading detour into the far country.

The very essence of what it means to be made in the image of God is in our freedom to choose.

To give this up would be to become a computer of God rather than a child of God. The prodigal's father permitted him to be a sinner, but he also permitted him to come back home and be a forgiven son. His permissiveness is not the problem. It is what the son chose to do with it that is the problem. The abuse of a precious gift is no reason to reject the value of the gift. If I use the new Bible you give me to start fires in the fireplace, does that make it a bad gift? Not at all, and freedom is a wonderful gift no matter how foolishly men use it. If you let your children mix cool-aid on a painting of Rembrant, that is no reflection on the value of Rembrant, but on your own values and common sense.

The permissiveness of God is abused and misused, but the fact is, it is still the greatest act of friendship God has shown by giving us such freedom. If we were not free to choose, we would not have been capable of being redeemed. We could not chose to put our faith in Christ and

receive Him as God's gift. We would be things and not persons. Christ would not have died for things. Things cannot choose, but only those who were made in God's image can choose, for they alone have the capacity to see the value of God's permissiveness.

Yes you can abuse what God permits, but you can also choose what God permits, which He also wills. He does not will everything He permits. This would be nonsense and meaningless, for it would be saying everything is the will of God. All evil, sin, folly, and rebellion would be God's will. All of this God permits, but none of it does He will. The prodigal's father did not will any of the folly he permitted him to do. And God does not will any of the folly He permits us to do. The father also permitted the prodigal to come home and to confess his folly, and to be forgiven. He permits the prodigal to do everything that is essential for reconciliation. He permits him to humble himself, and pray, and to seek his father's face, and to turn from his wicked ways. The tyrant forces you back. He drags you home kicking and screaming to be his slave. The father, as a friend, permits you to come home freely as a son.

This permissiveness of God is the very essence of his love and friendship, for he permits those who have violated his holiness to come back into his presence, and into his family, and to celebrate with him the victory over all that the abuse of his permissiveness led to. If this does not say to us God is our friend, then nothing will, for there is no way to say it more loud and clear. God is our Father, but that is not enough. The message is not complete until we know too that God is our Friend. This bright side of God's permissiveness is the basis for all the songs of praise for life and for all that God has given us to enjoy for time and eternity. The poet put it

Lord, thank you for setting me free. Free to blow bubbles, fly kites, listen to seashells, build castles in the sand, wish on stars.

Thank you for setting me free. Free to hunt for four-leaf clovers,

explore oak trees with inviting branches, run laughing in the rain, walk barefoot, jump puddles, wave at trains.

Thank you for setting me free. Free to yellow my nose in buttercups, catch a firefly to see his light, pick the first wild strawberry, count the stars, talk to ladybugs, chase a thistle.

Thank you for setting me free. Free to see you in sunlight dancing on the water, dogwood smiling at the sky, willows curtseying to the river, azaleas flaming across the land, rainbowed cobwebs, drifting leaves.

Thank you for setting me free. Free to play with, wonder at and love all that you have given me. And free, as well, to give it back to you. Author unknown

We can hate what men do with God's permissiveness, but we cannot help but love what it means for life when we use it as He wills. If there was no positive side to the Father's

permissiveness, there would be no happy ending, but because the door swings both ways, father and son became great friends. It is God's permissiveness that allows all sinners a second chance. He permits men to sin and defy His law, but then He permits them the freedom to repent and be forgiven. He made their freedom possible by providing His own Son as a sacrifice for their sin. Greater love has no man than this, that He lay down His life for a friend. God in Christ became the greatest friend of all, for He died for all.

God's permissiveness is why prayer is a universal reality. If God did not permit His free creatures to have a say in what happens in this world, prayer would be of no value whatever. If

God, by eternal decree, had already determined every detail of history before history began, then prayer is meaningless, for nothing can be other than it is. Prayer can change nothing if this is so. But the Bible makes it clear that God permits the prayers of men to change things from what they might have been. Abraham pleaded with God and God came down to ten righteous men as the number for which He would have spared Sodom. God listened to Abraham like a friend.

God said that in 40 days Ninevah would be destroyed. But when the people repented and prayed to God, God changed His mind and did not destroy them, but in mercy spared them. Prayer not only changed things, it changed God because He is a God who permits man to make a difference. He permits man to be truly free. Abraham Lincoln said, "As I would not be slave, so I would not be a master." Is this more noble than God? Not at all, for God will not be a tyrant who makes the will of man of no account. He will respect their freedom to be fools, or to be friends, and this is our greatest aid to knowing God as our Friend.

The elder son chose to be a stubborn fool, but the fact is, the father left the door wide open for him to still be a friend. The door was just as open to him as it was for the younger son. The father wanted him to join the party. That is the way it is with God and all rebels. They are welcome to join the party and be in on the joy of being part of the family of God. Prayer is the exercise of freedom. Prayer can change things; can change you; can even change God. All men are free to pray and make a difference in this world because of God's permissiveness. God permissiveness leaves the door open for anyone to come in to the party and discover God as their greatest Friend.

25. A PERPLEXING PARABLE Based on Luke 16:1-15

Have you ever heard or read of such a unique and perfectly planned crime that you said to yourself, "That was really clever"? For example, was it not amazing that that group of men in England could steal millions of dollars without firing a shot? We have to admit it was a bad thing well done. They knew what they were doing, and were dedicated to their plan. We do not approve of their crime, but we admire their commitment. They were willing to sacrifice their life for the goal they have chosen. Does this sound like blasphemy to be admiring the

dedication of clever crooks and their evil schemes? If it does, it may be because we have forgotten how seldom Jesus used people with halos to illustrate His teachings.

Do you remember the story of the mean old judge who would not help a poor old widow? But she kept bothering him till he finally gave in, and what Christ was teaching was this: If a stubborn unjust judge will help a widow just to get rid of her, how much more will God help those who call upon Him because He loves them? Or what of the story of the man wanting bread who goes to his neighbor who is in bed? He tries to get him to go away, but finally just to get rid of him he gets up and gives him bread. The point is, if a man will be kind in order to get rid of a nuisance, how much more will God be kind to those who come to Him in need?

We are now considering a parable that has perplexed many people, and has caused some critics to say that Jesus taught it was wise to cheat if you are smart enough to get by with it. The hero of the story is an outright crook, and Jesus uses him as an example for His disciples. Jesus was not

limited to saints for His illustrations. Jews could not loan money for interest, so they hired Gentile stewards to do it for them. The steward was completely in charge, and he kept all the books. He would loan to farmers to get them going, and they would pay back so much of a percent of their crops. He was one who made sure they paid back the right percentage.

This particular steward was wasting his master's profits (no doubt in wickedness, for the word is the same as that used of the Prodigal who wasted his substance in riotous living). When his master heard of it, he called him and told him to give an account. When he saw that the books were false he fired him. The steward faced the consequences and pictured the future. He was not able to dig or beg, so he came up with a clever plan. He called his lord's debtors and gave them all a big discount so they would be his friends when he lost his job, and in gratitude would take him in. It was so clever that even his lord, when he heard of it, said that the man was really sharp. It is a shame to lose a man with such a good head on his shoulders. Jesus then comments on this story and teaches us some lessons from this unjust steward. First we see

I. A LESSON ON THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD. v.8

In World War II, Leslie Weatherhead was in a battalion located in a bend of the Tigris River. They were constantly annoyed by the cleverest thieves in the world-the Arabs. The men would sleep with revolvers under their pillows and have them stolen in the night. They even tried to bury their rifles under the surface of the ground and fasten straps to their wrists. After a night of unbroken slumber they would wake to find them stolen. Two of his fellow officers were so angry they were determined to shoot any Arab on sight, and so with rifles loaded they laid out in the desert all night to keep watch. They did not hear or see anything, but when they came back to their tent in the morning, the entire contents had been looted. They were absolute

experts in the field of crime.

'Twas the night before Thanksgiving, And all through the plane Not a stewardess was smiling,
 Or serving champagne.

The reason was because a skyjacker by the name of Don Copper had flashed a bomb and demanded 200,000 and four parachutes. In Seattle the demand was met, and the passengers were allowed to leave the plane. He then ordered the pilot to fly to Mexico. Somewhere between Seattle and Reno he opened the rear door and bailed out with the money. Law enforcement agencies combed the area, but no trace of him could be found. The reaction of the American people was one of amazement at his cleverness. He was admired as a hero, for he outwitted the system. The majority of people interviewed hoped he would get away because he was so clever.

Jesus is saying to His disciples that they can learn from non-Christian dedication, even the dedication of crooks. Look at the world and learn something from their commitment to their evil goals. Jesus is not approving of their actions. He is simply pointing out that they are often more devoted to, and consistent with their ungodliness than Christians are with their profession of faith. In the long run the worldly are fools, but in the short run they are often wiser in attaining their goals than believers are in attaining theirs.

Why should we not be as dedicated to God as the world is to their idols? They devote their time and money to their idols. They are not hypocritical saying that they love their idol, and then give only one or two hours a week to it. What would you think of a man who said his god was sports, and then only went to one sporting event a week. You would denounce him as a hypocrite. If sports was his god, he would be into some sort of sport everyday, and when not doing it, he would be reading about it and talking about it. A truly religious sports fanatic has no limit to his love, for it penetrates into his very being, and he exists for it. The true sports worshiper will deny himself, his family, his friends and relatives, and give up all other values to be loyal to his first love. Sure he is a fool, but Jesus would say even his folly shows you what true commitment is to one's highest values.

They are relatively wise and absolutely foolish, but we can learn from them anyway. An ancient proverb says, "It is lawful to learn from an enemy." Jesus said, "Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves." It is the one characteristic or quality of the serpent we are to learn from, and not be like the serpent in its evil ways. When Jesus said He would come as a thief in the night He was not identifying Himself with the evil motives of the thief, but just the one quality of suddenness. He is not saying we should be like crooks, but that we should learn from their commitment to false gods what our commitment ought to be to the true God. Look at some of the values we see in this unjust steward.

1. FORESIGHT-v. 3. He pictured the day of judgment for him, and he faced the consequences.

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, and how foolish not to face that fact, and consider the consequences of living a half-hearted Christian life. We ought to fear to stand before Him with a life as fruitless as an iceberg. When Jesus said we are to take no thought for the morrow, He meant we are not to worry about where our next meal is coming from. He did not mean we are not to plan ahead. Nothing is so strange as people who want to go to heaven but who do not want to learn of Christ now, and serve Him with all their energy. It is wisdom to see the future and plan, as did this thief, on how to deal with negative consequences in a positive way.

2. DETERMINATION-v. 4. The man of the world says, here is what I want, and here is how to get it. Jesus would have us learn that success in anything demands determined and concentrated effort. The safe cracker spends many years training his ears and fingers to be sensitive. He needs to develop the tools necessary for his trade. If it takes so much effort and energy to be a good crook, how much more ought you to expect to take to become a good Christian? Many think it is a snap to be a Christian, but this is not so for those who want to be all that Christ wants them to be. This calls for everything you've got.

The Christian life is a joy, but also a job. The Christian life is a feast, but also a fight. The Christian life is banquet, but also a battle.

You can't expect to be successful in the Christian life if you are not willing to exert the energy necessary. Alexander Maclaren said to his large congregation, "Why, a boy, will spend more pains in learning to whistle than half of you do in trying to cultivate your Christian character." A man who spends 6 hours a week on the golf course and only one in pursuit of the things of Christ will likely be a better golfer than he is a Christian. A man reveals his real hunger and thirst by the way he spends his time. If he seldom considers God and His Word, and is always involved with

other things, he is a worldly Christian. No one is as unhappy as a half-hearted Christian. He is too good to enjoy the sins of the world, and not good enough to experience the joys of full Christian commitment.

This committed crook of our text did not have anyone to consult with. He was a self-starter. He said to himself, here is the picture of what I am facing, and here is what I want to do about it. If more Christians would just say that, and get to doing things for Christ, they could make a big difference. Ted Engstrom, the president of World Vision, told of how he one day got a long distance call from a young man who said he wanted to work with World Vision. Ted told him its not that easy, but he said he wanted to meet with Ted in person. They arranged to do so, and Ted tried to tell him he probably would not fit into their organization. But he would not take no for an answer. Ted asked him what he would like to do, and he said he liked to solve problems.

So Ted said he would give him a thousand dollars for a month to help solve problems. He was so good at it he helped them solve one problem after another. He got the love loaf program going that took in over 15 million to feed the hungry. Bob Biehl was determined to use his gifts for the kingdom of God, and he did it.

Allen Gardiner was a missionary to Patagonia. His life is a record of terrible sufferings and privations. He was found at last lying dead alongside an overturned boat on the shore. In his hand was his diary that told of his hardships of hunger, thirst, wounds, and loneliness, but his last words which he scribbled before he died, with a hand so weak it could hardly be read, were, "I am overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God." One does not die with a faith like that unless his life has been dedicated to the service of God. Men will sacrifice, murder, and steal, to gain some earthly goal. Jesus says, look at that and learn. How much more ought ye to sacrifice and serve for an eternal goal? Just look at your unsaved friends, neighbors, and relatives, and see to what extent they give themselves to their gods of pleasure, and compare it to your commitment to Christ. You will see how well Christ knew what He was saying when He taught this lesson. Secondly we see

II. A LESSON ON USING MONEY AS A MEANS. v. 9.

The meaning of this verse is illustrated in the other parable in this chapter about Lazarus and Dives. If Dives had used his money wisely he would have been welcomed into heaven by Lazarus. But instead of using it as a means he used it as an end in itself, or as a means to a selfish end, and he found himself in hell without a friend. The steward had enough sense to sacrifice present funds in order to secure future friends. He could have collected the total and kept some for himself, but then he would be alone in the world, and no one would trust him. When his money gave out he would have to beg, and so he gave the farmers his commission by cutting it off their debt, and thereby he made friends who could help him out when he lost his job. That was a good investment.

Jesus says to His own, don't be less wise than a crook, but use your money to lay up treasures in heaven. Use it to make friends who will welcome you when you enter glory. There is a mystery here that we know little about, but what we do know makes sense. There is a saying of the Rabbi's that goes, "The rich help the poor in this world, the poor help the rich in the world to come." Jesus never taught that one could be saved by his use of money, but he did say that the

saved can lay up treasure in heaven. Paul said, "I know in whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day." How could Christ keep it if he had not committed it, and how do we commit our treasure to Christ? It is by the way we use our material wealth.

Jesus said that at the judgment He will say, "I was naked and you clothed me, hungry and you

fed me, in prison and you visited me." Then when we ask when we did this, He will say, "As you did it unto one of the least of these my brethren you did it unto me." Put this all together, and what Jesus is saying is that the man who has used his wealth on earth as a means by which to help and lift others, and to bring them into the kingdom of God, will one day die and lose all his earthly possessions, but will find a multitude of friends welcoming him to glory. All though eternity he will have the reward of fellowship with those he helped to win. This ought to be one of the greatest incentives in our lives to use our wealth to win men. It implies that those who go on before us learn who was responsible for their salvation.

John Wesley said that the Christian philosophy in regard to money is: Make all you can; save all you can, and give all you can. He practiced what he preached, and even though he made a fortune by writing books, he died with only loose change in his pockets. This does not mean we go handing out money to all who are in need. When we went to skid row on Gospel teams we were warned not to give any money for cups of coffee, for it is known that it all goes to alcohol. Here again we are to learn from the world. They know how to invest money wisely for the best results.

At the battle of Waterloo, Nathan Meyer Rothschild was a spectator from a shot proof tent. At sunset when he saw Napoleon's soldiers giving way, he jumped in the saddle and galloped all night. He reached the English Channel at daybreak. He bribed a fisherman to take him across. He reached London 36 hours before anyone heard the news of the victory. He used those hours to trade in the stock exchange to such an advantage that he gained nearly 2 million pounds. Here was a man who was clever and dedicated to making money. How much more ought Christians to be dedicated to bearing fruit for the kingdom of God?

Let us be clear, however, that the use of our money is not a means of salvation for self, but it can be for others. Jesus is speaking to His disciples, and it is assumed that they are already children of light in contrast to the children of darkness. Only the Christian who has committed his life to Christ can hope to gain anything by his use of money as a means of helping others. But once a Christian, we dare not underestimate how significant this factor can be. The evangelization of the world is, in a very real sense, dependant upon material wealth. That which shall perish is essential to secure that which is permanent. That is what Jesus is trying to get us to realize. Money is not an end in itself, as the miser is deceived into thinking, but its only value is in what it can purchase. You have a choice of values you can use it to secure. The passing values of the world or the permanent values of eternity. Jesus says, be wise and let God be your investment counselor, and use what you have for the greatest interest of the kingdom of God. Thirdly

III. A LESSON ON FAITHFULNESS IN LITTLE THINGS. v. 10-12.

The chain of thought here is still dealing with the use of money, but since the principle was true in all areas of life we want to include everything. Jesus gets right down to earth here.

Some

people think He only talked about spiritual and other worldly things, but that is not so. Jesus says Christianity is a spirit that is to infiltrate your whole life right down to the way you buy your groceries. If you can't handle your money right, you are not having success in spiritual matters either.

Helmut Thielicke, who was one of the great preachers of the world, said, "Our destiny with God is rarely decided by our reflecting upon dogmas and all kinds of others worldly problems. Our destiny is rather decided by what we do with the all together real worldly questions and temporal problems which play a part in our life. Such as sex, money, and personal relations." We don't have to major in minors, but we had better master them. How many of you ever have trouble with your wife over systematic theology? It is more likely to be the grocery bill, or how you squeeze the toothpaste. Jesus makes it clear that we don't get to the top except by starting at the bottom. You don't get to be surgeon, and then learn how to clean your fingernails. Nor do you get to manage the riches of God until you learn to be faithful with the things of earth. We can't handle the trigonometry of the spiritual if we haven't learned the simple math of the physical.

Two men met on a train and discovered they were both Christians. One said to the other, "What do you do as a Christian?" He said, "I make shoes." The other replied, "I mean what do you do as a Christian?" The other repeated, "I make shoes." You may say he was not very spiritual. On the contrary, he had an insight that all of us need. He was far more pleasing in the sight of God by making a good quality shoe than one who does a sloppy job and spends his evenings handing out tracks. If we are not faithful in our work, it is not likely we will succeed in our witness.

Jesus wants us to see that there is no such thing as the insignificant in our lives. It is a great thing to be a hero in battle. It is a great thing to command a large post in the world of business. It is a great thing to be famous in the world of sports. It is a great thing to be able to preach a sermon to the masses. But Jesus says that we don't know what real greatness is until we have learned to be Christian in our everyday, incidental, seemingly insignificant tasks of life. When it is put that way, none of us escape. Many are they who have died in the flames and given their bodies to be tortured, but how few are there of the truly great who have applied their Christianity to the petty things of life?

A friend once saw Michaelangelo at work on one of his statues. Sometime later he saw him again and said, "You have so little done. Have you been idle since I saw you last?" "By no means," he replied. "I have retouched this part and polished that. I have given some expression to this lip and more energy to this limb." "Well, well," said the friend. "All these are mere trifles." "It may be so," he responded. "But recollect that trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle." He was a master, and his works live forever because he recognized the

value of little things.

Let us all give heed to Christ, and wake up to the fact that the way we use the least determines what we will have of the best. Commit your life, your money, your everyday tasks and experiences to Christ. Let us learn from the best of the world how to be our best for Christ.

26. DEAD MEN DO TALK Based on Luke 16:19-31

On a cold December night in 1959 blazing machine guns found their victim. Roger Toughy, a former member of Al Capone's gang, was shot down in front of his sister's house in Chicago. It was only 23 days after his release from prison. He knew too much about the underworld, and they have a saying that says dead men don't talk. We would all agree that death is a great silencer, and that is why we are quite surprised by the parable of Lazarus and Dives for it is a conversation between two dead men.

We should expect such a conversation to arouse our curiosity and stimulate some questions, but less we ask questions for which it has no answers let us first ask the first two basic questions which we should ask of every Scripture passage: When was it spoken, and to whom? You might ask what difference does it make? In this case it makes the difference between understanding and confusion. By not keeping in mind that Jesus told this parable before the cross and resurrection we can get confused as to its teaching on salvation. We see little of the character of Lazarus and Dives. All we see is their condition, and it appears that one was saved simply by being a helpless beggar, and the other was lost because he was rich. Our confusion arises because we fail to realize that this is a pre-Christian parable.

Lazarus was not a Christian. He was saved on the basis of the Old Testament dispensation. This is the only parable Jesus told in which He gave a name to one of the characters. Lazarus means helped of God, or a man whom God helped. It indicates that he was one who found his only help in God. We notice also that there is no mention of the Gospel, but only Moses and the prophets. The parable is in pre-Christian terms. The Jewish concept of Hades was a place where all dead people go. The righteous dead go to a good part called Abraham's bosom, and the wicked go to a place of torment. There was only a wall between them and conversations between the dead were a common method of teaching by the Rabbis.

This means that what we have in this parable is a picture of the intermediate state under the Old Testament. The New Testament picture does not follow this same pattern. The fact of this being before the cross and resurrection changes the impression we should get as we seek to interpret what Jesus is teaching. It is also helpful to see that Jesus told this parable to the Pharisees. They based their hope of salvation on their genealogy. They were descendants of Abraham. They felt that they were in for sure and had complete security because of the heritage. You can imagine the shock they felt in hearing a story where a descendent of Abraham

was on the wrong side of the gulf in Hades.

The fact of this being spoken to the Pharisees also explains why the rich man wanted someone from the dead to warn his brothers. It is likely another poke at the foolishness and blindness of the Pharisees who were always asking for signs and proof, but they never believed it when it was given. All they had to do was accept Moses and the prophets, but since they did not believe the Word of God, neither did they believe His work when it was before their very eyes. With this background in mind we need to ask some specific questions about this story which apply to all

times.

I. WHY WAS THE RICH MAN IN HADES?

On the surface it seems that his greatest sin was in being rich, and there have been many in the past who taught just that. If we examine the life and teaching of Jesus, however, we do not find Him teaching that poverty equals piety nor that wealth equals wickedness. Money in itself is amoral. It is like electricity. It can be either good or bad. It can light a church or light a bar. Money has the potential for both good or evil.

Consider the life of Jesus. He was not poor in the extreme sense as was Lazarus. He was a hard working carpenter. When He called His disciples a treasurer was appointed and Judas carried the bag. We know there was money in it because when He left at the Last Supper the others thought He was going to take care of some financial matters. Jesus did not wear rags, but had such a beautiful robe that the soldiers gambled for it. He could not have worn such a garment had there been anything inherently evil about expensive clothing. The same holds true for the large meals He often ate with the rich, and for all the fuss Martha went through she must have put together quite a feast. There was praise for the man who turned his 5 talents into 10, and for the woman who poured a small fortune of perfume on Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man who buried Jesus in his tomb, and John Marks mother had a nice home she opened up for the disciples of Jesus.

Even in this parable Lazarus goes to Abraham's bosom, and Abraham was one of the richest men in Bible history. Neither in the Old Testament nor the New is poverty considered a virtue. Riches in both Testaments call for great responsibility. Whenever Jesus rebuked the rich it was not because they were rich but because they were irresponsible with their riches. Verses 10 to 21 make it quite clear that Dives was not a good steward of his riches. A poor man in misery was before his very eyes and he did not respond with compassion. It is like the story of a traveler who came upon a miserable wretch in dirty rags sitting in silence by the roadside. "Why are you dumb?" he asked. "Why don't you ask for help?" The wretch responded, "Can any mouth speak louder than my rags, sores, and skeleton bones?"

Lazarus represents an opportunity to serve God, and Dives represents a neglect of that opportunity. All Lazarus desired was crumbs from his table, but Dives was so self-centered that he did not care. We know he did not get crumbs, for when Dives asked for only a drop of water he too was refused. To add to his condemnation Jesus pictures the man's dogs as having more compassion than he did. By instinct they should more love with their healing tongue on his sores than Dives did with all of his riches and God-given capacity to help. Thank God not all men are without compassion. When Albert Schweitzer read this story it was the spark that touched off a revolution in his life. He concluded that Africa was the beggar at Europe's doorstep and he dedicated his life and talents to heal that beggar. There are too many who ignore the beggar and lack compassion, and that is why Madam DeStael said, "The more I see of men, the more I think of dogs." There is no doubt about it, we can learn something about compassion from dogs.

Dives was in Hades not because of his good food and fine clothes, but because he had no concern about the poor food and clothing of Lazarus. God's requirement is that we do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. He failed to do any of these and was justly condemned.

II. WHAT DOES THE TORMENT OF HADES REPRESENT?

Verses 23 and 24 make it clear that Dives is in real torment, and he cries out to Abraham for mercy. All he wants is a drop of water from the tip of the finger of Lazarus. He realizes now how meaningful it is to receive the smallest mercies. If only he had known it when he had the chance to give Lazarus some crumbs.

Just in passing we want to notice that this is the only prayer in the Bible to a saint, and it was not answered. Abraham makes it clear that there is no help available now, for death determines destiny. If anyone prefers to call the intermediate state purgatory let them do so, but let them also note that there is a great gulf over which they cannot pass in spite of their pleading with a saint. Too often we get our concepts of what Christ taught from the artist rather than from the examination of his own words. How often have we pictured hell as a place where men are raging in rebellion against God, and cursing the injustice of it all. Jesus pictures it just the opposite, for it is seen here as a place of great enlightenment. Dives saw in hell what he never saw on earth.

Dives was not raving against injustice. When Abraham points out the contrast between his life and that of Lazarus his conscience condemns him. He knows he is there justly, and he knows he never repented, for he pleads for his brothers to be warned because they may repent. It is almost as if hell made a better man out of Dives. He saw himself as he really was for the first time. He knew the truth, but now it was too late, and that is what hell is. It is truth known too late. The weeping and gnashing of teeth that Jesus often spoke of fits perfect with this picture of regret and sorrow for living a life without compassion.

What was his torment? The answer is found in verse 25. The essence of his misery was his memory. This is not only confirmed by biblical commentators, but it has been the conviction of great leaders such as W. B. Riley. He said, "I do not believe that hell is a 'lake of fire.' I do not believe that hell is a living, gnawing 'worm.' I do not believe that hell is a rushing foaming sea. These are all biblical figures of a greater or more terrible fact, and that fact is summed up in one word in this text-the torment of 'memory.'"

It is said that when a sailor falls from the masthead he sees his whole life pass before him before he hits the water. D. L. Moody almost drown on one occasion, and he said that the second time down his whole life flashed across his mind. He too believed that the worm that will not die is the memory. Where do the flames of torment come from in hell? A man takes them with him in his memory. The memory is perfect in hell. There is not a word or deed that is not recorded in your mind, and when we stand before the judgement seat of God every man's conscience will condemn them. The only things ever forgotten in this universe are the sins of those who have been forgiven by receiving the salvation of Jesus which He purchased on the cross.

Those who do not receive this gift of grace will live in torment with a perfect memory of the folly of rejecting that gift. It is to be a Cain with the cry of his brother Able ever in his ears. It is to be a mocker of Noah with a perpetual vision of the folly of rejecting the offer of escape. It is to be a Judas who can never forget that kiss in Gethsemane. It is to be a Pilate who can never get his hands clean. Imagine the pain of knowing you had dozens of opportunities to receive Christ, but you rejected them all.

This concept of hell is not only biblical, but it is a logical and ethical necessity. We cannot conceive of God allowing men to suffer without knowing why. A perfect memory is essential to the justice of hell. It also explains how there can be degrees of anguish, for not all will have been equally foolish. If men could not remember how they lived for self and rejected God there suffering would be unjust. It would be like the idea of reincarnation in which a man does not remember what he did in his past life to make him suffer in his present life.

We believe that God is just and no man will be condemned without having all the charges against him before him, and not only before him, but in him. He not only goes to hell, but he takes hell with him. Milton wrote, "Which way I fly is hell-myself am hell." That is why the gulf is impassible. Hell cannot enter heaven, and the man himself is hell. When parents bury a dead child it is not because they do not love the child, but because it is dead. When a man goes to hell it is not because of God's lack of love, but because he has died spiritually. He has refused the only hope of life, and so there is no alternative but that he should go to the burial ground of those with dead souls.

The important teaching for all to consider in this parable is that right now we are preparing for heaven or hell. It is one of Satan's lies that deceives men into thinking that they are not lost

until they are dead. Dr. Sam Morris told of how he was hunting one day and took a wrong turn in the woods. He thought he was going back home, but after several miles he came to a farm which he recognized as being in the opposite direction from his home. It was at that point that he discovered that he was lost, but he had been just as lost all the time he thought he was going the right way. Some people will not discover that they are lost until he wake up in Hades, but they are just as lost right now. The essence of their torment will be remembering that they were on a road all the time marked-this way to hell, and they never turned off onto the highway of life, which intersected that road so often. They see it now, but hell is truth known too late.

III. IS THE BIBLE SUFFICIENT REVELATION TO ESCAPE HADES?

There are books filled with stories of the effectiveness of the written word alone. In what is called the Coffee Mountain Area of Brazil there is a well organized and active church of about 150 people. (this was in the 60's.) It all began over 30 years before when an illiterate Negro came their way selling Bibles. He had been set on fire by its message, and he devoted himself to bearing witness and selling Bibles. People were so impressed by him that they bought some Bibles and began to meet together, and they became a church founded on their common love for the Word of God.

Dives, however, seems to think that the whole problem with men is that they do not have an adequate revelation. They would not be such fools but would repent if only someone from the dead could go and tell them. This is a subtle way of blaming God for man's folly. If God would give man more evidence men would believe, but since they do not have sufficient evidence they remain in unbelief. Jesus says that if we seek we shall find, but the skeptic says that he will wait until he is blown over with facts, miracles, and wonders. This attitude reveals how attached men are to their folly. They are not taking any chances on giving up their sins until they are sure there is a pay off.

If Lazarus returned to the 5 brothers of Dives, they would probably try to kill him again for telling him their brother was in hell. How could he prove he was from the land of the dead? They would have to take it by faith, but they would find all kinds of reasons to reject him. It would be contrary to reason and so they would consider him a fanatic and reject him just as they did Christ.

Abraham seems almost harsh, but he makes it clear that if they will not hear Moses and the prophets they will not listen to one from the dead. And if the Old Testament was sufficient, how much more is the New Testament a sufficient revelation to escape hell and gain heaven by faith in Jesus Christ? Coming to Christ is an act of the will, and if one wills to come, even on only a shred of evidence, he will be received, restored, and regenerated, and more light will be given. But if a person will not come then all the evidence in the world will not move him. Dead men continue to talk, and what they tell us is that hell is remembering all the opportunities they

had to go to heaven. May God help us to see the folly of those who never choose Christ as the Way.

27. THE CHRISTIAN'S DUTY Based on Luke 17:7-10

In his book *Merely Colossal*, Arthur Mayer tells of how he hired a stunt man to be buried alive as a publicity stunt for a film he was promoting. The stunt man knew how to breathe in such a way that he could stay buried for 24 hours and not suffocate. After the papers made a big splash about a man being buried alive, the appointed day arrived, and just as the paper said, the man was buried. The spot was carefully marked with lime, so it could be easily found. Unfortunately, a heavy storm came up that night and washed away all the lime, and they could not find the exact spot. The stunt man was lost. Mayer says 30 men dug frantically in the area for 12 hours before they located him. He was in good condition, but he demanded overtime pay for the extra hours he was lost.

Just about anything can happen, but very few people are ever lost by being buried. The same, however, cannot be said for the truth. Men are constantly losing the truth by burying it. Millions lose sight of the most basic truth in life, which is redemption through Christ, by neglect. They bury this truth under a mountain of meaningless religious ceremony. Christians are constantly losing truths by not applying them to life when they hear them. Preachers are constantly losing truths by getting into ruts and riding hobby horses through the Bible, forgetting that precious treasures are found just off the beaten track.

For example, our passage today contains one of the most obscure parables of Jesus. It is not even noticed in most books on the parables, and commentators skip over it with little recognition. It has been buried in the field of neglect, even though it contains a precious pearl. Verse 10 contains the only recorded instance in Scripture where our Lord used the word duty, but in this one instance He made it so comprehensive that nothing more needs to be said to recognize that duty was a major subject of His teaching. He taught us all that is necessary to know about duty by a simple illustration and application.

I. ILLUSTRATION. vv. 7-9

Jesus says if you have a servant in the field doing his job, and he comes in at supper time, you

don't make a big fuss over him as if you were his mother. You don't tell him to set down while you fix his meal. Not at all, for you expect him to carry on his duties as a servant, and get your meal. Jesus says, "Does the master thank his slave for doing what he was commanded?" And the answer is, of course not. If that seems harsh, it is only because we read into it an unjust relationship between a master and his slave. If we put it into a modern setting, it is obvious what Jesus is getting at.

I once worked in a packing house where I was given a variety of jobs. One day I was told to pull hooks off of pigs as they came by. Another day I was commanded to scoop up rosin and throw it into a boiling vat. Another day my orders were to crawl under thousands of pigs hanging in a cooler, and wash the fat drippings off the floor with a hose. Never once did any of the bosses ever thank me for doing what I was told, and never once did I expect such thanks. Why? Because it was my duty to do what I was told, and I was being well paid to do it. As long as they fulfilled their obligation in the relationship, and paid me, it was my duty to do what I was commanded, without expecting them to shower me with praise. I was not doing anyone a favor, I was doing my duty.

That is what Jesus is saying. We have all kinds of relationships in life that involve obligations. We have duties to our family, our church, our neighbor, our employer, and our nation. These duties are the basic factors in human relations. They are so basic that we are expected to fulfill them without patting ourselves on the back, and thinking we are great for doing so. In other words, if you take care of your family, don't expect a write up in Life Magazine. It is your duty. Don't expect a thank you card if you pay your taxes or put money in a parking meter. It is your duty. If you don't run over anybody for 10 years, don't expect the traffic department to send you a medal. It is your duty to drive safely. If you get out to vote, don't gloat and expect to be named citizen of the year. It is your duty to vote. Don't expect rewards for doing what it is your duty to do in any area of life.

Now why did Jesus have to emphasize this? Because He knew the heart of man, and its susceptibility to that cancer of the soul called pride. In verse 5 His disciples had asked for increased faith, and Jesus told them they could do miracles if they had faith as of a grain of mustard seed. Jesus knew they would receive the power to do miracles, and so He gave this short parable to warn them against pride, and the danger of thinking they would put God in their debt by what they would do. Jesus says to them by this illustration, "Remember that everything that you do is your duty to do. Don't expect any thanks, and don't even think that God owes you anything."

Jesus is saying that doing our duty is the foundation of our life. We haven't even started to build until we are settled on that. And it is because we have buried this truth that our society is coming apart at the seams. Everyone demands their rights, but they dodge their responsibilities. They fight for their rights, but flee from their responsibilities. The old duty of youth keeping themselves pure for the one they will marry is being thrown out. Why? Because duty is hard, and no one thanks you for it. The duty of morality does not make anyone a hero. It is just the expected thing for one who lives responsibly.

Adults are being driven dizzy by duties these days. There are responsibilities weighing on them all the time until sometimes they come to despise their daily duties. They go to work, do their job,

pay the bills, go to church, go to PTA, and what do they get? Does anyone ever thank them for being dutiful parents, employees, church members, and citizens? No! Very seldom to never are people thanked for doing their duty. Duty is a big bore. So people become duty dodgers, and like the priest and the Levite they pass by on the other side. I was hungry and you gave me no food; thirsty and you gave me no drink-but duty is so dull. I was naked and you clothed me not; I was a stranger and you took me not in-but duty is so boring. I was sick and you visited me not; in prison and you came not-but nobody would thank me if I did. Yes, duty can be dull, but to dodge it is not only dangerous, it is deadly. To evade it leads to judgment.

Many try to escape duty all together. Someone has expressed their feelings like this:

I wish I had a ticket for Siam, I'm getting bored with where I am. But when I'm in Siam why all I'll do, is wish I had a ticket for Peru.

What can we do? If we can't evade it and be happy, and if we can't escape it and be happy, we can exalt it and be happy. We can put duty up where Christ put it, and recognize that it is the path to happiness.

II. APPLICATION. v.10

Jesus says to apply in the spiritual realm what is true in the natural relationships of life. If you give a man back the ten dollars you owe him, don't expect him to shower you with devotion. You gave him nothing but what you have received. He has made no profit because you have done your duty. In the service of Christ, if you are completely committed, and obey all that Christ commands, remember, you have brought no profit to God, for all you do you do by His grace and power. Recognize this and you will be humble, and aware that you can never do more than your duty. It is your duty to do all, and having done it, you can claim no merit, for what is your all compared to the price Christ paid to purchase you?

The rivers pour into the sea yet add nothing to it, for the sea is the source of their existence. So all we do has its source in God's grace. This exalts duty to the highest level. It is only in fulfilling our duties that we can do anything to thank God for His grace. "To glorify God and enjoy Him forever," is our goal, and the only means to do so is by doing our duty. With this in mind, that we are not in the world looking for thanks, but we are here to express thanks, we approach the daily duties of life with new devotion and even delight, for now we see that as one has said, "As the birds are made to fly and rivers to run, so the soul is made to follow duty." We cannot change the dullness of our duties, but we can change the spirit in which we do them. F. W. Robertson said, "If the duties before us be not noble, let us ennoble them by doing them in a noble spirit."

Jesus is saying that everything that He has commanded is a duty. One of His commands was to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. This covers a multitude of political obligations, like

paying taxes, voting, and doing what is in your power to keep government pure. If we are to have any honest ground to stand on in fighting for our rights, we must recognize and perform our duties. Einstein left Germany soon after Hitler took over, but before he did he turned to the universities expecting them to stand for liberty, but they were silent. He looked to the press, but soon it too

was silent, and the intellectuals likewise did not speak out. The only source of opposition that was open and honest was the church. Einstein saw that stand and wrote, "Until then I had shown no interest in the church. But now I am full of admiration for the church, and am drawn towards her for the gallant fight she made on behalf of spiritual truths and moral freedom. I willingly acknowledge my admiration for the church, although in the past I judged her of little value."

It is the silence of the church in times of great evil that causes intellectuals to feel the church is of little value. When Christians do not take a clear cut stand on what we profess the world considers them hypocritical. When love is preached, but prejudice is practiced, the world is not impressed by such a clear contradiction. When we fail to do our duty, we not only fail God, we fail men as well. The excuse is often made that one person can do so little, but the fact is, you can always do your duty, and when we do our duty we glorify God and please Him. This is not doing nothing, it is doing the greatest thing we can do. Luther wrote,

Put thou thy trust in God, In duty's path go on; Fix on His Word thy steadfast eye, So shall thy work be done.

Charles Kingsley wrote, "There are two freedoms: The false where a man is free to do what he likes, and the true where a man is free to do what he ought." Eccles. 12:13 says, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." It is not the duty of man to feel good or be happy, for he cannot control that, but to keep God's commandments and do His will is something you can choose to do. Maturity is doing what you are suppose to do just because you are suppose to do it, and not because it is exciting.

People do not want to be bogged down with duty. When Jesus said to go the second mile, He did not say you had to enjoy it. There are things you do because He wants you to do it, and not because you want to. These are acts of obedience. Love is often expressed in duty. Love is not all emotion, for it is acts of the will by which you make it clear where your loyalty is. Prayer is a privilege, but it is also a duty. We are obligated to pray for one another. We are commanded to pray, and so it is better to pray badly than not to pray at all. G. K. Chesterton said, "If a thing is worth doing at all, it is worth doing badly." In other words, a duty is to be done even if it is not done well. We don't pray for one another because we are so holy, or so eloquent, or superior, but because it is the loving thing to do, and love is our duty as Christians.

It is our highest duty.

Sometimes duties and delights do go together. It is your duty to love your mate, and that is also enjoyable. It is your duty to raise your children and provide for them, and this can be a great pleasure. It is your duty to learn what the Bible teaches, and this can be one of life's greatest pleasures, but regardless of the pleasure, these duties are an obligation we have before God. Fanny Crosby wrote, "Rescue the perishing, duty demands it." We are not in to soul winning because it is easy or fun, but because there is no way to obey Christ and not care about rescuing the perishing. It is our duty to try and reach people for Christ. The point of all this is, there are many things in life that we are suppose to do, and do them just because we are suppose to. May God help us all to be committed to being people of duty.

28. BREAKING OUT OF OUR COMFORT ZONES Based on Luke 18:18-30

It was 1847, and St. Paul, Minnesota was a town filled with ignorance and drunkenness. Liquor was sold in every store. Half the parents could not read, and so drinking was about their only form of entertainment. It was typical of frontier towns, and no one even dreamed of trying to make a difference. Then Harriet Bishop came along at age 13. She was converted to Christ and baptized as the youngest member of her Baptist church in Vermont. She read about missionaries and became determined to get an education to be one. She went off to Albany, New York to a Christian school for training teachers.

A pioneer missionary in St. Paul wrote a letter to that school telling of the desperate need for a godly teacher for the children. He painted no pretty picture, but warned of the sacrifice, risks, and obstacles. No one wanted the task except Harriet. She felt she was most needed there than anywhere else on earth. She accepted the call to be a missionary to Minnesota. Her call was confirmed by the special providence of God in her life. She did not want to travel on the Sabbath, and so she stayed over in Palmyra, New York instead of taking the ship Chesapeake that day. The ship went down in Lake Erie, and all the passengers were lost. She finally made it to St. Paul. The last 9 miles was in a canoe paddled by two Indian women.

Her first school house was a mud plastered log hovel. It was formerly a black smith shop on the corner of 3rd and St. Peter. Two weeks after her arrival she began the first Sunday School in town, and it became the foundation for the First Baptist Church of St. Paul. By the third Sunday there were 25 people. She started the fight for temperance to release the community from the bondage to alcohol. She took a lot of flack from the men, but she was supported by the women. She said, "To women is entrusted the future destiny of Minnesota." In 1867 she helped organize the Ladies Christian Union which helped the poor and homeless.

Like so many loving people she lacked good judgment for her choice of mates. Her first fiancé was a lawyer, and he broke the engagement just before the wedding. Seven years later she married a harness maker, and he was a drunkard. He was abusive, and after 9 years she

divorced. Unhappy in love, but she still made a major difference in other lives as the founder of the first public school and first Sunday School in St. Paul. She broke out of her comfort zone in the East to be used of God in the West.

Almost everything in God's plan calls for breaking out of a comfort zone and taking some risk. God called Abraham from the center of a great civilization to go out to a land he knew nothing about. He gave up his security and comfort and headed West, and that was the beginning of the people of God. Very little can happen for positive change if people stay in their comfort zone. When Jesus said to deny yourself and take up the cross and follow Him He was saying in essence that we need to break out of our comfort zone to be useful for the kingdom of God.

That is what Jesus was saying to the rich young ruler. He was basically a good guy. He was raised from childhood to be obedient to the commandments of God. He grew up to be a very successful Jew. He was both rich and a ruler, and so he had achieved two of the most frequent dreams of men, which is the dream of having power and possessions. Yet for some reason he was

not content, and he had some doubt about his relationship to God. His religion was obviously just mechanical and legalistic. He kept the commandments out of a sense of duty, and it was a mere matter of habit. He did not feel that he had a personal relationship with God, and so he had no assurance of eternal life.

Jesus knew he was typical of the many in Israel who had developed a mere legalistic religion where they kept a lot of rules and cared little to nothing about the needs to be met in a fallen world. They were religious and wealthy. They had the good life and they were content. Jesus shocked this young ruler by saying you lack one thing. He told him to sell all he had and give it to the poor, and then follow Him. Jesus never said this to any other person. Other rich people became His disciples, and He never told them to sell all and give it to the poor. You have Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, Zacchaeus, and others including some of his chosen 12. Peter and Andrew, and James and John had a substantial fishing company with hired hands, but Jesus did not tell them to sell it all.

The point is that Jesus is using this rich young ruler to teach a major lesson. The truly committed person is one who is willing to break out of a comfort zone for the sake of the kingdom. If you are content to stay stuck in the comfort zone, you are not available to be used to fulfill God's dream for you. He goes on to say to Peter that those who have left loved ones and possessions for the kingdom of God will be greatly rewarded, for giving up of comfort is a key sign that reveals that a person is really serious about the dream God has for them. No pain-no gain is a biblical truth. Almost every beneficial change in the history of mankind demanded that someone break out of a comfort zone. A hurting world is seldom helped by comfortable

people. It is people who are willing to suffer hurt who help the hurting.

Jesus was comfortable in heaven. He was rich beyond anything we can conceive, but He became poor for our sake. He gave up perpetual pleasure and took on the persistent pain of a real human life. It was a life of rejection and then crucifixion. Had Jesus gotten stuck in His comfort zone there would be no plan of salvation, and we would face eternal condemnation rather than eternal comfort. We owe everything to the fact that Jesus broke out of His comfort zone.

If you look at the history of every miserable situation and the people who changed it, you will see the same pattern. Somebody has to break free and pay the price of sacrificing their own comfort. For example, take the life of Sara Josephine Baker. She was born in 1873 to a well to do lawyer in New York. Her mother was one of the first to enter Vassar's new college for women. They were rich, educated, and sophisticated. Sara became a female doctor when it was very rare. In 1902 she was offered the job of seeking out sick babies in New York for the health department. Believe it or not, in 1902 there were 1500 babies that died every week in New York City. Dr. Baker climbed stairway after stairway where she saw drunk and filthy mothers with dying babies. She came to the conclusion that these babies were better off dead than to have so degrading a life.

The whole medical community was fatalistic. It was inevitable that these babies would die, and nothing could change it. By the time doctors saw these babies it was too late to save them. Dr. Baker fell into the comfort zone of accepting the inevitable. But then in 1907 The Bureau Of Municipal Research asked Dr. Baker to help find the reason for New York's high death rate. She learned that one fifth of them died before they were one, and one third died before they were five. It was obvious that the only solution would be prevention of the sicknesses that killed them.

The Bureau made a new division for prevention, and made Dr. Baker the chief of this division. She chose to experiment in the Lower East Side populated by Italians newly arrived in New York. It had one of the highest infant death rates. She used all of the city school nurses who were off for the summer to go and teach parents of all the newborns the principles of child hygiene. At the end of the summer there were 1200 fewer deaths than the summer before, and all other areas of the city had as many deaths as ever. All of the medical skeptics were convinced that it was not inevitable that masses of babies die each summer. 35 year old Sara Baker became the head of the first government bureau in the world concerned with child hygiene. She was the first person to act on the idea that preventative medicine was a function of government.

She had enormous battles with the medical profession, the New York City school board, the psychologist, and basically all professional people. Nevertheless she pressed on, and her programs saved tens of thousands of babies. The paradox is that it was among the poor that

the death rate was drastically reduced. She was never able to achieve this reduction among the wealthy because they refused to believe her. In pride they had to see their babies die at a greater rate than was the case among the poor. The medical profession kept killing mothers and babies at a higher rate than any other country except Chili, but the thousands of mid-wives who trained to work with the poor were saving lives at a greater rate than ever before in history.

Her successes were so great that her division became the largest in the New York Department Of Public Health. The city's infant mortality rate became the lowest of all the major city's of the world. By 1923 there were agencies for preventive child hygiene in every state and many foreign countries. You and I may be alive today because of one wealthy sophisticated lady who broke out of her comfort zone and devoted her life to saving poor babies. History reveals that Jesus was right. The kingdom of God, that is the realm where God's will reigns and His will is done on earth as it is in heaven, does not overcome and conquer the kingdom of darkness unless someone is willing to break out of their comfort zone.

The best of people who just conformed to the system whatever it is get comfortable with what is in every realm of life. The only hope for change that can make a difference is a non-conformist who is willing to risk his or her own comfort for the sake of benefiting others. The reason it is so hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God is because they are the most comfortable. It goes against the grain of human nature to give up their comfort for the good of others, and even for achieving what they know is God's will. But Jesus says though it is impossible for men to break out of their comfort zone, it is possible with God. By the grace of God we can break free and be used to fulfill God's dream for us. But let's be honest and admit that we love our comfort zone. Who of us would not join the rich young ruler in being sad if we were told to sell all our possessions and give it to the poor?

We like the kind of rut we are in. We like our net worth to rise each year, and we like to acquire more stuff. We like to be comfortable, and don't like to look for ways to break out of our comfort zone. This is the American dream, and it is more acceptable to our nature than the demands of the kingdom of God to sacrifice comfort. Most of us are not fighting to figure out how to break free, but of how to maintain the comfort zone. Someone wrote, "A burley construction foreman lined up his crew and told them that he could lick any man on this gang. A husky young man stepped forward and said, 'You can't lick me.' The foreman looked him over carefully and replied, 'You're probably right. You're fired.'" What threatens our comfort is not welcomed as a

challenge, but rejected as a foe of our dreams.

All change is something of a threat. Change means you may have to move out of your comfort zone. If you try something new, or strive to develop a new relationship, it means a likely sacrifice of something old. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. He saw something in Jesus

that challenged his comfort zone. He was basically in the same boat as the rich young ruler, but he was a rich old ruler. He was stuck in his comfort zone, and Jesus said that he needed to be born again. He did not tell him to sell all and give to the poor, but said that he needed a rebirth. He needed to escape his legalistic and mechanical religion and experience the love of God with all his heart. He was set in his ways as were all the leaders of the Sanhedrin. He showed that it is not true that you can't teach an old dog new tricks. The rich young ruler went away sad, but Nicodemus went away glad, for he realized it is never too late to break out of one's comfort zone. He did it and went against the majority to become a follower of Jesus.

Peter was the oldest of the 12 Apostles, but he was more willing than the rest to break out of his comfort zone. He was the only one with the faith to step out of the boat in a storm to go to Jesus. That boat was the comfort zone of all of them, but Peter took the risk. He didn't get far before he started to sink, but he did break free and gave Jesus a chance to show him that his security was not in himself, but in Jesus. It is often a leap of faith to break out of a comfort zone, for you may no longer be in control, but have to surrender your destiny to the Lord. This leads to a lot of discomfort to let go of the wheel and let another take charge. It is hard at any age, but all ages are expected to do it to experience God's best.

Comfort is not our goal as Christians. We love it and hate to leave it, but it is not our goal. The goal is to be channels of God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. Our goal is to be Christ-like in all areas of life. Our goal is to love God with all our being and our neighbor as ourselves. Our goal is to fulfill the Great Commission, and do our best to see that the whole world hears the Gospel. There may be a great deal of joy and satisfaction in aiming for these goals, but on the other hand, there may be a great deal of risk and sacrifice. If our comfort is not leading us to success, then we need to face reality, and recognize the need to break out of our comfort zone, and be willing to pay the price of discomfort for the kingdom of God. Even success is dangerous, for it can lead us to be comfortable and not be willing to pay the price for a greater dream.

Back in August of 1985, 200 lifeguards with the New Orleans Recreation Department gathered at the city pool for a party. It was the first summer in memory when there had not been a drowning in any of the New Orleans pools. They were celebrating this great success record, but at the party a 31-year-old man, Jerome Moody, drowned in that very pool. There was such a sense of security in their success that nobody dreamed of staying on the alert, and one of their own was neglected and drowned. They got too comfortable in their success, and the result was a failure.

This also happens to Christians. Janette George, who played Corrie Ten Boom in *The Hiding Place* became so popular after that movie came out. She was a Christian celebrity overnight, and people saw her as Corrie Ten Boom. She was on platforms with Christian leaders in all fields. In TV interviews she was asked about her views on controversial issues she never knew

existed. But not knowing, never kept her from answering. People expected her to be all wise, and she felt comfortable with all the attention, and the assumption that she was just like Corrie. The fact is, it was all a front, and she was pretending to be someone she was not. She became a hypocrite

playing a role that made her feel good. She wrote her book *Travel Tips From A Reluctant Traveler* to set the record straight and start being herself. She had to break out of that comfort zone of being somebody else to be the person God wanted her to be. Her very success in being somebody else was making her a failure at being who she really was. The price for getting back to her really self was discomfort.

Her problem was more similar to that than the rich young ruler than it appears on the surface. She was loading her life with that which gave her comfort, but which also robbed her of being authentic. It seemed like a dream come true, but it was not the dream that God had for her. God dreams for us to become fully ourselves, and not to escape into the fantasy of being someone else. She had to get rid of the excessive luggage if she was going to travel to the destination God had in mind for her. That was the problem with the rich young ruler. He was loaded down with possessions, and was actually enslaved to them, and the result was he could not follow Jesus.

Breaking out of our comfort zone often means we need to learn to travel light. We get so encumbered with life's stuff that we are no longer free to go the way God desires for us to go. The rich young ruler could not travel light because he could not let go. We are not in a position to judge him, for my guess is that none of us are able to travel as light as Jesus expects. We cannot let go, and so we hold on to our comfort level and miss the adventure God has planned for us. Back in 1915 the ship *Endurance* was locked into the freezing ice in the Antarctic. Sir Ernest Shackleton, the great polar explorer, called all of the crew together and explained that their only hope was to abandon the ship and drag the lifeboats over the ice to the open sea 350 miles away, and then sail 1000 miles to the nearest civilization.

He told them that the key to their success would be to travel light. To show just how serious he was about this he took out the gold coins he had in his pocket and threw them into the snow. He then took his Bible which had been given to him by Queen Alexandria, he turned to Psa. 23 and tore it out, and he tore out the fly leaf with the Queen's inscription, and put these in his pocket and laid the Bible gently in the snow, and he walked away. Nobody could miss the point. Survival meant letting go of all that was not absolutely vital. They followed his example and by the grace of God, after 13 months of unbelievable danger and hardship, they made it back to safety. They survived because they traveled light.

The rich young ruler could not do it. He held to his load and did not make it into God's dream for him. Many are the accounts of people in ship wrecks who cannot let go of their money bags or prize possessions, and they sink as a consequence. Christians who can't let go

of a painful past let it drag them down. Christians who can't let go of a comfortable present let that hold them back. There does not seem to be an end to all the ways Satan can keep us from God's dream. It seems like some sort of suffering has to be endured to make progress in the Christian life, and this is a hard choice to make, for all of us prefer comfort to suffering. But if you read the biographies of the people God has used in history, you discover there were not many who lived lives of great comfort. They were more likely to be facing discomfort perpetually.

The point is, we all have our comfort zones. We like the thermostat between 65 and 75, and we like to get through the grocery line in 10 minutes or less. We like company to stay just three days at the most, and we like 6 to 8 hours of sleep a night, and we like people to agree with the way we think. When circumstances and people do not cooperate and our comfort level is disturbed, we

find it hard to be Christ like. Our old nature takes over and God's dream for us to be holy and blameless gets shattered. We are not as different from the rich young ruler as we like to think. What we hold on to may not be the same, but all of us hold on to some comfort zone that is hard to let go of, and we tend to go backward instead of forward because of it.

Few of us escape entirely from the very comfort zone the rich young ruler held onto. It was the comfort of acquiring and possessing things. Scott Wesley Brown, the musician, wrote a song called "Things."

Things upon the mantle, Things on every shelf, Things that others gave me, Things I gave myself,
Things I've stored in boxes, That don't mean much anymore, Old magazines and memories
Behind the attic door,

Things on hooks and hangers, Things on ropes and rings, Things I guard that blind me to The
pettiness of things. Am I like the rich young ruler Ruled by all I own? If Jesus came and asked me,
Could I leave them all alone?

Oh, Lord, I look to heaven, Beyond the veil of time, To gain eternal insight That nothing's really
mine And to only ask for daily bread And all contentment brings To find freedom as Your
servant In the midst of all these things.

For discarded in the junkyards, Rusting in the rain, Lie things that took the finest years Of
lifetimes to obtain, And whistling through these tombstones The hallow breezes sing A song of
dreams surrendered to The tyranny of things.

May God help us all to dare to dream again, and break out of the comfort zones that hold us back from an adventure with God.

29 THE UPPER CLASS Based on Luke 22:24-30

When soldiers for the 6th Massachusetts Militia were attacked, and many were wounded at the start of the Civil War, they were brought to Washington, D. C. Clara Barton had been a teacher in Massachusetts, and she recognized some of the wounded soldiers as her former students. She went to the hospital to help, and she discovered that no one was prepared for this emergency, and the supplies were short. Other trains began to arrive with the wounded, and Clara appealed to her friends for supplies. Barrels of food and bandages were being sent to her.

Many of the wounded died because it took so long for them to get treatment. She kept moving closer and closer to the scene where they were wounded until she ended up right on the battlefield. She became known as the Angel of the Battlefield. She escaped death through all four years of the Civil War, even though wounded men she was treating were shot as she was aiding them. She was like an angel being guarded by an angel.

After the war Lincoln asked her to take on the enormous task of locating the 80 thousand missing men, and report to the families if they were found dead. This was another four years of work. In 1869 she went to Europe for her own health. While there the Franco-Prussian War broke out, and she volunteered her services. She was again nursing the wounded. She saw the efficiency of the Red Cross at work. She came back to America and for 5 years labored to get legislation through Congress for the United States to join The International Red Cross. She succeeded, and in 1882 the U. S. branch was established. At age 77 she was on the battlefield again in the Spanish-American War. She died at age 91 in the year of 1912.

Her lifetime of service to others all began with service within her own home. When she was 11 years old her brother had an accident and was ill for two years. She became his nurse and developed such a love of meeting the needs of the suffering that it became her passion for the rest of her life. She gave her life to serving others, and was very conscious of the presence of Christ. She quoted Jesus: "In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." Then she added, "I never in my life performed a days work at the field that was not grounded in that little sentence." She was asked how she could endure all the horror of the battlefield, and she replied, "You must never think of anything except the need and how to meet it. Then God gives the strength, and the thing that seemed impossible is done."

Her life illustrates one of the hardest lessons in life for us to learn, and that is that greatness is not measured by what you get, but by what you give. We have the same problem as the disciples had because we think greatness and successful living has to do with the position, power, and prestige we get in life, rather than the service that we give in life. It is such a hard lesson to learn because all of the media constantly bombard us with the opposite message that life does consist in the abundance of your possessions, and that the key to greatness is power,

position and prestige. It is hard for our minds not to conform to this message when the Christian world tends to promote the same value system.

There is little in our culture that causes anyone to aspire to be a servant. That is a thing of the past. Servant-hood seems so archaic and obsolete. Sid Frank in *The Presidents* tells of how two of

the presidents of the United States were indentured servants as boys. The two were Millard Fillmore and Andrew Johnson. They were under contract for 5 to 7 years, and for all practical purposes were owned by their masters. Andrew Johnson was indentured to a tailor and he hated it and ran away. A reward of ten dollars for his capture was advertised in the *Raleigh, North Carolina Gazette*, but he was never captured. Fillmore purchased his freedom for 30 dollars after he served a couple of years. This kind of servant hood links it with it with slavery and this is repulsive to freedom loving Americans.

It is hard for modern American Christians to get their minds open to the mind of Christ on this issue because it goes against the grain of our culture. The New Testament, however, is loaded with teachings about being servants. To make matters worse the primary word for servant in the New Testament is the word *doulos*, and it means slave. In Matt. 20:6-7 Jesus said to His disciples who were indignant at James and John trying to get places at His right and left hand in His kingdom, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave." In the parable of the talents the master says, "Well done thou good and faithful servant." He uses the word *doulos*, which is slave.

The study of this word is time consuming, for it is used so many times. But let me point out that Paul called himself, and his companions, slaves of Christ, and he considered all Christians slaves of Christ. James, Peter, and Jude likewise proudly wore the same title. It would take hours just to read all the verses that exalt the role of servant in the Bible. When we come to the text in Luke 22 we see Jesus is using a different word than *doulos*. Here He uses the word *diakoneo*, from which we get the word deacon. Jesus came into this world to be a deacon, which is one who serves. The word means one who waits on and ministers to others. Jesus did not come to be waited on, but to wait on others, and to be their servant.

There is no escape from this reality that Jesus both taught and lived. True greatness can be found only in service. Therefore, whenever people are aware of the presence of Christ there will be a desire to minister to the needs of others. If we open our homes to Christ, it means we will have no problem with the issue of submission to one another. Submitting simply means ceasing to play the role of master and taking on the role of servant. Since this is the highest role we can play, it means the husband never stands taller than when he serves the members of his family by meeting their needs. The wife's calling to submit to her husband is not then a call to a place of second class lowness, but rather, it is a call to the most Christ-like role of the servant.

The reason wives and mothers are more honored and exalted by holidays, and in poetry, is because their role as servants meets so many vital needs of the family members that everybody knows they are the greatest factor in family harmony, health and happiness. It is service that makes them the greatest in the kingdom of the home just as it is service that makes any of us great in other realms of life. Jesus took the little lad's lunch, and that service that his mother rendered to her one little boy was used to feed 5,000. Her family service was multiplied to minister to a multitude of families. Jesus does this for all of us. Whatever service we render to another member of the family enhances their potential to be of service to others.

This means that the Christian home is a service center. It is a place where we are served, and a place where we learn the art of serving. Someone said, "No matter how small your lot in life there is always room on it for a service station."

Each of us can be great in the kingdom of God by means of service. We want to look at two aspects of service in this text.

I. THE SUPREMACY OF SERVICE.

Jesus said the servant is the greatest, and the whole of the Bible and history support this. Moses was a great many things. He was a leader, a law giver, a miracle worker, a man of prayer and faith, and a man of courage and compassion. There are so many things one might remember him for, or put on his epitaph to sum up his life. But in Joshua where God comes to him to tell him he was the new leader of Israel he referred 4 times to the fact that Moses was his servant. That is the one characteristic that God selected to describe this great man. There is no greater compliment that God can give a man, for to be a servant is to be the greatest of all.

Many of the great men of the Bible are called servants of God, and so the only upper class in the Bible is the servant class. When you get into this class you are at the pinnacle of your career for God, for there is no place to go that is greater and higher. If your goal in life is to be in the upper class, then service is the only way to go. The final proof of this is that the Son of God Himself came into human life, not to be a king and ruler before whom masses would bow, but to be a servant of the masses. Our Savior is supremely a Servant. He not only taught this truth, He demonstrated it. Jesus is Lord of all men, not just by right of creation, but by right of redemption. He is the only being in the universe that has provided a vital service for every person who has ever lived. He provided the way of salvation so that all can be forgiven and have eternal life.

There is not way to be like Jesus without being a servant. In Acts 10:38 Peter sums up the life of Jesus by saying that He went about doing good. Jesus was the servant of every man, woman and child He met. That was the whole point of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Who is my neighbor? And the answer is, every person you confront in life who has a need you can meet. The Scribes and Pharisees passed by on the other side. They were, no doubt, better

Bible expositors than the Good Samaritan. They, no doubt, had more gifts, and their worship was more consistent with Old Testament law. But Jesus exalted that Samaritan to the highest class because He was a servant. He was upper class, and these spiritual leaders were low class, for they refused to give service.

The servant and love are the two sides of the same coin. Love is the highest virtue, and the servant is simply one who expresses love. That is what service is. It is love in action. Love is something you do. David took a tumble and fell further than most of the Old Testament saints, but he came through in the end as a hero because he was a man after God's own heart. He had the heart of a servant. He loved people and ministered to people, and he has continued to do so all through history through his Psalms. His epitaph was, "David served his own generation by the will of God." He fell the lowest, but he also climbed the highest, for he made it to the servant class. It was not by being a king, but by being a servant.

The world says we measure greatness by how many people are under us serving us. The Bible measures greatness by how many people are lifted and blessed by our service of them. Only Jesus lifted everyone, and He is the Supreme Servant, but by being channels of His Spirit we too can be lifters and lovers of many. This is the whole point of the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. R. A. Torrey said, "There is not one single passage in the Bible, either in the Old Testament or the New

Testament where the baptism with the Spirit is spoken of, where it is not connected with testimony or service." In other words, the goal of all spiritual experiences is not that we have an emotional high, but that we become more able and effective servants.

The difference between the sheep and the goats in the judgment is simply service. The sheep are those who met needs and ministered to people. The goats did not do so. They never became servants, and so they never became a part of that upper class welcomed into the eternal mansions prepared for that class. God honors only the servant class. In reality, that is true for the honors of men also. We see a soldier being honored with a medal for his bravery, but he is honored because his bravery was a service to us. He risked his life for us. We don't care about his bravery. He may have been scared silly, but he still did what was a service that benefited us. If bravery was worthy of honor in itself we would have to give medals to sky divers and bungi jumpers. But there bravery is of no service to others, and so we have no such medals. It is service that we honor.

We think we honor leaders, but this is not the case if they do not become servants. Leaders who do not serve seldom become great, or greatly loved. Frank Warren said, "If you wish to be a leader you will be frustrated, for very few people wish to be led. If you aim to be a servant, you will never be frustrated." His never is too strong, but his point is correct. The servant is always desired, for all people what service. Next consider

II. THE SUCCESS OF SERVICE.

Learning to develop the servant's spirit is the key to overcoming the greatest problem in relationships, and that problem is selfishness. Selfishness operates on the world's value system. It says, "I have my position, my rights, and my power, and I expect to be served accordingly." This leads to a host of hurts and hostilities in relationships. The servant spirit reverses this and says, "Regardless of my position and rights I will seek to meet the needs of other in so far as I can." This leads to peace and positive relationships.

David Mains tells of an assistant he had in his church in Chicago. He came out of a well to do home where he had many servants. When he became a Christian he decided to go to a Bible school. When he got to the dorm he found the washroom dirty and reported it to the headmaster. He then returned to his room to wait until it was cleaned. Almost immediately he heard footsteps and looked out of his door, and to his shock it was the headmaster carrying a bucket and rags. He cleaned the room himself, and then came and reported the job was done. He learned that day a powerful lesson on servant-hood that changed his life. Here was the leader stooping to serve his need, and that was success.

Christian success is always servant's success. If you work for others, you must provide a service for them to be successful. The secular success of the Christian also revolves around service, for without service there can be no satisfaction. It is service that gives meaning to life and all that we do. Back in 1802 Beethoven made out a will, and in it he wrote of growing deaf and how that he was tempted to despair when others spoke of hearing beautiful music. He was restrained from taking his own life by his deep desire to bring out of himself his full potential for the service of others. Every suicide could be prevented if people could see their potential for service. That is what saved Beethoven and many others. Every person alive has meaningful service to give to others, especially within the family. But when they become blind to this they lose their sense of self-esteem and give up.

Successful living is in discovering what service you can provide for others. Church growth is built on the principle of finding a need and meeting it. In other words, church growth is a result of service, and so is personal growth. You find a need in your home and you meet it. You find a need in your community and meet it. You find a need in your church and you meet it. In every realm of life success and service are one. Someone wrote, "We must be God's arms to comfort and help, God's eyes so quick to see that need, God's ear, so ready to hear the overburdened heart, God's feet, so quick to run His errands, God's fingers to do His work.

The successful people in God's book, and all through history, are people who have the servant spirit. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. just two months before he died preached a sermon in which he said, "Every now and then I think about my own funeral. If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver

the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long...Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize, that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards, that's not important...I'd like somebody to mention that day that...Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody...I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity."

King became famous, but there are millions of successful people in God's book who never did. They are people who see a need and meet it. They may not even be leaders in their local church, but they are people who make life easier for leaders because of the service they provide. They are mates and children who make home life easier and happier for everyone because they carry their own load, and then help with the load of others. Successful living is always lifting the load of others.

This is so obvious a reality that it is universally recognized. Here is a paraphrase of an ancient Chinese proverb, and in it you can see that the ancients knew that service was the key to successful living. It says, "If there is a love of helpfulness in one's heart, there will be acts of gracious serving in one's life. If there are acts of gracious serving in one's life, there will be harmony in the home and trust among friends. If there is harmony in the home and trust among friends, there will be order in the nation. If there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world."

Your contribution to the peace of the world starts with the spirit of service. How do we get it? It is by being aware of the presence of Christ as we relate to people. What would Jesus do as He sees the need of the person before us? It may be our mate, our children, a friend, a neighbor, or a complete stranger. If we could only be conscious of the presence of Christ we would relate to all as a servant, and we would be concerned about how we could meet the needs of those around us. This can be a problem, even as it was for Jesus. He had so many needs to meet that He had to escape and find rest for Himself. He had needs also, and so the servant does not ignore his or her needs. A successful servant ministers to himself as well as others. Balance is a must.

If you lose balance and begin to focus exclusively on your own needs then you become a major problem to yourself. Your self-centeredness robs you of the success of serving others, and this leads to depression and all sorts of emotional problems. Unhappy people are usually people

who have gotten into the rut of selfishness. They are locked into serving their own needs only, and this is just not a satisfying way to live. James Magner wrote a book about the problems Christians can get into mentally. It is titled *Mental Health In A Mad World*. After describing how messed up we can get our minds and lives by self-centeredness he writes, "The moment a person takes his mind off himself and applies it to the needs and welfare of others, he becomes alert, active, interested in life, and concerned with positive functioning. With this outlook, the

world becomes full of real people, not merely walking shadows. We begin to have an actual investment in some of them, so that what they do or fail to do becomes vitally important to us.

His studies confirm our point that successful living is found in service, and in meeting the needs of others. He warns, however, of the danger of sudden change from selfish living to servant living. Those around you may not buy it right off, but be suspicious of the motive behind your service. He told of a man who brought a box of candy to his wife and she asked, "What is this?" He said, "It is a gift for you my dear." She asked, "What is the occasion?" "You know," he responded, "It is our anniversary." "Yes," she said, "I remember, but this is the first time you have remembered, what kind of mischief have you been up to?" He was so offended by this that he lost his cool and threw the box of candy out the window. Magner said it was still laying there outside when he arrived for counseling. Peace was restored and the candy was retrieved, but the problem could have been avoided by communication that he was striving to be more of a servant in their relationship.

Our service within the home is a far greater significance than we tend to realize. Jesus said, "As you have done it unto the least of one of these my brethren you have done it unto me." This means that service to members of our family is a major part of successful living. Do good unto all men, but especially to those of the household of faith. The Bible makes it clear that the common place everyday acts of service that make the home and the church function more efficiently may not make the news, or win you any honors, but they represent successful living to Jesus. This kind of service is serving Him.

Service in the family goes deeper than merely doing chores. It has to do with meeting deeper and inner needs. We all need someone to take the garbage out, but who helps us get rid of the emotional garbage that builds up within? Happy and healthy families allow for temporary insanity. Mom may ordinarily be the calm and collected type who never gets rattled, but one day she is so irritable that she screams about every little thing that does not go right, and she treats the rest of the family in a spirit of resentment and anger. This is not acceptable behavior over the long haul, but it may be necessary to endure it for a day because mom has unusual pressures and frustrations. If she is tolerated for this day, she will probably be back under control the next day. It is a form of service to be tolerant of this temporary insanity, and she will love you for not rejecting her when she is so rejecting of you.

Mates who do not fight back but become an outlet for anger in their mate can perform a service that will lead to deeper love and appreciation. It is not a slam at you that you are asked to get rid of the garbage in the kitchen, and so do not take it as a slam when you are asked to help get rid of the garbage in the heart and mind of your mate. Garbage is not pleasant, and there is no way to make it so. But getting rid of it is pleasant, and helping your mate get rid of it can lead to both of you enjoying the pleasantness of a garbage-free night together. The alternative is to throw garbage at each other and spend the night in the dumps. Someone said,

"Love is found by

those who can live with human nature as it is." This means we need to be tolerant of each other when we are temporarily on a sub-Christian level.

One of the reasons Gandhi became one of the most famous men of the 20th century is because he found his greatest pleasure in service. His brother-in-law became very ill and he spent day and night nursing him. He wrote in his autobiography, "My aptitude for nursing gradually developed into a passion, so much so that it often led me to neglect my work, and on occasions I engaged not only my wife but the whole household in such service. Such service can have no meaning unless one takes pleasure in it. When it is done for show or for fear of public opinion, it stunts the man and crushes his spirit. Service which is rendered without joy helps neither the servant nor the served. But all other pleasures and possessions pale into nothingness before service which is rendered in a spirit of joy."

Service at home led him to service his nation and the world. He wrote, "I had made the religion of service my own, as I felt that God could be realized only through service." He wrote that in the context of describing the Christians who had the biggest impact on his life. They were people who were devoted in serving others. They were Christians who had reached the upper class, that is, the servant class. Life is complex, but some messages are simple to grasp, and this is one of them. If you want to be the best person you can be, and the most effective Christian you can be, and rise to the highest level you can attain, you have only one option, and that is to be a servant.

Every Christian is called to serve the Lord with gladness. Paul was so delighted that the Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the Living and True God. In Rom. 12:11 Paul says this is our perpetual calling: "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." When you stop serving you stop being a successful Christian, for success in Christ is in service. God has no other plan by which to love the world and his family on earth. His love does not sail about in the air, but it flows through those who are His servants. Service is not only the supreme means of doing the will of God, on earth as it is in heaven, it is the sole means. That is why there is no success without service. God wants us all to live on the highest level, and it is only by being servants that we can be in the upper class.

30. WORDS OF LOVE Based on Luke 23:26-35

The one subject that is appropriate for every Christian holiday, and for the season of lent, and for the recognition of Washington and Lincoln, and for the Valentine season is the subject of love. It is not only the greatest of the Christian virtues, but is the most universally relevant subject there is. Love not only makes the world go round, it makes the trip more exciting. All of us need to give and receive love.

Nevertheless, there are those who feel you can be too loving, and they urge moderation even in mercy. Lincoln was accused of being too soft during the Civil War. He was so merciful that he went out of his way to pardon people that he knew were guilty. One young soldier had gone to sleep at his post, and he was court marshaled and condemned to be shot. Lincoln intervened and

gave this defense: "I could not think of going into eternity with the blood of that poor young man on my skirts. It is not wondered at that a boy raised on a farm, probably in the habit of going to bed at dark, should, when required to watch, fall asleep. And I cannot consent to shoot him for such an act." There was no question about his guilt, but he was granted the blessing of hearing the words of love-you are forgiven.

On another occasion 24 deserters were to be shot. Warrants for their execution were sent to Lincoln to be signed. A General urged Lincoln to sign them to make these men an example to the rest. In spite of the forceful argument Lincoln replied, "There are already too many weeping widows in the United States. For God's sake don't ask me to add to the number, for I won't do it." With complete knowledge of their guilt he pardoned them, and he spoke the words of love-you are forgiven.

Amazing grace indeed, but no where near as amazing as the words of love we hear from the central cross on Golgatha. Here we see the King of the Jews-the Lord Jesus, being unjustly crucified with criminals. It was the greatest sin against God ever committed on this planet. No words can describe the depth to which man had fallen in killing the only perfect man who ever lived. But there are no words of cursing coming from that cross. There are no words of revenge, but unbelievably we hear words of love, and words of pardon, for Jesus said, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

Murder mysteries are famous for surprising endings, but you never see a more surprising ending than this. Here are the guilty standing before God as their judge, and who is their defense attorney? It is none other than the very victim of their dastardly crime. And what does he plead? He does not plead not guilty, for they are guilty as sin. But he pleads the mercy of the court in saying, "Father forgive them." These are the greatest words of love ever spoken on this earth. For if Jesus had not forgiven those who crucified Him, there would be no plan of salvation, for the sins of all mankind took Jesus to the cross, and without His words of pardon no one could be saved.

These words of love represent God's pardon for a world of rebels who have defied His will. There is no doubt about their guilt, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Nevertheless, with full knowledge of their guilt Jesus pardoned the guilty and made it possible for every sinner to become a child of God. Jesus died for all sin, and that included the sin of causing Him to die. The result is that no one ever has to pay the penalty for the greatest sin ever. And if that sin is forgiven, then Jesus stands ready at all times to forgive any sin and to

speak these words of love to any who come to Him-"Father forgive them."

In 1973 a bank robber got caught in the act in Stockholm, Sweden. He took three women and a man as hostages for 131 hours. There was no way he could escape, and so in frustration he terrorized his hostages. He shot off his assault weapon to scare them. He threatened their lives and just made them miserable. When it was all over one of the women became his fiancée. Woe! you say. What is that again? That's right, it is no mistake, and one of the women fell in love with this jerk. To add to the surprise, the other hostages refused to testify against him. The crazy thing about it is that this is not an isolated incident. It is just one example of a pattern which has come to be called by the FBI the Stockholm Syndrome.

It is that mysterious magic that makes a dangerous enemy a person you like and want to help.

Thousand of hostages have been studied, and after their crisis they feel a closeness to their captor, and they do not want to see them punished. They take his side and try to protect him. Studies show that a sort of intimacy develops when people share a crisis together, and they feel they know each other. The victim grows to know the problems and weaknesses of their captor, and they feel they have a sense of intimacy with them.

As crazy as it sounds, it is real, and it fits what we see at the cross. These men have taken Jesus by force and have illegally railroaded him into capital punishment. He is their captive, and they are violently taking his life, and yet Jesus is sympathetic and is pleading for them not to be judged as they deserve, but to be forgiven. It is not the Stockholm Syndrome but the Calvary Syndrome, or the Savior Syndrome. It is the desire to love and save even those who do not deserve it, but who deserve only anger and judgment.

Our heritage as Christians revolves around this spirit of grace and these words of love from the cross. But, our heritage as Americans does also, for it was this very spirit of Christ that made the greatest presidents in the history of our nation the instruments of God that they were. Lincoln's birthday was Feb. 12 and Washington's birthday is on Feb. 22. It is providential that February, the month of focus on love, is the month in which we celebrate the birthdays of these two great men. They were great because they heard the words of love from Christ, they received these words of love as their own heritage, and then passed on these words of love by their talk and their walk. It was their love of people, truth, and liberty that made them great.

Abraham Lincoln was a great man because he knew how to love. He loved the truth and he loved what was right, but he loved people even when they fought the truth and did not know what was right. Lincoln knew how to love his enemies as few leaders ever have. When General Lee was about to surrender and end the Civil War, the Northern officials were making preparation for a triumphal entry into Richmond. Lincoln put his foot down and said, "There shall be no triumphal entry into Richmond." Lincoln went alone into Richmond and walked

through the Southern capital with his head bowed. When he reached the home of Jefferson Davis, the president of the South, he sat with Davis and wept. It was one of the greatest victories of the Civil War, and many felt that Lincoln's sympathetic heart saved the Union and enabled the South to be bound together with the North.

Lincoln was one of the few great leaders in history who had the honesty to admit that both sides in a war were sinners, and both sides had godly people of faith. He said, "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other." Lincoln loved people even when he hated their convictions. Lincoln was able to do what we all know is the biblical ideal, but have a hard time doing it. He hated slavery, but loved the slave owner, and recognized that they could be good and godly men who were blinded by their heritage and environment.

Most leaders of a nation at war try to portray the enemy as the essence of evil. Lincoln portrayed the enemy as just pathetically mistaken. But he did not pretend the North was a holy haven of saints. He admitted that God had not fully answered their prayers either, and that they too were suffering part of the judgment of God on a nation that supported depriving others of their liberty. In his famous second inaugural address he said, "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue

until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two-hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said 3000 years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous all together."

Lincoln never had a "holier than thou" spirit, but one of humility, and that is why he could love his enemies and recognize they were not to be treated with contempt, but with mercy. In that same great message he expressed his spirit toward the South: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in...." And what was that work? To heal and lift the nation so that it would be united in the common cause of fulfilling the purpose of God. This is why you will find the name Lincoln on almost every list of the greatest men who ever lived. He wrote no great books, and produced no great art or music, and he led no armies himself. He was quite homely, and had a long list of failures in his life. How does a man with so many failures and handicaps become great?

He had a difficult childhood. He had less than one year of formal schooling. He failed in business in 1831. He was defeated for the legislature in 1832. Again he failed in business in 1833. His fiancée died in 1835. He was defeated for the Speaker in 1838. He was defeated for Elector in 1840. Only one of his four sons lived past age 18. He was defeated for congress in 1846. He was defeated for congress again in 1848. He was defeated for the senate in 1855. He was defeated

for vice-president in 1856. He was defeated for the senate again in 1858. After all of this defeat he finally won to become President in 1860.

Lincoln became great because he never let failure stop him from trying. He cared about people and people knew it. It was love that lifted Lincoln to the level of greatness. Someone said, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Where did he learn this spirit of love for people, for truth, and for freedom? He learned it as a child. He only had a handful of books as a child. The Bible was one of them, and the life of Washington was another, and Washington became his hero. Then he had the famous Christian classic Pilgrim's Progress, and besides these all he had was a History of the United States, Aesop's Fables, and Robinson Crusoe. But these few resources were all he needed to develop a God-like attitude, and a value system pleasing to God.

Had Lincoln had trash to read rather than these few great treasures of literature and God's Word. The whole history of our nation could have been radically different. What a child reads can change the history of the world. If you want a child to grow up and be part of the answer rather than part of the problem, make sure they read the best there is. If you love people, you will get children to read books of love, and the greatest of these is the Bible. Daniel Webster said, "If religious books are not widely circulated among the masses in this country, I do not know what is

going to become of us as a nation. If truth be not diffused, error will be; if God and His Word are not known and received, the devil and his works will gain the ascendancy; if the evangelical volume does not reach every hamlet, the pages of a corrupt and licentious literature will; if the power of the Gospel is not felt throughout the length and breadth of the land, anarchy and misrule, degradation and misery, corruption and darkness, will reign without mitigation or end." (1823)

Lincoln said, "I believe the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man. All the good from the Savior of the world is communicated to us through this book. I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go." Lincoln had a godly mother who taught him to love God's Word. Her pastor rode on horseback all the way from Kentucky to their new home in Indiana for her funeral service in 1818. Lincoln was deeply impressed by his mother's love for Christ and His Word. He acknowledge he was what he was by her influence. The love of a mother for her Lord and her son produced one of the great lovers of history. Lincoln was a great lover, and love is the greatest of the virtues, and so those who are great in love are the greatest of all.

Lincoln knew that without the providence of God there was no way the outcome of the war could be for liberty. The South won most of the early battles, and when the great battle of Gettysburg was about to take place, Lincoln knew this was the turning point. If the South would win a great battle on Northern soil and take Washington D. C., the nations of England and

France may have come to their aid to help the South take over the whole nation. Lincoln went to prayer and prayed as never before for the victory at Gettysburg. He said, "I felt that I must put all my trust in Almighty God. He gave our people the best country ever given to man. He alone could save it from destruction. I had tried my best to do my duty and found myself unequal to the task. The burden was more than I could bear. God had often been our Protector in other days. I prayed that he would not let the nation perish. I asked Him to help us and give us the victory now. I felt that my prayer was answered. I had no misgivings about the result of Gettysburg." This man who loved God and His Word, helped this nation become great. Lincoln was great because he was, like his Lord, a lover.

George Washington was a great man because of his Christian virtues. He said, "It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible." Washington was a hero in war, but he was a humble man who did not look for a fight. As a young man he got into a conflict and was knocked down. It was the custom to have a duel in such a situation, but Washington recognized he was part of the problem, and that he had provoked the fight by his sharp words. He went to the man and said, "I was in the wrong. I am sorry and I ask your pardon." The two became life long friends. Washington had demonstrated true greatness in the ability to humble himself when he was wrong. You can be famous and achieve great goals without this ability, but you cannot be great in the biblical sense without humility.

The more you study the life of Washington, the more you realize that he was God's providential gift to America. Had not God preserved his life many times he never would have been the hero of our heritage. Moses was spared as a child and so was Jesus. Both had to be protected until their work was done. But Washington had to be preserved from death over and over again.

1. When he was 20 he visited his brother in Barbados and was infected with smallpox, which was almost always fatal. He recovered in less than 3 weeks.
2. The next year in 1753 he was shot at by an Indian only 15 paces from him, and he was not hit. He and his companion were pursued by Indians ready to kill them, but they escaped.
3. In crossing the Allegheny River to escape he fell into the icy water, but was able to seize a floating log and save himself.
4. Soaking wet he had to stay out all night in the cold, but he survived.
5. In the French and Indian War he knew God had a destiny for him, for all around him men were dying. His horse was shot out from underneath him, and bullets were tearing through his uniform, but not one was permitted to enter his body. He knew he was protected by the providence of God. Four bullets actually went through his coat, and yet he was not even wounded. This is how he knew God's hand was on his life.

Washington was a man of prayer. His mother urged him, "My son, neglect not the duty of secret prayer." His mother and father were both devout members of the Episcopal Church which was almost the only Christian denomination in Virginia in that day. When he was 20

years old he wrote a 24 page book of prayers. One of them he ended like this: "Less my friends and grant me grace to forgive my enemies as heartily as I desire forgiveness of Thee my heavenly Father. I beseech Thee to defend me this night from all evil, and do more for me than I can think or ask, for Jesus Christ's sake, in whose most holy name, and words, I continue to pray." This reveals that, like his Lord, he wanted to be a man of words of love.

Washington was a great helper in the Baptist fight for religious liberty. They insisted on the addition of the Bill of Rights to the Constitution. These were the first 10 amendments. Washington wrote to the Baptist who fought and said, "If I could have entertained the slightest apprehension that the Constitution framed in the convention where I had the honor to preside might possibly endanger the religious rights of an ecclesiastical society, certainly I would never have placed my signature to it; and if I could now conceive that the General Government might ever be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure, I beg you will be persuaded that no one will be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution."

Washington was not a perfect man, nor was he a perfect Christian. He was a slave owner all his life. He set them all free in his will. It was his greatest admirer who finally set them all free, and that was Lincoln. There are no perfect men, but only those who try their best to be what Jesus wants them to be. Washington was an active church leader. Lincoln got turned off by the church, but Washington was an elected officer many times over, and was faithful to his church. In 1766 he was made chairman of the building committee and guided the building of the new church. He also bore a large share of the expense. He was also faithful in his daily devotions. He had many struggles in his life, and he lost a 16 year old daughter to consumption, but he was a man who stayed faithful to God and the will of God, because he was a man of love.

31. A CHRISTIAN CONVERTED Based on Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

Can a Christian be converted? Yes, and not only can a Christian be converted, but it is often essential before he becomes an effective servant of Jesus Christ. Conversion means to turn again to the ways of the Savior from the ways of self and sin. We are only born again once, but we need to be converted as often as we find ourselves going in the wrong direction. In many Christian's lives there are several conversions. Many make their first decision for Christ at an early age, and then as they get older they begin to realize they are being shaped by the world. The Holy Spirit convicts them, and they turn again in renewed dedication to the things of Christ.

So often people accept Christ as Savior without realizing that it means one must give Him Lordship over life, and so there is a time of ineffectiveness and failure until the Lordship of Christ is recognized and one is converted again. You can call it dedication, renewal or commitment, but it is a turning again, which is a conversion. There is, in a sense, a continuous conversion of the Christian, for there is a constant work of the Holy Spirit to keep us turned in the direction God would have us go. As the world gets worse, the believer is to become better.

The great need of the world is for Christians to be converted, for until they are the church will fail to win the world.

The truth of this is illustrated for us in the experience of Peter. In verse 32 Jesus indicates that Peter needed to be converted, or to turn again, from the path of failure he was going to follow to the path of confidence and faith in Christ, and that the purpose of this is that he might strengthen the others. This, of course, was so that they too might be strong instruments to reach the world. We want to examine this experience of Peter in 3 stages, for it illustrates a pattern, which most Christians will go through.

I. THE DANGER OF SATAN. v. 31-34

The very fact that Jesus warned Peter by the double use of his name indicates the seriousness of the danger. In only one other place did Jesus use a name like this and that was when He said, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things." She too was in great danger of letting Satan have control of her life. Whenever Jesus said something extremely important He said, "Verily, verily," and all through the Bible the double use of a word reveals deep emotion. David cried out, "Absalom, my son, my son." And Jesus cried out, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem." The point is, Jesus was trying to impress upon Peter the great danger he was facing.

Peter, however, was too self-confident to be bothered about any danger. His attitude was, don't worry about me. All the others might forsake you but not me. I will go to prison, or even face death, where there is no danger that I cannot face. Peter had a hard lesson to learn, but we know that after this experience he never again underestimated the danger of Satan's power. In I Peter 5:8 he warns his brothers in Christ to beware, "For Satan as a roaring lion walks about seeking whom he may devour." Those he devours are those who are so proud and self-confident that they feel they do not need to heed the warnings of Christ. Peter learned the hard way, and now he warns fellow believers to learn from his experience.

This warning was for all of the disciples. They were all to be sifted and shaken up, but Peter needed special prayer, for he alone, because of his self-confidence, was going to get himself in a situation of great danger. Satan was going to sift Peter like flour in a sifter. He wants to take Peter the rock and grind him to sand. Satan charge against all believers is that same charge brought against Job. He is only faithful because he has no problems and no dangers in life. You protect him, and that is why he serves you, but let me bring trial on him and he will cast you off. Satan knows that in many cases this is true that men serve God only when all is well, and they forsake him in times of trial. God allows Satan to test true believers and thereby illustrate that, like Job, a true believer will cling to God and trust Him though all the flames of hell be kindled in his life. They will say with Job, "Yea though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."

This means that every one of us are in danger of being tempted to deny Christ. Satan may be of accusing you before God. He may be saying that you only serve God because everything is going so well. It may be that you will be tested, and this is a great danger. An enemy who tripped David in the Old Testament and caused Peter to stumble in the New Testament is not an enemy that can be laughed off. Jesus took it seriously, and that is why He taught us to pray that we would be delivered from evil. The danger of Satan is a fact, which we must face. None of us escape, and to lean on our own self-confidence, as Peter did, is to court failure.

No matter what your experience or theology, the danger of Satan is real. Peter had good theology, for he said, "Thou art the Christ the Son of the living God." His experience was one of special privilege, for he was one of the inner circle, and he had supernatural experiences that most did not have. All of his privileges did not free him from this danger. In fact, they made his danger all the worse, for he was over confident in the very area that he failed. We are in greatest danger when we feel there is no danger, and so we need to give heed to the warning of Christ. Satan desires to have us all. He got Judas and almost got Peter. Let us not be self-confident, but put our confidence in Christ. The story of Peter's fall does us no good unless we recognize that the danger of Satan is real for us as well.

II. THE DENIAL OF SIMON. v. 54-60

Peter is called Simon in this context, for he is a follower of Christ, but still wants to have his own way. He is not Peter the rock at this point. He was no coward. His denial was an act of cowardice, but not because he was a coward. Peter's problem was a struggle between confidence in himself and commitment to his Savior. He had been converted from his sin, but not from his self. It took this fall for Peter to gain the victory in this area. He received rebukes from Christ on several occasions, but did not learn this lesson. He was still an unconverted Christian. Jesus said that He would go to Jerusalem and be killed, but Peter insisted that it would not be so. Jesus had to say, "Get thee behind me Satan." When Jesus was going to wash his feet Peter responded, "Not so Lord." Jesus had to rebuke him again. In this very chapter Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of Malchus, and Jesus had to rebuke him again. When is Peter ever going to learn to let his Lord lead his life?

The reason Peter denied Jesus was not because he was a coward, for he showed it in the garden that he meant what he said when he told Jesus he would die for Him. He had the courage to face the Roman soldiers single handed. He was no coward when he pulled a sword against well-trained soldiers. His problem was that his faith was in his own power, and not in the person of Christ. He was a man of action, and he alone jumped out of the boat to walk on the water. He alone wanted to build three shrines on the Mt. of Transfiguration. He alone drew the sword in the garden. Peter was all for showing power, but Jesus was no longer showing power. He was like a lamb going to the slaughter, and this was offensive to Peter. He was confused and began to doubt. His faith was wavering because he did not understand. Jesus

had made it clear that He had to die,

but Peter was too strong-headed to pay any attention to that. He was ready to face and fight any force, but when he tried he was rebuked. Peter had been sleeping and failed to realize that Jesus had already fought the battle in the garden and had won. He saw Jesus exhibiting weakness, for He was being taken without a fight, but Peter was ready to come to the rescue.

Verse 54 indicates that Peter still had the courage to follow at a distance. The details of how Peter got into the courtyard are told in John's Gospel. John knew the high priest, and so he got in and persuaded the servant girl at the door to let Peter in also. Luke does not give many details, but it is clear that Peter's danger became great because of his attempt to deceive. His faith was shaky at this point. He was not sure if Jesus was really Lord, and so he was going to be cautious. He tried to act like one of the others. He wanted to hide the fact that he was a disciple of Christ, and the result was that his deception led to his denial. The train of deception will always wind up on the track of denial, and but for the grace of God will end at the depot of despair. When a Christian tries to act like he is no different from the world, he soon will be no different.

When you try and hide your convictions, and try to conform so as not to be recognized, it become extremely difficult to admit it later. It is much easier to deny Christ than to have it discovered that you have been trying to deceive. "O what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive. He started as a distant disciple, which was physical denial; then a deceiving disciple, which is mental denial, and then a denying disciple, which is spiritual denial.

We all need to be converted from our desire to deceive. I was told of the story of a man who was trapped in a cave, and a young friend said he would go down and rescue him. TV and radio reporters were on hand as he descended. Later he came up and said he was all right but he needed supplies. He went back down into the mine. He was a hero from coast to coast, but his father was suspicious. He went down into the cave and found that it was all a fraud. His son just sat there while his friend was dying far below. He was deceiving the world into thinking that he was a hero rescuing the perishing. Sometimes we pretend that we care for a lost world of the perishing, but we really do nothing to share the Gospel that they might be rescued. We are practicing deception.

Here was Peter trying to deceive these people. He sat among them and conformed to what they wanted him to be. His deception was discovered, however, and out of fear Peter made a flat denial that he knew Jesus. It was like the time he stepped out unto the water, for he was looking at the waves and not at Jesus, and the result was his faith failed him. Here again he was trusting in his own power to deceive, and again he failed. The only way out that he could see was to deny that he had any connection with Jesus. When you play the deceiver your next role will almost certainly be that of the denier. Peter never intended things to go this way. He really meant it when he bragged of dying for Christ. His confidence was in himself and not in Christ. It

would be a very sad and disappointing story if we did not have the third point.

III. THE DELIVERANCE OF THE SAVIOR. v. 32, 61-62.

This whole incident reveals a picture of our relationship to the unseen world. Here we see Satan wanting to sift and the Savior wanting to save. But notice how much responsibility is placed on man to determine which will win out. Judas chose Satan's way, but Peter chose the way of Christ. But didn't Peter choose Satan's way when he deceived and then denied? Yes, but the difference is that Judas planned to do so and Peter planned not to do so, but still did. Judas fell

because of wickedness, but Peter because of weakness, and Peter proved his real love by immediate repentance.

When Peter looked up and saw the eyes of Christ filled with sorrow and shame, but also sympathy, it came back to him what Jesus had said in the upper room. That look of Christ was a glance of grace that like an x-ray pierced to the very depths of Peter, and it cause him to see himself as he really was. He broke down and wept bitterly. Once we realize that all things are naked and open before Him with whom we have to do, deception disappears. Now he saw himself as Jesus knew he was all along. He no doubt thought, "Oh what a fool I've been. I have been doubting Him and wondering if I should risk being associated with Him. And yet He knew all along I would deny Him, but He still loves me. Oh how ashamed I am."

That look was a look of love and not rebuke. Rebuke had failed with Peter before, but now as he sees that Jesus loves him, even in spite of his foolhardy self-confidence and lack of faith, his heart is broken. Here we see a Christian repenting as he sees how disloyal to his Savior he has been. Even for a tough fisherman, the tears will flow when he sees how little love he has shown for Jesus, who first loved him. Peter was like the rock in the Old Testament that was smitten, and water poured forth from his guilty conscience, and Peter went out to have his own Gethsemane. He also had to learn to say, "Not my will but thine be done."

There is a legend that an angel was sent to find the most precious possession on earth. He searched everywhere and finally returned with a tear of repentance. Tears do not cleanse from sin, but they reveal that one has come to the end of himself, and is now willing to cast himself on the mercy and grace of Christ. The tears of repentance mix well with the blood of redemption, but the blood alone cleanses.

Could my zeal know respite know; Could my tears forever flow, All for sin could not atone, Thou must save and thou alone.

Verse 32 makes it plain that Peter owed his deliverance to the prayer of Christ. We need to face the reality of the danger of Satan, but even more so we must realize the reality of our Great High Priest, who daily intercedes on our behalf. If He could pray for Peter just before the

cross, how much more can He pray for us now that He is glorified? He does not pray that Peter escape, but that he endures. In John 17 Jesus prayed not that they be taken out of the world, but that they be kept from the evil one. The intercession of Christ is our only hope to face the trials that Satan brings, and come through without our faith failing. "In the hour of trial, Jesus plead for me, lest by base denial I depart from Thee."

Peter had faith already, but Jesus prayed that it would not fail. He was a Christian that needed to be converted, and we know that the prayer of Christ was answered, for Peter never again tried to be deceptive about his love for Christ. After the resurrection Jesus asked Peter 3 times, which was once for each denial: "Peter do you love me?" Peter responded, "You know that I love you." Never again did he hide the fact that he was a follower of Jesus. He boldly proclaimed it before the highest officials, and he went on to become one of the greatest influences in the world for Christ. We all face temptations to deny Christ to some degree, and we all have access to the same

Deliverer who can help us be converted Christians who have a faith fully fixed on Him. As we close with a poem, let us recognize that we may be, like Peter, a Christian who needs to be converted.

John Newton, the author Amazing Grace wrote another hymn on this experience of Peter:

When Peter boasted, soon he fell, Yet was by grace restored; His case should be regarded well
By all who fear the Lord.

A voice it has, and helping hand, Backsliders to recall; And cautions those who think they
stand, Lest suddenly they fall.

He said, "What ever others do, With Jesus I'll abide;" Yet soon, amidst a murderous crew, His
suffering Lord denied.

He who had been so bold before, Now trembled like a leaf, Not only lied, but cursed and
swore, To gain the more belief.

When he blasphemed, he heard the cock, And Jesus looked in love; At once, as if by lightening
struck, His tongue forebore to move.

Delivered thus from Satan's snare, He starts as from a sleep; His Savior's look he could not
bear, But hasted forth to weep.

But sure the faithful cock had crowed A hundred times in vain, Had not the Lord that look
bestowed The meaning to explain.

As I, like Peter, vows have made, Yet acted Peter's part; So conscience, like a cock, upbraids

My base, ungrateful heart.

Lord Jesus, hear a sinners cry,

My broken peace renew, And grant one pitying look, that I May weep with Peter too.

32. FORGIVENESS OF SIN Based on Luke 23:34

Charlie Brown is quite certain that Lucy's offer to hold the football for him to kick will end just like the other attempts. She will pull the ball away just as she kicks, and he will end up flat on his back. She assures him that she is a changed person and that he can trust her. He accepts Lucy at her word and comes running to kick the ball. But sure enough, as he kicks she does it again and pulls the ball away. He flies through the air and smashes to the ground, and Lucy bends over Charlie to say, "I admire you, Charlie Brown. You have such faith in human nature."

Poor Charlie is made to look like a fool, but the fact is, followers of Christ are expected to be fools like this for Christ's sake. Jesus made it perfectly plain that the practice of forgiveness was to be perpetual. In Matt. 18:21 Peter comes to Jesus and asks, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as 7 times?" In verse 22 Jesus answers, "I do not say to you 7 times, but 70 times 7." We can only look at such radical teaching and say in the words of Lucy, "Lord, you have such faith in human nature."

Jesus not only taught radical forgiveness, but He practiced it. We see this in these first words He spoke from the cross. In these first of His final words He expresses a forgiveness far greater than the 70 times 7 that He expects us to express. Forgiving those who so cruelly crucified Him not only revealed His faith in human nature, but it opened up to the whole world an insight into His nature as the Son of God.

We do not understand God, or the Gospel, until we grasp the significance of forgiveness of sin. God's plan cannot be fulfilled without it, and we cannot be saved without it, nor can we live the Christian life without it. Forgiveness is not a subject out on the edge of Christian truth. It is at the very center. Maybe those at the cross did not hear Jesus in His prayer of forgiveness, but they heard the Gospel of forgiveness later. In Acts 5:30-31 Peter says to the leaders of Israel, "The God of our fathers raise Jesus whom you killed by hanging Him on a tree. God exalted Him at His right hand as leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."

The Gospel of forgiveness was the message of the early church. God commissioned the Apostle Paul to preach the message of forgiveness of sin to the Gentiles also. Paul speaking before King Agrippa tells of the message he received from Christ when He was saved. The Lord was sending him to the Gentiles, and Acts 26:18 has Jesus saying, "To open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." Note how forgiveness of sin is a key factor in the Gospel. It was a major message that Jesus wanted

spread into all the world.

When Paul preached in Antioch where many, both Jews and Gentiles responded to the Gospel, he concluded that fruitful sermon with this great news in Acts 13:38-39, "Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by Him

everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses." Forgiveness of sin was the key message in Paul's preaching and writing. He writes in Eph. 1:7, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our sins, according to the riches of His grace." In Col. 1:14 he ends his statement of things to be thankful for with, "In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

We could go on and on showing how the whole of Christian theology has been influenced by the truth of forgiveness of sin. Those words of Jesus from the cross, "Father forgive them," laid a foundation on which the church has been building ever since. We want to examine what forgiveness means to us. First of all,

I. FORGIVENESS MEANS FREEDOM.

We just read of how Paul said that forgiveness in Christ frees us from everything from which the law of Moses could not set us free. If the Son makes you free, you are free indeed, and the Son makes us free through forgiveness. Where there is no forgiveness of sin, there is only bondage. Much, if not most, of the world not only lacks political freedom, but they also lack spiritual freedom, which is the freedom that only comes to those who know their sins are forgiven. Many feel there is no escape from the past. What has been has been, and nothing can change it. Your Karma has been determined, and what shall be shall be.

The moving finger writes, and having writ Moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit, Can lure it back to cancel half a line, Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.

You are bound by the sin of the past, and there is no escape in the hard-nosed philosophy of much of the world. Pardon is not a possibility for them, and they cannot fathom forgiveness. The gods of the pagans have got their own problems, and could care less about man. Tennyson describes them as they lie reclined in heaven.

"Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands, Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deep and fiery sands, Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands. But they smile."

In contrast to their indifferent grin, we have the God of Calvary who has an answer for sin, and who says, "Father forgive them." There is freedom in Christ, and no man needs to live in bondage because of his past. No man needs to carry the burden of his sin and folly. He can

leave his heavy burden at the cross, and go free. The prayer of Jesus was for those who crucified Him, but He made it a part of the Gospel to be proclaimed to all the world. He died for the sins of all mankind, and so anyone can receive His forgiveness and be set free.

For you and for me He prayed on the tree; The prayer is accepted, the sinner is free. The sinner am I,

Who on Jesus rely, And come for the pardon God will not deny.

John Bunyan was in prison when he wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, but he was one of the freest men whoever lived, because of his full grasp of the truth about the forgiveness of sin. He tells of how Christian journeyed with a heavy burden on his back. The burden weighed him down, but he could not get rid of it. Then in his dream he saw Christian at last ascend to a hill where he stood before a cross, and then the burden fell from his shoulders and tumbled down the hill never to be seen again. Christian could hardly believe it, and when he realized he had received forgiveness he leaped for joy and began to sing

Thus far I did come laden with my sin; Nor could ought ease the grief that I was in, Till I came hither: what a place is this! Must here be the beginning of my bliss? Must hear the burden fall from off my back? Must hear the strings that bound it to me crack? Blessed cross! Blessed sepulchre! Blessed rather be The Man that there was put to shame for me!

He made forgiveness of sin personal, and went away free. Forgiveness means freedom. The tragedy is that many of God's own people do not experience the perfect liberty that comes with forgiveness. C. S. Lewis wrote, "I had been a Christian for many years before I really believed in the forgiveness of sin, or more strictly, before my theoretical belief became a reality to me. I fancy this may not be so uncommon." Lewis fancied right, for the world is full of neurotic Christians imprisoned by the inability to accept forgiveness. Guilt poisons and pollutes the stream of their life, and in spite of the fact that Christ has opened the door to victory, they stay in the dungeon of defeat. These Christians need to grasp this truth:

II. FORGIVENESS MEANS FORGETTING.

There is no freedom without forgetting. If you are going to dwell on your past sins and failures, you will never be free from them. Forgetting comes before freedom. When God forgives He forgets. In Isa. 43:25 we read, "I, even I, am He that blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and will not remember your sins." God blots out sin, and He makes it white as snow. He removes it as far as the East is from the West. Communion is a call to remember Christ and what He did for us on the cross. We are to remember Him, and not our sin. He paid for our sin. He atoned for it to make forgiveness possible. If we do not remember to forget we limit the freedom He died to give us.

So many saints get confused, and instead of remembering Christ and His victory over sin,

they remember their sin and feel regret. They think that God must desire them to feel bad about their evil past. But all the regret and tears of a lifetime will not blot out one sin. The Christian who understands forgiveness will feel relief and not regret. A.W. Tozer in his book *That Incredible Christian* says that some Christians feel that a lack of regret reveals a low view of sin, but he says just the opposite is true. Lack of regret reveals a high and biblical view of forgiveness. The biblical view leads us to forget and not regret. Tozer gives this illustration from the teaching of Christ.

"The return Prodigal honors his father more by rejoicing than by repining. Had the young man in the story had less faith in his father he might have mourned in a corner instead of rejoicing in the festivities. His confidence in the loving kindness of his father gave him the courage to forget his checkered past."

Do not misunderstand. The Prodigal had to repent of his sin and regret his folly before he returned to the father, but once he was received and forgiven he forgot his past, and he entered into the joy of restored sonship. A Christian who never learns this lesson that forgiveness means forgetting will never experience the full joy of Christian freedom.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher points out how we tend to keep things we don't need. For example, men have buttons sewed on the outside seam of their coat sleeves right in back of the wrist. Their usefulness disappeared long ago. A century ago gentlemen wore white ruffles at the wrist, and to keep them from getting soiled they were buttoned back. Long after the ruffles went out the buttons stayed, even though they had no purpose. Regret and sorrow for sin has its place, but once it brings us to the cross it becomes obsolete. If we truly receive the forgiveness of Christ, we are set free from guilt, and we can forget the past. If we go on regretting and sorrowing for our sin, we hold on to what no longer has any purpose, and we hinder our joy in Christ.

One of the greatest gifts Jesus gave to every person who has received His forgiveness is the healing power to forgive others. Broken lives, broken health, broken homes, and broken hearts can all be healed through forgiveness. May God help us to experience the full joy of forgiveness in our own lives, and then let the spirit of forgiveness flow through us to bring healing and freedom to others.

33. GUILTY BUT PARDONED Based on Luke 23:34

If God did not pardon the guilty there would be no Gospel, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Even so, we feel there is a danger in being too merciful. Abraham Lincoln was accused of this during the Civil War when he seemed willing to pardon just about anyone. He would defend those who broke army regulations, and he would find alibis for those condemned to die. One young soldier, for example, had gone to sleep at his post and was court marshaled and sentenced to be shot. He was pardoned by Lincoln, who gave this defense: "I

could not think of going into eternity with the blood of that poor man on my skirts. It is not wondered at that a boy raised on a farm, probably in the habit of going to bed at dark, should, when required to watch, fall asleep, and I cannot consent to shoot him for such an act."

There was no question about his guilt, but though guilty he was pardoned. At another time 24 deserters were to be shot and warrants for their execution was sent to Lincoln to be signed. He refused to do. The general went to Washington to see Lincoln. At the interview he said, "Mercy to the few is cruelty to the many. These men must be made an example or the army itself would be in danger." In spite of the forceful argument Lincoln replied, "There are too many weeping widows in the United States. For God's sake don't ask me to add to the number, for I won't do it." With complete knowledge of their guilt he pardoned them, and it was not because Lincoln was

ignorant of the law, for he was a lawyer. He was also not ignorant of the importance of justice, but out of mercy he pardoned the guilty.

This is a parallel of what we see at the cross, though the mercy there was infinitely more amazing. We see a king, who was also a lawyer, defending those whom he knows to be guilty. But here it is himself who is also the victim of their sin and crime. Certainly no murder mystery ever ended with a more surprising scene than this. Here the guilty are standing before the judge, who is also the murder victim, and who is acting as their defending attorney pleading for their pardon before he dies. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." He has acknowledged their guilt, for if they were not guilty there would be no need for forgiveness. His case then will not consist in proving them not guilty, but instead that even though guilty there is a basis on which they should be pardoned. There are two questions we want to ask about this defense Christ makes for the guilty sinners who crucified Him.

I. WHO IS HE DEFENDING?

It would be a confusing trial indeed in which one did not know who the defendant was. There is some disagreement as to who is included in Christ's plea for mercy, but this is only because a few authors cannot bring themselves to believe that even the cunning Jewish leaders were included. All agree that the Roman soldiers are included, and that they are the least guilty of all. They are victims of a power machine beyond their control. It is not theirs to reason why, but only to do or die. They have orders to crucify this man, and whether they like the task or not they do it. They could have refused and died, but what reason would they have for refusing to execute a man that has been legally condemned by the state? How could they know that the only sinless hands that ever were are now being nailed to a cross. It was certainly true of them that they knew not what they were doing.

But did Jesus go further than this? Did He intercede also for the Scribes and Pharisees? Did He include Caiaphas and Annas, and the cruel crowd that mocked Him? The vast majority of

commentators say yes, but a few say no. Are we to follow the majority and make this plea all inclusive just because it is a majority opinion? The magnitude of this plea for mercy cannot be determined by counting votes, but by searching the Scripture, and as we do we discover that the majority view is not an opinion only but a conviction based on clear revelation.

In Acts 3 we read of Peter preaching to the Jews where he gives credit to Christ for the healing of the lame man. He says of Jesus, "...whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilot, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Author of life..." And then in verse 17 he says, "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers." Peter knew that even the most guilty acted in ignorance, and so they were forgiven and were able to respond to the Gospel which he preached. Paul adds to the conviction in I Cor. 2:8, "None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

With these two witnesses we rest our case that Christ's plea for mercy included all who guilty and responsible for His crucifixion. This means that Christ died for all sin, and that included the sin of causing Him to die. No one who was guilty was left without a pardon. The case was closed, for all were forgiven. The plaintiff dropped all the charges. They were all guilty, but they

were all pardoned. This fact should have made it impossible for the history of Christian anti-Semitism to have ever happened. It makes the modern debate over the guilt of the Jews for the death of Christ a mockery. There is any dogmatic truth we can learn from the history of the church it is this: When ever professing Christians do not determine all of their attitudes and actions based on the Word of God and the example of Christ, they promote evil rather than the kingdom of God.

Jesus forgave those who were guilty for His death. Peter and Paul repeat this fact, and yet men go on debating whether or not the Jews should be forgiven. This word of Christ ought to enable everyone to see the folly of it all. Even if the very Jews who killed Jesus were alive today, they would be forgiven. How much more contemporary Jews who had nothing to do with it? God forbid that any who name the name of Christ should refuse to forgive the innocent when Christ forgave the guilty. To the question then, who is Christ defending? We answer: Everyone who needs defense, or all who are guilty. Next we ask

II. WHY IS HE DEFENDING THEM?

When we see that He meant even the most guilty in this plea for forgiveness we are compelled to ask why would He seek a pardon for those who deserve to be condemned? The primary answer lies in the very nature of Christ. The story is told of how in the Scotch Rebellion a man by the name of Ayloff was captured and taken before King James II. The king said to him,

"You had better be frank with me Mr. Ayloff. You know that it is in my power to pardon you." The prisoner broke his sullen silence and answered, "It may be in your power but it is not in your nature." And so it was not, and Ayloff was executed.

This was not the case with the King on the cross. It was not only in His power but it was also in His nature to pardon. He never would have come into the world in the first place was it not His nature to seek and to save the lost, and to pardon the guilty. Mercy is one of the greatest attributes of God. As grace means what God does for us that we do not deserve, so mercy means what God does not do to us that we do deserve. We could conclude then that Jesus pleaded for the pardon of the guilty just because His nature of love and mercy made it a natural reaction.

This statement of Christ, however, that they knew not what they were doing shows that there is more to it than that. There is some cause in the guilty themselves that makes Him plead for pardon. Jesus finds a reason for their folly that does not make them not guilty, but does make them candidates for pardon, and that factor is ignorance. It is practically a proverb that ignorance is no excuse, but it is a product of man's wisdom and not God's. The Scripture says ignorance is an excuse. We have already read Peter's statement that the Jews killed Jesus in ignorance, and to this we can add Paul's testimony in I Tim. 1:13 where he says, "I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him, but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief." He was guilty, but because he sinned in ignorance he was pardoned. Had ignorance been no excuse Paul would have been a flaming Apostle in the fires of hell, and not one flaming against the forces of hell.

The Old Testament makes a difference between the sin of ignorance and the sin of a high hand. One who sins willfully with full knowledge that it is out of God's will sins with a high hand. There is no atonement for those who sin in this way, but there is for those who break God's law in

ignorance. We see then that the crucifixion of Christ was a sin of ignorance. They did not know what they were doing. As wicked as they were they would not knowingly kill the Son of God. They were really convinced that they were killing a blasphemer. Ignorance allows men to do the worst evils with the conviction that they are doing right. God accepts such ignorance as a basis for pardon. The fact that the greatest crime ever committed was the result of ignorance ought to open our eyes to see that ignorance is one of man's greatest curses. "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free," said Jesus. Those who love ignorance are bound to do that which is stupid, harmful and evil. Even so, if their evil is a product of ignorance, it makes a difference in God's attitude.

It made a difference in Lincoln's attitude as well. We saw how he could freely pardon those who became traitors out of weakness and ignorance, but when he was approached to pardon one who was engaged in the slave trade he made this reply; "You know my weakness is to be, if

possible, too easily moved by appeals for mercy, and if this man were guilty of the foulest murder that the arm of man could perpetrate, I might forgive him on such an appeal, but the man who would go to Africa and rob her of her children, and sell them into an interminable bondage with no other motive than that which is furnished by dollars and cents, is so much worse than the most depraved murderer, that he can never receive pardon at my hands. No, he may rot in jail before he shall have liberty by any act of mine."

We see the 2 sides of Lincoln with his mercy and justice. We see mercy to the ignorant guilty and justice to the willful guilty. The fact that he had these two attitudes would indicate that he was a man directed by God, for this is God's attitude as well. The mercy and wrath of God are to be understood in the light of this principle. As G. Campbell Morgan says, "All sins of ignorance are forgiven. It is only the sin against light, which has no forgiveness." He probably should have qualified that by adding that sins against light have no forgiveness without repentance. We sin willfully often in the face of clear revelation, and we need to know that if confess He is faithful and just to forgive. The point is, however, that sins of ignorance can be forgiven by God even before repentance, but willful sin only after repentance. Jesus prayed for the guilty sinners around His cross, and they were anything but repentant. But we cannot doubt that God heard the dying prayer of His Son. They were guilty and unrepentant, but they were still pardoned.

Because they were ignorant it makes sense that they did not repent, for one does not repent apart from conviction that one is doing wrong. By necessity then forgiveness must often come before repentance. Jesus often forgave sins and then told the person to go and sin no more, and to turn from evil to God, which is repentance. Paul also says in Rom. 2:4, "Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" Men often need to experience forgiveness first before they can repent. We often fail to represent God at this point by trying to bring conviction by means of condemnation rather than assurance of God's forgiveness.

We cannot begin to understand people as Jesus did, nor can we know their inner motives and the degree of ignorance in them, but it is our responsibility to be both just and merciful. For the unbeliever there is the responsibility of either receiving the mercy of Christ and being pardoned, or of receiving His justice and being condemned. The Jews suffered the wrath of God in 70 A.D. not because they crucified Christ, for they were pardoned for that, but judgment came because they refused to believe in Christ even after the clear revelation of His deity in His resurrection. Ignorance can be forgiven, but sin against light must be condemned.

Seneca the Roman says that those who were crucified usually cursed their executioners and spat upon all who were near. Cicero says that the tongues of those crucified were cut out on occasion to stop their terrible blasphemies. How Satan and all the forces of evil would have

delighted had Jesus uttered a curse from the cross, but Jesus, like a fragrant tree, bathed in perfume the very acts, which gashed Him. His first thought was not for himself but for those who were guilty. It is hard to be like Jesus in this way because it is contrary to self-defense. To forgive demands self-denial, for to forgive means to take upon yourself undeserved suffering and demand no payment from those who inflict it. They are guilty of injustice, and you are innocent, but yet it is you that must suffer and the guilty who get off scot-free if you forgive them.

Our very sense of justice fights against forgiveness, for it is not fair, but that is just the point. Grace deals with unmerited favor. If forgiveness was fair it would merely be a legal obligation and moral duty, but it is not fair, and so it is a free choice that rises above the law. Forgiveness is totally of grace, and only those who are gripped by grace can grasp the importance of it, and the ability to express it. I cannot express what I have not experienced. I cannot give away what I do not have, and so we must first be forgiven in order to forgive. We must believe in God's free grace of forgiveness before we can be free to forgive those who sin against us.

The example of Jesus shows us that the innocent party is free at any time to forgive. There is no need to wait for repentance and confession. The people Jesus forgave did none of these. They never said they were sorry, and they were not even looking for His forgiveness. Grace is expressed because of the nature of the forgiver, and not because of the nature of those being forgiven. We have many sins of which we are not conscious. We have many which are called the sins of omission. There is no way we can confess these sins of which we are not aware, and so we need to depend upon the grace of Christ to forgive them, and we can have the assurance that He will because He was willing to pray, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

34. LOVE'S RESPONSE TO HATE Based on Luke 23:34

One of the most diabolical criminals of his day, and the first big time American gangster, was also a very impressive pulpit orator. John Murrell as a youth was caught for horse stealing, and after a public whipping he was sent to prison. He declared eternal vengeance upon society for this, and while he was in prison he studied theology. When he was released he assumed the garb of an evangelist and began to preach. His eloquence gained him quick popularity, and soon he had an unique racket going with a highly organized gang. One of his schemes was to greet people in front of the church and compliment them on their beautiful horse. This was a signal to his helpers as to which ones he wanted stolen during the service. Before his career ended he added counterfeiting and murder to his list of crimes, and all the while he was preaching the Word of God.

He was an obvious example of the great contrast that can exist between what a man professes and what he practices. Profession is the easy part. The real test comes in practice. We need not limit this failure of practicing what is preached to sham clergyman, however.

Leon C. Prince has

recorded the experience of others. He writes, "A New England navigator who had charted the dangerous reefs of the Massachusetts coast who wrecked his own vessel on a sunken rock which he himself had described and of which he warned others. A surgeon on one of the Arctic expeditions of the last century who earnestly and repeatedly cautioned his fellow voyagers against the peril of yielding to the almost overwhelming impulse to sleep, but the surgeon himself fell asleep and perished."

History is filled with such glaring inconsistencies, and we need look at further than our own lives to add to the evidence that man is far more able to learn the truth than to live it. It is so much easier to proclaim than to practice. Shakespeare has Portia say, "I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching."

In the light of this fact of human nature it is with great assurance and satisfaction that we turn our eyes upon Jesus in whom we find perfect consistency. No one ever made such startling statements as Jesus. No one ever set such high standards of character and conduct. If we could not look at his life as an example of what He taught, we would have to dismiss His teaching as dreamy idealism and sentimental nonsense totally irrelevant to the real world in which we live.

How could we honestly bother to consider Christ twice once we heard Him say, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you," if we say that he could not practice what He preached? No one can make such radical statements and hold anyone's respect whose life does not back them up. Thank God for the cross and the record we have of it, for not only is our salvation dependant upon it, but the reality of all Jesus taught is dependant upon what we see and hear at the cross.

We want to focus our attention on the first word of Christ that He spoke on the cross, for here we see the idealism of Christ made real, and His life conform to His lips. If all we had was the record of His life, and not His death, men might dare to doubt the sincerity of His teaching. They might point out that it is easy to say love your enemies when you are walking from village to village with crowds of eager listeners. It is nothing to set on a mount with friends and disciples all around, and talk about praying for those who hate you. But the record of the cross leaves critics facing a scene that removes all doubt.

The first word on the cross demonstrates in a manner unsurpassed love's response to hate. It proves dogmatically that Jesus meant every word He preached, and those who claim Him as Lord need to take everyone of them seriously. Only the blind and deaf could stand at the cross and hear this word of Christ and not respond with the Roman Centurion who said, "Truly, this

was the Son of God."

This word of Christ is composed of two parts. First is His intercession for His enemies, and second is His interpretation of His conduct. We have then His response and the reason for that response in this word. We want to focus our attention on the first part only, which is His response of

INTERCESSION. "Father forgive them."

Jesus began His ministry as an interceding high priest even while on the cross. J. C. Ryle put it this way, "As soon as the blood of the Great Sacrifice began to flow, the Great High Priest began to intercede." It is generally agreed that Jesus spoke this word of intercession as the nails were being driven into His hands, or immediately after. To respond to hate and cruelty with love and forgiveness is paradoxical enough in itself, but the paradox of this prayer is unique and unrepeatable. Here was the Lamb of God being sacrificed for the sins of the world, and at the same time He is the High Priest offering the sacrifice, for He is voluntarily laying down His life for us.

This prayer gives us a God's-eye view of the cross. A man's eye view would give you the impression that the man on the cross is the guilty criminal and those mocking were the judges and jury. But this is not the real picture at all. This word of Christ pictures God as the judge, and those mockers as the guilty criminals on trial. This one on the cross is the advocate, that is their lawyer, who is pleading their defense. What a paradox! Jesus Christ the Lamb nailed to a cross interceding as a lawyer for the guilty sinners who nailed Him there. Imagine having a lawyer pleading for you in the very act of crime when He is the victim of the crime. This is love's response to hate.

It is of great importance that we recognize that Jesus began His painful experience on the cross in perfect fellowship with the father, and that He also ended the cross experience in that same relationship. His last word was, "Father, into thy hands I commend my Spirit." The cross is a picture of the superiority of love over hate from beginning to end. In the 3 hours of darkness on the cross, where Jesus became sin for us, which was the cup He so much dreaded to drink because He knew it meant separation from the Father, He again came forth victorious, and we cannot underestimate the importance of this first word in preparation for that victory.

Jesus had to face and experience the hate of man at its worst before He bore the sin of the world. This was the great test of His love. Could it take cruel injustice, mockery, pain, and finally the most horrible and humiliating form of execution known, and still respond in love? Could even divine love refrain from wrath in the face of such overwhelming hate? This word is our answer, "Father forgive them." Here is commentary on the "So" in John 3:16 where we read, "God so loved the world."

Jesus never held a grudge, for He never permitted one to gain entrance into His heart. This word of forgiveness, in which he demonstrated the final superiority of love over hate, was a necessary victory before He bore the sins of the world. The total victory of the cross depended upon His response to hate at this point. If Jesus had responded with anger and an unforgiving spirit, He would not have the perfect, spotless, and flawless Lamb required for the sacrifice for sin. Jesus had to bare our sin as one who was perfect and innocent. Here was Satan's last chance to halt the plan of redemption by getting Jesus to sin.

Satan and all the demons of hell would have broken forth in delight beyond measure if Jesus would have cursed and spit back, and cried out to God to destroy them. If Jesus would have met their cruelty and hate with a cry for revenge, the cross would have spelled defeat rather than victory. But like a Lamb going to the slaughter He opened not His mouth. We see then that this word of intercession is not just an incidental remark. The redemption of the whole world hung upon this response to hate. Jesus could not bare the sins of the whole world for all time if He could not bare the sins of His contemporaries .

What a contrast we see between this response and the response of Samson in his last prayer. Samson had also suffered at the hands of his enemies, and he had to endure the mockery and laughter of hate. In Judges 16:28 we get his reaction: "O Lord, God, remember me I pray Thee, and strengthen me, I pray Thee, only this once, O God, that I may be avenged upon the Philistines for one of my two eyes." From this response to hate let us turn to Acts 7 where we see Stephen the first Christian martyr being unjustly stoned to death by an angry mob. In 7:60 we read of his response to hate: "Lord do not hold this sin against them."

Here were two men of God with opposite responses to their enemies and hate. One cried out for revenge and the other for forgiveness. What made the difference? The answer to this is the answer to the question, what is the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament? The answer is the cross of Christ, or more accurately, the Christ of the cross. The cross is the central theme of Christianity because it is the basis for the salvation of all people, and is the basis for the transformation of all people. The cross and the Christ of the cross is our standard by which we measure all attitudes and actions. Whatever is not consistent with the cross is not consistent with God's highest revelation. To be satisfied with any response to hate that is less than, or inconsistent, with this response of Christ is to be pre or sub-Christian. We cannot follow two examples. It is either Samson or the Savior.

If Christ is our Savior and Lord, He must be our example. He is the ultimate and final revelation of what God expects each of us to be. In the light of this first word from the cross we see that God expects believers to take seriously what Jesus taught about love's response to hate.

How hardly man this lesson learns; To smile, and bless the hand that spurns, To see the blow, to

feel the pain, And render only love again!

Dreamy idealism and sentimental nonsense? No! It is the very essence of the Gospel. It the good news that God so loved the world that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. This is love's response to hate, and this is what we see in this first word of intercession.

Jesus in thy dying woes, Even while thy life-blood flows, Craving pardon for thy foes.

Here was love that hate could not defeat. Gaius Glenn Atkins said, "When love is lost, all is lost-and the last banner which love maintains over its beleaguered strong hold is the power and the willingness to forgive." Let us never forget that the shedding of Christ's blood would not have atoned for sin if Christ did not have this heart of love and spirit of forgiveness. His spirit is the foundation for the effectiveness of His sacrifice. To have fulfilled the letter of the law without the spirit could not have atoned for sin. He could not truly forgive all sin if He was not willing to forgive the sin of crucifying Him. Charles Wesley wrote

Five bleeding wounds He bears, Received on Calvary; They pour effectual prayers,

They strongly plead for me. Forgive Him, O forgive, they cry, Nor let that ransomed sinner die!

Let us remember that we only know of this message of His wounds because of the message of His words, "Father forgive them." Where sin abounded grace did much more over flow. At the cross where we see the greatest example of hate we also see the greatest example of love. Love's response to hate at the cross not only defeated hate, but used it for good. If it was not for the open hatred and violent injustice around the cross we would lose this most magnificent lesson of love.

O love of God! O sin of man! ` In this dread act your strength is tried, And victory remains with love: Jesus, our Lord, is crucified.

Booker T. Washington once said, "I will not let any man reduce my soul to hatred." Jesus would not let the most unjust act of hatred in human history reduce His soul to hatred, or even to anger. Jesus was victor on the cross from beginning to end. There is no way to fight love and win. May God open our eyes to see this, and begin to apply this supreme and superior weapon in our lives. If you are one who has never trusted Christ to be your Savior, may God open your eyes to recognize that He stands willing to forgive you and to receive you into the family of God, for His response to all who come to Him is always the response of love.

35. THE WORD OF FAITH Based on Luke 23:39-46

Not all heroes die a noble death. Jacques de Lalaing, the flower of knighthood, who was considered the pattern of chivalry for all of Europe, and who was called the last hero of

romance, died an early death in 1453. It was not of a lover's broken heart, or in a tournament with his flag flying. He walked into a cannon ball fired by a shopkeeper in the little town of Ghent. That was not a very noble way for a hero to die, and the fact is many of the heroes of history die very ignoble deaths.

There is nothing very glamorous about being fed to lions, or about being burned at the stake, or even dying in a wreck, or by a disease. When you come right down to it, there are not very many ways to die that are noble and glorious. It ought not to bother us as to how we die, however, for this passage we are looking at reveals to us that the very first saint to enter paradise died in the most horrible and ignoble way. He died on the cross a victim of capital punishment in the worst possible way. Nevertheless, he is one of the heroes of Christian history. It was not because of the way he died, but because of the faith he expressed before he died. Because of his faith Good Friday was good for him long before it was dreamed to be good for anybody else. He was not only first in paradise, but he was the first man to experience the goodness of Good Friday. He died on that day, but it was also the day he began to live forever. It was already Easter for him.

When I was just a small boy in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the lights went dim one night and we all knew why. The only man ever to be electrocuted in the State Penitentiary, just up the hill from where I lived, had just come to his inglorious end. Years later I learned that George Sitts had put his faith in Christ months before he was strapped in that electric chair. He studied his Bible and wrote his testimony that was published for millions to read. He left this world by a horrible and disgraceful method, but like the thief on the cross he died in faith.

Faith or the lack of faith is the difference between heaven and hell. There is no way to over-emphasize the necessity and value of faith. Charles Wesley wrote, "Faith, mighty faith the promise sees, and rests on that alone; Laughs at impossibilities, and says it shall be done." Only faith has the audacity to believe in the impossible and be hopeful in a hopeless situation. What could be more hopeless than to be dying on a cross as a thief, who is being rejected by society? Such is the setting we see on Calvary, and yet, faith brings a dazzling glory into that dismal gloom. This dying thief, after rebuking his criminal companion for his lack of faith, and after revealing his awareness of his own sin and guilt, turned to the center cross and said, "Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom.

If ever a man had reason to be pessimistic about the future it was this dying thief, whom tradition has called Dumas. He had no future whatever according to the eye of flesh, but Dumas saw the future through the eye of faith, and he had hope. He did not say to Jesus that he wanted to be remembered if he came into his kingdom. He said he wanted to be remembered when he came into his kingdom. He had complete confidence that Jesus would be a victorious and conquering King who one day would rule over a kingdom. That conviction was based on faith, for the evidence for it was conspicuous by its absence. Jesus was dying just like

he was. It looked as if his future was to be short and filled with nothing but pain. He did not have the evidence of the resurrection like we do. He did not have a long history of the power of Christ to change lives. All he had to build his faith on was the presence of the suffering Savior.

Tholuck rightly asks, "Did ever the new birth take place in so strange a cradle?" Calvary was a most unlikely context for a conversion. There was no beautiful church, no glorious music, no flowers or choir. The environment was all wrong, for it was a setting of horror and hate. The one positive factor that gave birth to faith, however, was the eloquent love of Christ in the midst of that hate. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." It was this attitude of Christ's love for His enemies that convinced Dumas that Jesus was more than a man. He was convinced that Jesus had a future even though He was dying. He believed that Jesus would conquer death and come again and establish His kingdom. Dumas wanted in on that kingdom and so in faith he said to his new- found King, "Remember me."

Faith enabled him to be optimistic about the future even in his situation. Someone said, "Faith is the daring of the soul to go further than it can see." Those who live according to what they can see only do not live in faith. The present facts are often negative, but faith recognizes that the play of life must be judged by the ending, and not the difficult scenes along the way. Faith believes that God is an author and director who will bring his production to a happy ending. Francis Quarles wrote,

My soul, sit thou a patient looker-on, Judge not the play before the play is done.

Her plot hath many changes, everyday; Speaks a new scene, the last act crowns the play.

Had Dumas lacked faith he, like all those around him, would have looked at Calvary as the final scene. It was a dismal conclusion, and his companion shouted out to Jesus, "Save your self and us." In other words, non-faith says its now or never. If you don't save us now there is no salvation. Faith, however, says that even this tragic scene in which we die is not the end if there is a king who can conquer death and establish a kingdom after death. Dumas could read the sign above the cross of Jesus, which said, "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews." He could observe the reaction of Jesus to the hatred of those around him, and also His love for His mother. This convinced him that Jesus was the Messiah. He became one of the world's great non-conformists at this point, and he went against the crowds, the community leadership, and his own companion in crime to put his trust in this dying King.

Dumas saw none of the miracles of Jesus, but only His misery. No lepers were cured; no blind were made to see. There was no mass feeding, no storm stilled, and no walking on water. All the evidence to the eye was negative, and yet he had faith in Christ. If ever a man had faith in the unseen, it was him. John Calvin wrote, "How clear was the vision of the eyes which could see in death life, in ruin majesty, in shame glory, in defeat victory, in slavery royalty. I question if ever since the world began there has been so bright an example of faith." What an example

of salvation by faith alone. He was not baptized and never partook of communion. He never joined a church and never gave a dime, and he never did a good deed, but that day he entered paradise with nothing but faith in the one who could save him.

As profound as his faith was, it is also a great example of the simplicity of faith. This thief did not know the answer to dozens of questions about the future. He did not know how Jesus could conquer death, rise again and establish a kingdom. He had no answer to the complexities of end time theology. All he knew was that he trusted Jesus to remember him. If Jesus let him down he was sunk. Christian faith is simply trust in a person and not a conviction that your creed is foolproof and covers the mystery of theology accurately. Faith is trust in Christ and a confidence that the future is bright because He will remember you and receive you into His kingdom. Faith is always optimistic about the future because it is a trust in the power of Christ to bring any life to a happy ending. Someone wrote,

If I stoop into a dark, tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast, its splendor, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom; I shall emerge one day.

Jesus confirmed the faith of Dumas on the spot. He promised him that that very day he would be with Him in paradise. If ever there was a man who needed a purgatory before paradise it was him, but Jesus says that He would immediately be with Him. From hell on earth to paradise in the same day-no one can afford such a trip, for the cost is infinite, but Jesus offers it freely to all who will, like this dying thief, turn to Him in faith.

36. THE PERFECT PROMISE Based on Luke 23:43

Jonathan Swift made the well known statement, "Promises and pie crust are made to be broken." This attitude has prevailed through much of history, and the result has been that many have been rich in promises, but poor in performance. Many centuries ago Ovid suggested that men ought to supplement their promises with deeds, and so indicated that men could freely promise, and then just as freely forget. In more modern times Spurgeon complained of those who promised mountains and perform mole hills.

The promise has been used from the beginning as a weapon of deception. It was Satan's promise to Eve that she would be like God by eating the forbidden fruit. It was also by promises of great power that Satan sought to tempt Jesus to avoid the cross. The kings and lesser rulers in the days of Michelangelo were notorious for their use of promises to trick enemies into their power so as to execute or imprison them. Promises have been used by men to try and deceive even their gods.

The Persians have a fable about a peasant who saw an egg floating in the river, and when he tried to get it out he fell in. He began to get carried away by the current. He cried out, "Allah

save me. I'll never eat another egg." Just then he was able to grab a low hanging branch of a tree and pull himself to shore. As he stood shaking himself off he remarked, "I suppose Allah you understood me to mean raw eggs of course." He quickly modified his promise when he was safe so as to nullify it, showing that he only promised in the first place to manipulate his god to his advantage. Peasants have not been the worst offenders, however, but rather kings and rulers who have had so much more with which to promise.

Many of the kings of England gained a reputation for breaking their promises. John Wilmot wrote this epitaph for Charles II.

Here lies our sovereign lord and king, Whose promise none relies on. He never said a foolish thing, Nor ever did a wise one.

In Shakespeare's Henry VIII we read, "His promises were, as he then was, mighty, but his performance, as he now is, nothing."

It is in contrast to this dark background of deception and inconsistency that we turn our eyes upon Jesus, who is the light of the world, and the King of Kings, and whose promises all can rely on to be backed up by performance. Jesus promised that those who come to Him will in no wise be cast out, and that whosoever will call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. We see these promises being fulfilled to the thief who was dying on the cross next to Him. Jesus made the perfect promise to this dying man. It is a perfect promise for two reasons that we want to consider. First of all it is a perfect promise because

I. IT IS PERSONAL PROMISE.

Jesus said to him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." This was a personal promise to this man that on this very day that he would die he would enter into the perfect life. The first word that Jesus spoke from the cross was a prayer of forgiveness for all who were responsible for His crucifixion. It was addressed to the Father, and not to those who were forgiven. Most of them did not even hear it, for they were so busy shouting and mocking. It was an unconscious benefit which Jesus bestowed on them. But this second word had to be very personal and direct, for it would be without meaning and effect if not consciously grasped by the one it concerned. The value of this word to the thief on the cross lies in its personal nature.

This holds a lesson for all of us who seek to communicate to others the Gospel of Christ. When we talk to an individual about the promises of God we ought not to speak in generalities that leave a person guessing, but get specific and personal. For example, imagine how less perfect this promise of Christ would have been if He had made His royal response to the rebels request something like this: "I will remember many when I enter my kingdom, and they shall join me this day in paradise." That would have given hope, but not assurance. It would have

made him feel his salvation was possible, but it would have given him a sense that it was actual.

Jesus made His promise perfect by purposely making it distinctly personal so as to leave no doubt in the mind of the thief. Whatever may or may not be the experience of anyone and everyone else, you can count on it that this day you will be with me in paradise. What a joy it must have been to Christ to be able to win a soul for eternity in His dying hours. Here we see Jesus doing personal work even on Calvary's cross, and in so doing He transforms Golgotha, the hill of death into a hill of life. As Tholuck has said, "Did ever the new birth take place in so strange a cradle."

What a paradoxical picture is produced by this personal promise of a dying Savior to a dying sinner. The cross was a cruel way of bringing a man to the end of life, but it brought this thief also to an endless life. His cross began as his doom, but it ended as his deliverance, for now, though yet facing certain death, he does so with the promise of certain life. He was born again on the very day that he died. Nothing but a personal promise could satisfy in such a situation, and that is why Jesus emphasized it, and made it so personal. He was only hours away from a Christless eternity, but Jesus assured him that he was only hours away from a Christ filled eternity. Only and earnest personal promise could persuade a man so close to the gates of hell to believe that he was on his way to heaven.

What a strange day it was on that Friday we called good. Two out of the three being crucified died victorious with joy in their hearts. What promise could be more perfect than one that could redeem a crucified criminal? Let us take Christ as our example in winning the lost, and make sure we give the Gospel the personal touch by making it clear that every individual can lay claim to the promises of Christ. He not only died for all men, he died for you and me personally. His blood was shed not only for the sins of the whole world, but for your sins and mine.

The dying thief rejoiced to see That fountain in his day; And there may I, though vile as he Wash all my sins away.

My sins can only be forgiven by one who is my Savior. A Savior of the world does me no good if He is not my Savior, and that is why we stress that every person recognize that they must as an individual turn to Christ and request His salvation. Christ died for the other thief as well, but he was lost none the less, because he did not look to Christ, and believe, and ask. This penitent thief did these things, and ,therefore, received a perfect promise. It gave him peace and assurance because it was a personal promise. The second reason for this being a perfect promise is

II. IT IS A PRECISE PROMISE.

It is possible to make a promise personal, but leave it so imprecise that it is far from perfect.

If Jesus would have said something like, now don't you worry, or all will turn out best in the end for you, it would have been personal but shallow. What really gives this promise power is its preciseness. Jesus promised that it would be that very day that he would be in paradise. It was not some day I will remember you, or soon I will remember you, but today, this very day of your tragic exit from this world will be the day of your triumphant entrance into a new world.

The preciseness of this promise not only made it perfect for the thief in that it would give him such specific hope for that very day, but it also protects the rest of us from popular perversions. It protects us from sacramentalism that says baptism, communion, extreme unction, or some other sacrament is essential for the salvation of a soul. This most public and widely known conversion of all is all the evidence necessary to reject such ideas. It is Christ and Christ alone that saves, and we ought not to put our trust in anything or anyone else for assurance of our salvation. Baptism is an act of obedience, and not a means to salvation. Jesus alone is the Savior, and not Jesus plus something else.

It protects us from the teaching that man is not fit to enter God's presence immediately after death. This means that the concept of purgatory does not fit this picture. If anyone needed a slight delay for cleansing it would be this dying thief, but Jesus promised him prompt entrance into paradise that very day. Wild imaginations have built up quite a list of crimes that this man had committed. We do not need to speculate, however, for we have the man's own confession in verse 41. He admits that he and his companion are justly suffering crucifixion. This means that he was worthy of capital punishment, and it could very well mean he was guilty of murder.

He was, by any standard, an evil man guilty of serious crimes, and yet he was promised immediate entrance into paradise. It could well be that before his body was covered with earth his spirit was filled with mirth in paradise with Christ. This rules out such concepts as purgatory and soul sleep. Some teach that the soul sleeps until the resurrection, but this promise of Christ makes it clear that Paul spoke what is God's Word on the subject when he said, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." The preciseness here helps us avoid man made opinions as to what happens at death.

This promise also reveals the perfect confidence of Christ while on the cross. He knew that before this day was over he would be back with the Father having accomplished His mission. Thirty three years was certainly not a long time to be removed from paradise for the eternal Christ, but even to deity there is no place like home, and Jesus was happy that day had arrived for Him to return home, even though the worst experience of His existence had to be endured that day. He had to become sin for us, and to be separated from the Father. The joy that was to be His before

the day ended enabled Him to face even the worst in confidence, and it was the promise to the thief that enabled the thief to face his death with confidence. Because of Christ's victory that day all believers can have the assurance of following the same pattern that Jesus did. We will

go immediately into His presence at the time of death.

This personal precise promise given to the thief is offered to all who will turn to Christ in faith. I do think we must recognize the experience of this man to be unique, however, and not a recommended pattern. We are not to wait until we are on our death bed to turn to Christ. We have this one example so that all may have hope even in their dying moments, but there is only one example less men presume and make it a pattern to live in sin until they come to die. Far better it is to take Christ's promise as soon as possible, and have the joy of living for Christ before you die and enter paradise.

The dying thief had a perfect and precise promise that was all he could ask for, but we who could live beyond the day of our salvation have exceeding great and precious promises in plurality. We have the privilege of growing in grace, and being used of God to carry the good news of salvation to others. The thief received the perfect promise, and all who would benefit by the unsearchable riches in Christ must also first receive this promise. They must make this promise personal, and receive Jesus as their personal Savior, for only then are they ready to die with assurance. The dying thief was delivered from the very jaws of death and hell by turning to Jesus, and this same deliverance is freely offered to all who will respond to His promise: "He that comes to me I will in no wise cast out."