

A close-up photograph of a metal gold pan. The pan is tilted, and inside it, there is a layer of water. In the water, a large number of peanuts are visible, some partially submerged. The background of the image is a dense layer of small, light-colored, rounded stones or gravel, which are tinted with a golden hue. The overall scene suggests a metaphorical search for value, where peanuts are being panned for like gold.

Paul W. Powell

**Raising
Peanuts**

**In A
Gold Field**

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5603 Elderwood Drive
Tyler, Texas 75703

Printed in the United States

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Dedication

*"To my whole Texas Baptist Family
and to James Landes and Bill Pinson in particular
who for over 50 years
challenged me to not be content with raising peanuts
when I could be mining gold
in the fields where I served "*

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Introduction

Dan Bagby who teaches Pastoral Ministry at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia tells that when he was a pastor in Waco someone asked his seven year old daughter what she wanted to be when she grew up. That's a strange question for a seven year old. Her answer, to the surprise and pleasure of her Dad was, "I want to be like my brother." He was fourteen at the time. Then she added, "Mediocre."

None of us want to be mediocre nor do we want our churches to be. Yet we set mediocre goals, give mediocre efforts, are satisfied with mediocre results and wonder why the world is not impressed with our Christian witness or our churches.

Mediocrity, being satisfied with less than our best in any area is a menace and a malignancy. It will destroy both us and our churches if we are content to accept it. Admiral Hyman Rickover who retired after 64 years of Naval service warns, "Mediocrity can destroy us, just as surely as perils far more famous. In a society that is willing to accept mediocrity, the opportunities for failure are boundless. I believe it is the duty of each of us to act as if the fate of the world depends on him." (From a speech to the Jewish Federation of Ft. Wayne, Indiana.)

The title of this book, "Raising Peanuts in a Gold Field" suggests that is what many of us are doing. We are settling for less than our best in our character, our calling, and our churches. And if we keep settling for that the opportunities for failure are endless.

Linus in the comic strip "Peanuts" once said, in anguish, "There is no heavier burden than a great potential." As individuals we must strive to achieve our full potential to become all that Christ saved us to be. In

many instances it is far more than what we have become. Johnathan Swift wrote, "Although men are accused of not knowing their own weakness, yet perhaps few know their own strength. It is in men as in soils, where sometimes there is a vein of gold which the owner knows not of." The challenge of life, and this book, is for us to find that vein of gold and to make something beautiful out of it for Christ.

We must do the same in our churches. We must not short circuit the church by giving way to inertia, aimlessness, or self doubt. These always lead to mediocrity. Our goal should not be to become the biggest or the best, but to become our best to get the maximum yield out of our field. If God has placed us in a gold field we shouldn't be satisfied to raise peanuts in it.

All joking aside, we need to discover our potential as individuals and as churches and make the most of it. So start digging for gold and never stop as long as you live. You may give out, but don't ever give up and don't ever give in.

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Chapter 1

Raising Peanuts In A Gold Field

Luke 10:1-3

Years ago our local newspaper carried an article that was headlined “West Texas Gold Discovery Richest in Years.” Date lined Weatherford, Texas the article said: “Assay test have verified the presence of gold flakes in 18 sandy West Texas acres, and about 500 owners-mostly peanut farmers-may quit tilling and start mining.”

Random samples were taken from the field in Parker County west of Ft. Worth and sent to the Colorado School of Mines in Golden, Colorado where two professors from the school described this find as one of the richest in modern times. (*Tyler Morning Telegraph*, July 13, 1981)

What captured my attention about the article was the fact that the farmers had been raising peanuts in a gold field. I love peanuts and I’m glad somebody raises them. I like them any way-raw, parched, salted, honey roasted, in peanut butter, in candy and even boiled. In fact, I have a five pound sack of raw peanuts in my jeep right now, and a container of peanut brittle at home that were both given to me by church members. That’s what you’re supposed to do, of course-give things to the preacher. That’s in the Bible I think. If not, it ought to be.

There’s nothing wrong with raising peanuts, but if the choice is raising peanuts or mining gold then the decision is easy to make.

When I read the article, my mind immediately went to some churches (and some individuals) I know that have golden opportunities, but they do little with them. They are satisfied to meet, greet, and eat. Spiritually, they are content to raise peanuts in a gold field.

Jesus is never satisfied with peanut production unless all we have is peanut potential. Luke's Gospel points that out vividly.

In chapter 8 he records that Jesus went throughout every city and village of Galilee preaching the glad tidings of the Kingdom of God. (Luke 8:1)

Not satisfied with the results he alone could produce in the next chapter, Luke tells us he called his 12 disciples together, told them where to go, what to take, what to say, and what to expect and sent them to preach the Kingdom of God also. (Luke 9:1)

Still not satisfied with those limited results, in the very next chapter Luke tells that Jesus then appointed another 70 disciples and sent them out two by two to every city and place where he would eventually go. (Luke 10:1) In three successive chapters the witnesses grew from one to twelve to seventy.

Then he reminded them that the fields were ripe unto harvest but there was a need for more laborers. He was obviously not satisfied with peanut results. He wanted every last lost person to hear and have a chance to respond to the good news.

Still later he taught us that the Kingdom of Heaven was like a mustard seed, considered the smallest of all seeds, which when planted grows to a large tree that provides safety and shelter for many birds. (Luke 13:19) Clearly he expected growth, advance, and increase to characterize his kingdom. He expects the same from us.

What must we do if we are to obey the commands and follow the example of Jesus concerning going and growing? What must we do to make the most of the golden opportunity God has given to us? How do we get the maximum yield from our field?

There are four things we need to do:

- Make a commitment to growth
- Be open to change.
- Be willing to follow leadership.
- Go to work.

Somebody Needs To Stand Up

First, if we are to make the most of our opportunity we need to make a commitment to growth. You say, "Why do something so obvious?" Because experience has taught me that not everyone wants the church to grow. The fact is, most churches have no commitment to growth. Their goal is to meet next Sunday. They have little vision beyond that.

From the beginning my ministry has been committed to growth. When I was a student at Baylor I became pastor of the Belfalls Baptist Church, an open country church 30 miles south of Waco. Cathy and I would drive out on Sunday morning, spend the day with one of the members, preach that night, and then drive back to Waco. The little community had a cotton gin, grocery store, beauty shop, blacksmith shop, beer joint, and a Baptist church. That's all any community needs.

The little church had a sign-up list on the wall of the sanctuary where members could sign up for the Sundays they wanted to host the preacher for the day. We would go home with them for lunch, stay that afternoon, have supper, and then go back to church for evening worship.

In the afternoons we sat around and watched the two comedy hours on television, Oral Roberts' tent revivals and professional wrestling. But I felt that the church was supposed to reach people, so I asked Major Huffines, one of the deacons, to draw me a map of the surrounding area locating each home. Using a piece of brown wrapping paper he mapped every road, every lane, and every house for miles in every direction. Like most people in Belfalls he knew everyone in the area.

Then on Sunday afternoon I drove down every road and every lane and knocked on every door to invite people to church and to share the gospel. As a result we baptized nine people in that open country church in the year and a half I was there. We didn't have a baptistery so we used the baptistery of the First Baptist Church of Troy six miles away. We were actually using it more than they were. So when they became pastorless they invited me to be their pastor.

In Troy I continued the same practice. I went down every street, knocked on every door, and visited everyone in the town of 500. Then I asked Jack Dooley, Sr., a deacon and the owner of the local grocery store who knew everyone in the area to visit with me every Thursday afternoon and together we drove down every country road and every lane in that surrounding area and knocked on every door within miles of our church. In my five years at Troy we baptized over 100 people. That's what I thought I was called to do.

In time I became pastor of the First Baptist Church in San Marcos. It was a city of 18,000 people with a university of 6,000 to 7,000 students, most of them living in dorms. It was also the home of Camp Gary Job Corps Training Center that provided technical training to 3,000 young men from all over America and San Marcos Baptist Academy with about 500 students.

As usual I went to work visiting people. The church facilities were old and inadequate. They had been built in 1930 when the town was small and the university was even smaller. By now we were out of space and that limited our growth. When I arrived there was already some talk of building an additional building to meet our growing needs.

I met with the Long Range Plans Committee and after some discussion I said to them, "If our church is going to grow we must build this building." And the chairman of the committee responded, "Who said we wanted to grow?"

That was contrary to everything I believed about the gospel and the mission of the church. My response was, "If you ever decide that officially let me know and I'm out of here. I have only one life to live and I don't intend to waste it on people who don't want to do anything."

That was a long time ago but I haven't changed my mind. I still believe the church is intended to grow and I still think every church needs to go on record saying we intend to grow to our full potential.

Blessed Are The Flexible

Second, if we intend to grow to our full potential we need to be open to change. We must change because we haven't grown much over the years. And, as you know, if you keep doing what you've always done you'll keep getting what you've always gotten.

You may ask, "What changes do you think we need to make?" I don't know. Change is fluid but somehow the church must stay biblically true and at the same time be culturally relevant. What we need to change most is our attitude. The attitude that we don't want anything to change, we want things left just as they are.

At that little Belfalls Baptist Church I encountered that attitude. Next to the church was an old tabernacle, a large open pavilion with a shingled roof. The years had taken a toll on it and there were about as many shingles missing as there were in place. One Sunday in a sermon I said, "We ought to either tear that tabernacle down or repair it."

That seemed reasonable to me-tear it down or fix it up. But when I walked out of the church that day I was met by one of the elderly deacons, a wonderful man who said, "That's the problem in the world today. You young whippersnappers want to tear down everything we old folks built up." I realized for the first time people don't always hear what you say or understand what you mean. He didn't want to tear the tabernacle down and he didn't want to fix it up. He didn't want to do anything. That's the attitude I'm talking about.

Incidentally, about six years later, when I was pastor in Taylor I received a package in the mail one day from George Collier, one of the deacons who had overheard that conversation. That package contained a shingle from that old tabernacle. It had finally grown so old and dilapidated that they had to tear it down before it fell down. He wanted me to have a memento of my first encounter with people who didn't want to do anything. That's what will happen if you do nothing. Time will take its toll and change will take place even if you are opposed to it.

I was interim pastor in a church that needed a singles ministry. We hired a part time lady to work in that area. There was in the church a Sunday school class of five or six elderly women who had no teacher. They rotated with a different member teaching each Sunday. She said to the class, "We must get one teacher for this class so it can grow." They said, "Oh, no. We don't want a teacher.

We are comfortable the way things are." Her response was, "What about all the other people who need to be comforted?"

That's the attitude I'm talking about. We are comfortable and want to be left alone. We are not worried about anyone but ourselves. When you have that attitude you are dead in the water.

This kind of resistance to change looks ridiculous when you see it in other people. Pat Neff was Governor of Texas from 1921-1925. During the second called session the legislature congress was considering abolishing hanging for capital offenders, which always took place in the county where the offender was convicted. The event usually attracted a gawking crowd of spectators. One of the last legal hangings in Texas was in Waco and it was reported in the July 31, 1923 edition of the Waco Times-Herald that it attracted 4,000 to 5,000 spectators.

The bill to provide for electrocution at Huntsville of all capital crimes moved along smoothly in both houses of the legislature until a member of the house from south Texas rose to oppose the bill. With sincerity and eloquence he argued against electrocution, closing with words that set off a loud uproar:

"Why, Mr. Speaker, one of the few attractions now left in the country is for the people to gather together at their county seat and witness an occasional hanging and now you want to take even that away from them.

Mr. Speaker, I don't know what you think about it, but as for me, hanging was good enough for my father and it's good enough for me." (*The Land, the Law, and the Lord: The Life of Pat Neff*), Homeplace Publishers, Austin, Texas, 2007, page 139)

Heating homes with a wood stove was good enough for my father until he found out about central heating. Studying by kerosene lamp was good enough for him

until we got electric lights. Saying a thing was good enough for the past does not mean it's good enough for today.

Come to think of it, when I consider what some of the people on Wall Street have done and what some of our congressmen have done, a few public hangings might not be a bad thing.

On Interstate 35 outside of New Braunfels is a billboard sign that says "GRUENE: Gently resisting change since 1872." Listen, you can gently resist change or you can violently resist change but you can't win against change. It will run over you or it will go around you and leave you behind in the dust. You can't stop change.

President Lyndon Johnson once described Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia as "a steadfast opponent of most of the 20th century." (p. 410 *Lyndon: An Oral Biography*, Merle Miller, G.P. Putman's Sons, N.Y.) He was against all progress and change. He lived in the past. I know a lot of Baptists like that. Don't let that be said of you.

There is a well-worn saying, "Blessed are the flexible for they shall not be bent out of shape." Some people are too easily bent out of shape. And, when they are, they get on the computer or telephone and let everybody in the church know about it. That kind of spirit is destructive to a church. Dr. Samuel Sargent, one-time dean at Union University, Jackson, Tennessee, was a popular speaker. He often quoted the following verse that is apropos for us today:

*I saw them tearing the building down,
A group of men in a busy town;
With a ho heave ho and a lusty yell,
They swung the beam and the side wall fell.
I asked a workman, are these men skilled,
Are they men you would hire if you had to build?*

*He laughed and said, no indeed,
Just common labor is all I need.*

*Can easily wreck in a day or two
What builders have taken years to do.
So I thought to myself as I went my way,
What kind of role have I tried to play?*

*Am I a builder who works with care,
Measuring life with a rule and a square;
Or am I a workman who walks the town
Content with the labor of tearing down?*

In matters of difference, hold on to your opinions. Vote your conviction, but don't spread discord among the brethren. Spreading discord is an abomination and God hates it. So should we. (Proverbs 6:16)

Two Serious Problems

Third, if we want to reach our full potential we need to follow leadership. Jim Henry, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Orlando, Florida said the church today faces two problems: pastors who won't lead and people who won't follow.

Clearly the scriptures teach that the pastor is to be the leader of the church. Paul instructs Timothy, "Let the elders who rule be counted worthy of double honor, especially they that labour at the word and doctrine" (1 Timothy 5:17). And the writer of Hebrews says, "Remember them that have rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." (Hebrews 13:17)

In both instances he is talking about the pastor, the one who preaches and teaches God's word being the

leader, and he speaks of him as the “ruler.” The word “rule” in the first passage means “to stand before” or “to be out front,” and in the second passage it means “to lead.”

Someone has to be out in front, someone has to lead, and that's the shepherd. He is to be out front, leading the flock.

Committees can't lead the church. Committees can carry out assignments. A committee can build a building. A committee can plan a budget. A committee can find a pastor. A committee can evaluate leadership and proposals. But it takes a pastor to lead a church.

Leadership requires that a person be on the scene and know the problems and the potential of the church. And to lead, a person must have a platform. The pastor has the ear of the people and a pulpit from which he can inform and inspire. The word pastor means “shepherd.” What's the role of a shepherd? It's to lead the flock and feed the flock. The people expect it. And, where there is a pastor who will do both, his people will follow.

There is a difference between leadership and dictatorship. Some people don't know the difference. They mistake strong, positive aggressive leadership for dictatorship. They are not the same. Dictators tell you what you must do. Leaders tell you what you ought to do. Dictators rule by edict. Leaders lead by inspiration.

A good shepherd knows you can lead a horse (or sheep) to water, but you can't make them drink. So a good leader does not try to manipulate or intimidate, he motivates.

Leaders don't try to make people do what they don't want to do. They challenge people to do what they never thought they could do.

Of course, some people don't want to be led at all. Back to San Marcos, I heard that a man in the church, a

deacon and long-time member, had some problems with me. After I heard it a couple of times I realized that he was talking about it, so I decided to talk to him.

In his own life he was a real entrepreneur. He had a retirement benefit, had a full time job and owned two small businesses. I caught him at one of them one Sunday afternoon.

I'll call him Jack. I asked, "Jack is there some contention between us?" When confronting a person never accuse. Just ask them questions. Then they have to tell you the truth or they have to lie.

Jack was a good man, an honest man. So he said to me, "No, you are the kind of pastor we need but you're not the kind I like."

I said, "What kind do you like?"

He responded, "I just want to go to church, get up and go home, and not be bothered."

I then said, "Jack, as long as I'm here you're going to be bothered."

Jack didn't dislike me. He disliked being disturbed. What he didn't realize was that it was my job to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable. But that kind of spirit will kill a church or grind it down to a halt. Jerold Hewett reminds us, "You can't build a straight road that runs in front of every person's house," i.e., you can't please everybody. So a leader must set his course and move on. We did, and we baptized 600 people in the six years I was there. Today there are ministers, missionaries and teachers all over the world that came from those six years.

Resisting leadership is not new, even for the people of God. The children of Israel resisted Moses on every turn. On one occasion they said to him, "You take too much on yourself seeing that we too are holy." (Numbers 16:3) Moses grew so weary of their resistance he

asked God to take his life; instead the Lord said, "I'll take theirs." And every man and woman above 20 years of age died in the wilderness because they would not follow his leadership. A lot of churches die today for the same reason.

No Substitute

Fourth, if we want to reach our full potential we must go to work. Jesus said, "The fields are ripe unto harvest but the laborers are few." The church today has a labor shortage. We don't have enough workers.

The apostle Paul wrote 13 epistles and 13 times he uses the word "labor" to describe his ministry. The word literally means "to toil, to grow weary." Paul worked hard. That's why he accomplished so much.

If we aren't careful laziness is going to kill us. It's time for us to take off our coat, loosen our tie, roll up our sleeves and go to work. We need some holy sweat in the church today.

There is no substitute for hard work, but hard work will make up for almost any other deficiency you may have. That's part of the secret to success for any person or any church.

At his inauguration, President Johnson, as is the custom, had a number of inaugural balls. As he left the balls he would bid the people "good night" and say to them, "Don't stay up too late. We are on our way to the great society." (Ibid, p. 546) That's the spirit of mission and vision the church should have. We are people of "The Way" and we are "on our way" to build the Kingdom of God. We have been given a golden opportunity. We must not squander it by planting peanuts in a gold field.

Chapter 2

Leaving a Lasting Legacy

Proverbs 10:7; 22:1

The name Jack Whitaker keeps popping up in the news since he won the \$315 million power ball lottery years ago. He was already a successful businessman but with this new fortune came instant fame and instant heartache. What sounds like a dream come true actually became a nightmare.

He did some good things with some of the money-like set up a foundation to feed and clothe poor people, gave scholarships to students and even built two churches. But now he no longer goes to church.

He began to struggle with drinking, gambling, and philandering. The end result was:

He was arrested for DWI twice.

He was sued by three female casino employees for assault.

While in a strip joint thieves broke into his car and stole \$500,000 in cash and cashiers' checks.

His wife divorced him.

His 17-year-old granddaughter and heir to his fortune died of drug addiction.

He also doesn't have friends anymore. Practically all of them wanted to borrow money, and he said once people owe you money they aren't your friends anymore.

In an interview with the newspaper Jack said he has little doubt what his legacy will be. He said, "I'm going

to be remembered as the lunatic who won the lottery. I'm not proud of that. I wanted to be remembered as someone who helped a lot of people." (*Tyler Morning Telegraph*, 9/14/07)

How would you like to be remembered? What will your legacy be?

Col. William B. Travis who commanded the Texans who fought at the Alamo penned a letter to a friend, David Ayers in March 1836, while awaiting Santa Anna's assault to begin, "Take care of my little boy. If the country should be served, I may make him a splendid fortune; but if the country should be lost, and I should perish, he will have nothing but the proud recollection that he is the son of a man who died for his country."

When Martin Luther King, Jr., embarked on the Civil Rights Movement he knew it was a dangerous journey. He wrote in Reader's Digest that every now and then he thought about his own death and his own funeral, not in a morbid sense but he said, "I asked myself, what it is that I would want said at my funeral?"

"...Tell him not to mention that I have a Noble Peace Prize - that isn't important. Tell him not to mention that I have 300 or 400 other awards - that's not important. Tell him not to mention where I went to school. I'd like someone 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 day that I tried to be right and to walk with them. I want you to be able to say that day that I tried to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I tried in my life to clothe the naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity."

“Yes, if you want to, say that I was a drum major. Say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. Say that I was a drum major for righteousness.

“I won’t have any money to leave behind. I won’t have the fine and luxurious things in life to leave behind but I want to leave a committed life behind.”

What do you want to leave behind? How would you like to be remembered? As “the top producer in the office?” or as “the one who came out on top of every business deal?” or as a true friend, a person of substance and character, a role model? We will all be remembered for something. The challenge for all of us is to leave behind something far more valuable than money or land by which we will be remembered.

The scriptures point to this. The wise man of Israel wrote, “The memory of a righteous man is a blessing” (Proverbs 10:7). It is a blessing to his children, to his grandchildren, to his friends and to all who know him. And again, “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches and loving favor (with God and man) rather than silver and gold” (Proverbs 22:1).

In the end what matters is that we leave the memory of a righteous life; that we leave a good name.

I like what Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) said about his legacy. He was one of the most famous painters in the modern art era. He was deeply religious and early in life wanted to be a minister. In 1878 he applied for admission to a theological school but was rejected. He then decided to become an unordained preacher and received his training from a missionary in Brussels, Belgium.

Later in 1878, Van Gogh represented the society as a minister in the Borinage, a poor coal mining district in Belgium. He took his work seriously and he went without food and other necessities so that he could give

more to the poor. The missionary society objected to Van Gogh's unorthodox behavior and relieved him in the summer of 1879.

Not knowing what to do he turned to art. He had begun to draw while in the Borinage and later in 1880 decided to become a painter. He turned to art to express his strong religious feelings and deep need for love and respect. He said shortly before his death at the age of 37, "I wish not that my legacy be written on a building or in stone. I wish my legacy to be written on the heart of God."

During the last five years of his life he completed more than 800 oil paintings, but sold only one. Ironically, last year an art dealer turned down \$25 million for one of his paintings. We are all building and leaving a legacy. Few will be written in stone or on a building. But we can leave the memory of a righteous life and a good name. If we want our legacy written on the heart of God, here's how. There are three things we must do.

- Live to please God.
- Live to serve others.
- Live to enjoy eternity.

Old Enough to Be a Hypocrite

First, we must live to please God. There are only two people in the Bible of whom it is said, "They pleased God." I'm sure there were many others who pleased him, but in the King James Version there are only two mentioned specifically. The scriptures say concerning Enoch, ". . . he had this testimony, that he pleased God" (Hebrews 11:5). And three times in the Gospels God speaks from heaven concerning Jesus and says, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17, 12:18, 17:5)

Neither you nor I can ever please God like Jesus did, but if there are three who are said to please God, I want to be that third one, don't you?

What was there about Enoch that pleased God? His faith in God and his walk with God pleased him. First the scriptures say, "Enoch had this testimony that he pleased God." Then the next verse reads, "Without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is (that he exists), and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." (Hebrews 11:6)

Faith in Christ is the way to God. But we will never come to God unless we first believe that he exists and that he cares enough to respond to those who seek him, and then we must come to him. Faith is the act of trust by which we commit ourselves to him. God is repeatedly pictured as the loving Father who invites us to come to him.

Second, he walked with God. The scriptures say, "Enoch walked with God and was not for God took him (raptured him)" (Genesis 5:24). "Walking with God" suggests fellowship and obedience. "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3) If we are to please God we must live in agreement with him, in agreement with his word and his will.

There is a lot of talk today about people who live a double life. Their public self is strong and their private self is weak. In the light of these public officials being exposed the media has coined a new word, "Swaggerism." It is a reference to evangelist Jimmy Swagger who was preaching holiness while consorting with prostitutes.

A double life is wrong whether it's in the state house, the church house, or in your house.

On the old television show "Maude" years ago, Maude's young grandson was forced to go to church by

Maude and Arthur, his grandparents. He said he did not want to go, but they forced him to go. He said, "Why do I have to go and you don't?" Maude said, "Honey, we don't go because we are hypocrites."

The young boy said, "Man, I'll be glad when I grow up so I can be a hypocrite, too."

Most of us are old enough to be hypocrites, but we can't be and please God.

There is also such a thing as reversal hypocrisy—people pretending to be worse than they are. Kevin Belmont wrote of England in the days of William Wilberforce, "Aristocrats pretended to be worse than they were because it was fashionable to be loose in morals and skeptical in religion." It has never been easy to stand up for Christ and to stand out from the crowd.

If we are going to please God, we must value what God values. The Lord said, "I don't want your sacrifices, I want your love. I don't want your offerings, I want you to know me." (Hosea 6:6) If we want our legacy written on the heart of God, we must get to know him and we must love him. If we want to leave the memory of a righteous life, a good name; if we want our legacy written on the heart of God, we must live to please God.

A Friend to Everyone

Second, we must live to serve others. Recently I visited St. John's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia the oldest church in the city founded in 1741. It is the church where Patrick Henry made his famous speech, "Give me liberty or give me death." The oldest grave in the cemetery that surrounds the church is that of Robert Rose, the first rector of the church who died in 1751. His epitaph read, "In his friendship he was warm and steady. In his manner he was gentle and easy, in his conversation

he was entertaining and instructive. With the most tender pity he discharged all the domestic duties of husband, father, son, and brother. In short he was a friend of the whole human race and upon that principle, a strenuous asserter and defender of liberty.”

That could easily be an epitaph for Jesus and ought to be for all of us. The Pharisees said of him, “This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.” (Luke 15:2)

The word “receiveth” means to welcome, to accept. Jesus opened his arms and his heart to welcome into the circle of his friendship all he met. Look at his life and ministry. He opened his heart to tax collectors who were traitors to their own people, to women taken in the act of adultery, to foreigners, to divorcees, to soldiers who were a part of Rome’s occupying force in Israel, to little children, to lepers who were outcasts from society and everyone else. You cannot find a person whom Jesus did not accept, love, and offer to help. What was intended as a caustic criticism and condemnation became one of his greatest compliments—he was and is a friend of sinners. And if we want to have our legacy written on the heart of God, we must be also. We must be a friend of the whole human race.

Three quick stories with one moral—first, in 1976, you may remember, at a track and field event in Spokane, Washington, a group of nine contestants, all physically or mentally challenged assembled at the starting line to begin a race in their Special Olympics Program. The gun sounded and off they ambled down the track at their slow pace. One of the contestants took a tumble and began to cry. The others slowed down and looked back. Then one after the other they turned back to help the fallen friend up. And they all linked arms and walked across the goal line together. They voluntarily tossed aside their own dreams for winning in favor of helping

a fallen friend. When they walked across the goal line the crowd didn't know what to do. They had never seen anything like that before. Then, ever so slowly, someone began to clap until everyone in the stands was standing and applauding.

Second, John McCain's Christmas message last year (2007) was an account of his imprisonment as a P.O.W. in Vietnam. His plane was shot down in Vietnam, and he was then held as a prisoner in Hanoi for five-and-a-half years. When the Vietcong learned that his father was an Admiral in the US Navy, they decided to let him go free as a public relations ploy. But, he refused to be released from prison unless all his fellow prisoners were released with him. So the Vietcong guards tied his head between his ankles and his hands behind his back and left him in solitary confinement. The torture was so severe that it busted his shoulders and to this day he cannot raise his arms above his head.

The Christmas ad pictures him in a crude hospital cot in that Vietnam prison where he told that one day after he had been treated brutally by his captors, a guard loosened the cords on his arms to give him some relief from pain, then the guard reached down with a stick and drew a cross in the dirt. Then the ad said, "When you're at your lowest there's always someone who will lift you up. Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays."

When McCain returned to Vietnam years later, the only person he wanted to see was that guard.

Third, former Arkansas governor and presidential candidate Mike Huckabee said he was asked what he thought about Jamie Lee Spears, the sixteen-year-old sister of Brittany Spears when it was learned that she was pregnant. No reporter asked Obama that. And they didn't ask Hillary or McCain or Romney that. I suppose they expected the former pastor to criticize her. Instead

he said, "It's a tragedy, but I don't want to condemn her. There are lots of people lined up to do that. I always pick the shortest line."

The moral is, I want to be like all those people. I want to be like those mentally challenged people who go back and pick up a fallen friend and help them across the goal line rather than run off and leave them behind. I want to be like Governor Huckabee and always look for the shortest line. I want to throw ropes to people instead of throwing rocks at them. I want to be like that guard who loosens the cords that bind people and lifts them up when they are down.

It is through loving that we are most like God—not our doctrinal beliefs—our orthodoxy. You can be as straight as a gun barrel theologically and as cold as a gun barrel spiritually. It is not our church attendance, our scripture memory, or our giving. The whole law is summed up in these words, "We are to love God with all our heart and love our neighbor as ourselves." If you want to leave the legacy of a righteous life and a good name and have it written on the heart of God, you must live to serve others.

Trashed Trophies

Third, we must live to enjoy eternity. During a Prime Time Live interview, Billy Graham was asked, "What do you want people to say about you when you are gone?"

He responded, "I don't want them to say anything about me. The only thing I want to hear is Jesus saying, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.' But I'm not sure I'm going to hear that." (*The Great Curse Reversal*, Tom Gaddis, Guardian Books: Belleville, Ontario, Canada, p. 91)

Rick Warren reminds us that we can spend our lives trying to create a lasting legacy on earth. But what ultimately matters most will not be what others say or think about us. What matters is what God says or thinks. What matters is that our legacy is written on his heart.

So we need to settle the issue once and for all – are we going to live for God or for ourselves? Are we going to live for time or for eternity?

We had better live for eternity because we're here just for a little while, and we're going to be there a long, long time.

In college, James Dobson's goal was to become the school's tennis champion. He felt proud when his trophy was placed in the school's trophy cabinet. Years later, someone mailed him that trophy. They had found it in a trash can when the school was remodeled. Jim said, "Given enough time, all your trophies will be trashed by someone else!"

The apostle Peter reminds us that "There is a crown that fades not away," and as C. S. Lewis said, "All that is not eternal is eternally unimportant."

The songwriter put it best:

*"If I can help somebody as I pass along,
if I can cheer somebody with a word or song,
if I can show somebody he is traveling wrong, then
my living will not have been in vain.
If I can do my duty as a Christian ought,
if I can bring salvation to a world once wrought,
if I can spread the message as the Master taught,
then my living will not be in vain."*

(If I Can Help Somebody by A. Bazel Androzso, copyright 1945 by Boosey and Hawkes, Ltd. Lee's Music Corp.) (Article reported by UPI 4/6/1968, from a tape recording delivered 2/4/1966)

That's the secret to leaving the memory of a righteous life and a good name and of having your legacy written on the heart of God.

Chapter 3

Unplucked Thorns

II Corinthians 12:7-10

A lady was cleaning her parakeet cage with a vacuum cleaner one day when the phone rang. She reached over to answer it and while talking became distracted and sucked the parakeet up the hose and into the dust bag of the vacuum cleaner. As soon as she realized what she had done she quickly hung up the phone, turned off the vacuum and dug around in the lint and dust until she found the bird. He was covered with dirt so she shook him until his eyeballs rolled. Realizing that wasn't going to get the job done, she then took him into the bathroom, filled the basin with water, and doused him up and down until she got all the dirt off. Then she realized that the bird was soaking wet and was going to catch a death of a cold if she didn't dry him so she grabbed a hair dryer and turned it on high until he was dry then set him back into the cage.

Next week she met a friend on the street and the friend asked, "How's Tweetie bird?" She replied, "Tweetie doesn't sing anymore. He just sits on the perch and stares into space with a blank look on his face."

A lot of things can happen in life to take away our song. In life, no matter who we are, pain, chronic illness loss, and personal trials come to us. As Augustine said, "God had only one Son without sin; He has no sons without suffering."

The life of the apostle Paul illustrates this. He gives

us insight into his experience when he writes about his “thorn in the flesh” – his companion of pain (II Corinthians 12:7-10).

He begins by speaking of himself in the third person, “I know a man in Christ...” as though he is talking of someone else. But it was soon evident that he was talking of himself. He had a profound spiritual experience of being caught up into the third heaven. The cosmology of the Jews of that day believed there were three heavens. The first heaven was where the birds fly and the clouds float. The second heaven was where the stars and the planets orbit. The third heaven was where God is. We know this is what he means because he calls it Paradise (Luke 23:43). It was the kind of experience that could make a person proud, want to brag about it.

He quickly moves on to tell of his suffering that kept him from doing that. He says, “Lest I be exalted above measure there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me.”

The word “flesh” locates his problem. It was a physical infirmity, a bodily affliction. The word “thorn” suggests it was intensely painful. What was it? Regardless of what you’ve heard, it was not a deacon. Guesses have ranged from migraine headaches to malaria, to eyesight problems to epilepsy.

He calls it “a messenger of Satan.” Paul does not blame his suffering on God. God is not the author of sickness and death. Tragedy is not his handiwork. These things are the works of Satan. It was Satan that troubled Job, sent tornadoes to kill his children, robbers to steal his wealth, and boils to afflict his body, and Jesus referred to a woman who had been crippled for 18 years as one “whom Satan hath bound.” (Luke 13:16)

But Satan is the master of deceit. He causes suffering in the world and God gets blamed for it. When have

you ever had a person suffering ask, “Why has Satan done this to me?” It is always, “Why has God done this to me?”

It is not God’s design for us to suffer sickness or disease. These are a blight on his creation, a part of the opposition to his creative purpose for his children.

While he attributes it to Satan he adds, “it was given me.” God did not cause it, but he did permit it. It could not come otherwise. The word “given” suggests that there is a loving will behind it. God is sovereign in all his ways and our loving heavenly Father controls our lives and allows some things he doesn’t cause in order to accomplish his divine purpose. The enemy can operate only as far as God permits – and within boundaries set by a divine hand.

It did not come directly from the hand of God but it came through his hand. Jesus referred to his suffering as “the cup which the Father has given me” (John 18:16). Obviously the cup had been prepared by human hate but God had taken it and put it in his hand.

That is not an adequate answer for all evil but it helps us and is a comfort to know that it does not come directly from God.

The thorn came “to buffet” him. This is the same word that is used to describe the Roman soldier striking Jesus with their clinched fists. As they beat Jesus down so Paul says Satan sent this experience to keep him beaten down. Whatever it was it was a humiliating, debilitating, and frustrating pain of some sort.

When suffering came Paul did what we do. He prayed for God to remove the thorn. He prayed not once but three times he banged on the gates of heaven asking for relief. But God did not remove the thorn; instead he promised he would give Paul the grace to bear it. So, Paul resolves that he will trust the providence of God,

glory in his infirmity, and rejoice in his weakness rather than complain about it. He realizes that the thorn was given not to punish but to polish him, not to hurt but to help.

Many years ago, the famous and brilliant Baron Friedrich von Hugel, an Austrian Catholic theologian, wrote to his niece when she was facing an ordeal – something she could not change and did not wish to face. It was a letter of encouragement reminding her that whether she endures these weeks bitterly or nobly, they are there and will have to be gotten through. His final wish for her was that she would find a way to avoid the trap of what he called “sulking through the inevitable.” Paul determines not to do that here. He resolves to sing instead of sulk in his suffering.

One of the values of Paul’s experience is that it teaches us how to deal with illness and pain that will not go away, what Jack MacGorman called “unplucked thorns.” There are three things that will help: Look! Talk! Learn!

- Look for the good that’s in it.
- Talk to God about it.
- Learn to rejoice in spite of it.

Effectively Disguised

First, look for the good in it. The proverb says, “It’s an ill wind that blows no good.” So when the storm winds blow, look for the good in them. It is not always easy to see. We are most often like Winston Churchill when he was defeated in the elections of 1945. Lady Churchill told him, “It may well be a blessing in disguise.” He replied, “At the moment it seems quite effectively disguised.” (Winston Churchill, *Never Give In!: The Challenging Words of Winston Churchill* selected by Dorothy Price

and Dean Walley, Hallmark Ed. Kansas City: Hallmark Cards, 1967, 42)

In Paul's case he has clear insight as to why it came. Twice he says it was given, "Lest I be exalted beyond measure." He sees a divine purpose being worked out through his suffering. It was to remind him of his own weakness and to prevent arrogance. The devil had one purpose in causing it. God had another in allowing it.

While it was painful and frustrating, it kept him from spiritual pride and arrogance which he might have felt as a result of his special visions. Here, as in some other passages from Paul, we get the impression that humility was not an easy or automatic virtue for him. He sees this experience as coming to teach him to trust more in God, and that was good.

He feels that the continued discipline of pain and ill health was God's way of saving him from pride that is fatal in the Christian spirit and in our usefulness.

Trouble knocks a lot of nonsense out of us. It reminds us of our need of God. It helps keep our ego in check.

The instructions on some medicine bottles say "shake well before using." That's what God has to do to us sometimes. He has to shake us to make us usable.

Author James Mitchener tells a tale that helps explain what kept him writing.

"When I was five, a farmer living at our lane hammered eight nails into the trunk of an unproductive apple tree.

That autumn, a miracle happened. The tired old tree produced a bumper crop of juicy red apples.

When I asked how that happened, the farmer explained, 'Hammering the rusty nails gave it shock to remind it that its job is to produce apples.'

In the 1980's when I was nearly 80 I had some nails hammered into my trunk – heart surgery, vertigo, a new

left hip – and, like a sensible apple tree I resolved to resume being fruitful.” (*The World is My Home*; Random House, pp. 3-4) He lived another 17 years and wrote 27 of his more than 40 books after this.

Life sometimes hammers a rusty nail in us to shock us back to reality. Sometimes it’s in the form of financial reversal to remind us, “A man’s life consists not of the abundance of the things he possesses.” It reminds us to face life with the question, “What does a man profit if he should gain the whole world but lose his own soul?”

Sometimes it’s in the form of sickness to remind us, “All flesh is as grass, and the glory of man is as the flower of the field, the wind bloweth and it passeth away and no man knoweth where it was.”

Sometimes it comes in the form of an accident to remind us, “It’s appointed unto men once to die and after that the judgment.” To bring us face to face with the question, “What is your life?” It is even a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”

Sometimes it comes in the form of a career setback to remind us to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and these things will be added unto you.”

Thornton Wilder said, “In love service only wounded soldiers can serve.” God never wastes a hurt. In fact, our greatest ministry will most likely come out of your greatest hurt . . . So when trouble comes, ask yourself, is there something God is trying to teach me? Look for the good in it.

When God Says No

Second, talk to God about it. When Paul’s suffering came he did what we all do, he prayed. He asked the Lord to take it away. He felt he could do a better work for Christ if he was freed from this illness that continu-

ally tortured him. It was a daily drain on his body and his nerves.

So three times he asked the Lord that it be removed. This suggests earnest, intense, prolonged prayer. God's answer came back. The thorn would not be plucked but the Lord did say to Paul that his grace was sufficient. The Lord's answer was a pledge that there would be strength and grace to help him in whatever life handed him.

When troubles come, some people say that God does not want his children to have any suffering or thorns. In the name of religion they preach a glorified success formula. "Serve God, love God, and you will be healthy, wealthy, and your children will always walk in righteousness," they say. But Paul was one of God's children, and he still had a thorn in the flesh. There are others who say if you pray with enough faith, you won't have troubles in your life or God will raise you up from those troubles. But Paul prayed three times for the pain to be taken away. And it wasn't, and the Lord never said to him, "Paul, if you had only prayed with faith . . ."

And there are some people who say, "You have a thorn in the flesh? You've prayed and it has not been removed? Then you know the reason don't you? You have sin in your life." But the Lord didn't tell Paul that was the reason he had the thorn in the flesh. Just the opposite, it was to keep him from sin.

The last thing suffering people need is to have their suffering compounded by guilt. That just succeeds in grinding the thornbearer that much further in the dust.

How then do we deal with the thorns of life? We pray . . . We trust in the providence of God . . . This can work for our good. We claim the promises of God . . . His grace will be sufficient. We seek the presence of God . . . remembering as E. Stanley Jones said, "Christ is always

closest when the cross is the heaviest.”

Dr. Jack MacGorman, long-time seminary professor said, “I think I understand why God doesn’t specialize in thorn removal any more than he specialized in cup removal when Jesus prayed in the garden. He has a higher, nobler purpose for us. It is because the thorn room is a station on the way to the throne room.”

Then he helps put suffering in the perspective when he says, “The passage teaches us that in the difficulties of life and when our prayers are offered up, the answer of God is more often the sufficiency of his grace rather than the plucked out thorn.”

The shortest distance between our problem and God’s grace is the distance between our knees and the floor. So when suffering comes, talk to God about it, then listen, and if we listen quietly and reverently, God will whisper in your ear, “My grace is sufficient.”

Learning to Lean

Third, learn to rejoice in the midst of it. When God said “no” to the removal of the pain, Paul’s response is remarkable. He says: “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

God is never impressed with strength and self-sufficiency. He is drawn to people who are weak and admit it. Paul recognizes this and so he says he seeks no further release. He didn’t want the thorn but he had to live with it. So he determined to make the best of it and get on with the main business of life.

Look at Paul’s attitude. “I will glory in my infirmity

. . . I will take pleasure in my suffering, in the insults, in abuse, in my distresses." He does not surrender to a negative attitude of self-pity. There is no note of bitterness, self-pity or complaint. He didn't even tell us what the thorn was.

He wrote 13 of the letters in the New Testament, and he has much to say about the cross of Christ and the burdens of being a Christian but he never had time to explain his own hardship. No bitterness! No complaint! No self-pity! If it had been me, I'd have told every detail. I'd even have offered to show you my scars.

Paul's attitude gave new meaning to old scars. Attitude is the important thing. The captain was going through a field hospital after a battle when he saw a young chap who had lost his leg. He knelt down and consoled: "Son, I'm sorry you lost your leg." The soldier replied: "Captain, I didn't lose my leg – I gave it." That's the triumphant spirit of the apostle Paul.

You have a handicap? So did Paul. You have pain that won't go away? So did Paul. You have prayed and not gotten the answer you wanted? So did Paul. Some of the greatest Christian work has been done by people who are handicapped, with chronic illnesses, limitations, and who live in constant pain. Paul refused to waste his suffering on sulking in self-pity. He refused to surrender to the thorn.

William Wilberforce, the British statesman and reformer, at the end of his life said to his son Henry, "I am in a very distressed state."

"Yes," replied Henry, "but you have your feet on the rock." We know that rock is Christ (I Corinthians 10:4). Put your feet on the rock and refuse to waste a hurt.

Chapter 4

The Can-Do Spirit

Numbers 14:20-24

Texas Baptists had an inauspicious beginning. Texas won its independence from Mexico in 1836. Prior to that time there was no religious freedom in Texas. The only churches allowed were Roman Catholic. With freedom won the first Missionary Baptist Church was formed at Washington on the Brazos with eight members.

Three years later the first Baptist Association was formed. It took two tries to accomplish that. Four small churches, two missionary and two anti-missionary met in Independence but after two days of fruitless discussions broke up without any agreement.

Later that year four missionary Baptist churches with only 42 members organized the Union Baptist Association.

Within eight years Baptists had grown to 18 churches with 811 members and they met in Anderson to form the first state convention. The purpose of the convention was missions and evangelism. They described the mood as one of enthusiasm. They had what was called “the Caleb ‘can-do’ spirit.” With that small number of churches and those few members they made plans to evangelize everyone in Texas—the Indians, blacks, Mexicans, and Germans. And they also took three offerings for missions, for China (\$11.90), for Africa (\$11.50), and for Christian education (\$15.15). Baylor had been chartered in 1845

and they would support it, also.

Since that time Texas Baptists have grown to be the ninth largest denomination in America with nine universities, multiple hospitals and children's homes, and over 5,000 churches. Part of their success is due to the fact that they had the "can-do spirit" of Caleb.

We first meet Caleb when the children of Israel, 18 months out of Egypt, come to the borders of the Promised Land. Moses chooses one man from each of the twelve tribes and sends them to spy out the land. Their mission was not to decide if they should move into Canaan, but to get some idea of what they were up against once they crossed the Jordan. Was the land highly populated? Were the people strong or weak? Was the land fertile? Did the people live in walled cities or in tents? Was there ample wood for building? Was the land fruitful?

The spies returned after 40 days with a glowing but divided report. They all agreed that it was a wonderful land that flowed with milk and honey. They even brought back fruit from the land as proof.

"Nevertheless," ten of the spies said, "The people who dwell in the land are strong and their cities are walled and what's more we saw the children of Anak, and they are giants."

Watch that word "nevertheless." It is almost always a word of caution, of fear, of doubt. With that the people's hearts began to melt.

Caleb quieted the crowd and said to them, "Let's go at once and take the land. We can do it." Joshua agreed. But the other men did not think so. They repeated again, "We saw giants in the land, the sons of Anak, and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers and so were we in their sight."

If you see yourself as a grasshopper you begin to think and act like a grasshopper. So in those moments the

giants looked bigger than God, their fears were greater than their faith, the obstacles outweighed the opportunities, and the people became afraid.

Fear and doubt are communicable diseases. They soon spread among people like the plague. The people began to weep; and they wept into the night.

Then they began to murmur against Moses and Aaron and soon they decided to abort their mission and go back to Egypt. They preferred the security of slavery to the risks of freedom.

Once again Caleb and Joshua tried to inspire the congregation. They said, "If the Lord is pleased with us he will give us a victory in the land. But we must have faith. We must not doubt the Lord." When others were spreading fear and doubt Caleb and Joshua were calling for faith and obedience.

Still the people refused to go in.

God was angered and determined He would destroy the whole nation. The only thing that saved them was the prayer of intercession Moses prayed.

The Lord then said, "None of these people will enter into the Promised Land. They will wander in the wilderness for 40 years, one year for every day the spies searched out the land and every person above 20 years of age, (obviously the age of accountability,) will die in the wilderness."

"But the Lord said my servant Caleb, because he had another spirit in him and has followed me fully, him will I bring into the land where into he went; and he shall possess it." (Numbers 14:24) Caleb would one day enter into the Promised Land because he had a different spirit from the rest of the people. What was it? It was the spirit of courage, obedience, and faith. Caleb had a "Can-Do spirit." We need to be people with the faith of Caleb today—the faith to wholly follow the Lord; the faith to stand

up and speak out when others fear and doubt; the faith to believe that God is bigger than the giants and that the opportunities outweigh the obstacles.

Three things characterize the kind of faith Caleb had and the kind of faith we need:

- It is a faith grounded in the word of God.
- It is a faith confirmed by our walk with God.
- It is a faith undaunted by the wavering of others.

Standing On The Promises

First, we need a faith that is grounded in the word of God. How did Caleb come to such faith? He was born in Egypt, a slave of Pharaoh. He spent the first 40 years or so of his life cutting straw and stomping in the slave pits making bricks for Pharaoh. How then did he come to such confidence in God? Surely, his parents taught him the promises God had made to their people through the years.

They must have taught him how God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans and promised to make him a great nation, give him a great name, and through him all the people of the world would be blessed. (Genesis 12:1-3) And that God had promised Abraham that he would give to him and his descendants the land of Canaan as an everlasting inheritance. (Genesis 13:15) And I imagine they reminded him that God had told Abraham that his descendants would be slaves in a distant land for 400 years but when the time was right in the providence of God they would be set free and inherit the land God had promised.

Undoubtedly, they also told him how Joseph on his death bed reaffirmed that promise when he said, "God will surely visit you and bring you out of this land and to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and

to Jacob.” Now in full confidence of this, Joseph had made them promise when they made the journey back to Canaan they would carry his body with them to be buried in the land of promise.

I am confident Caleb had been taught these things and believed them to be true. Now he was standing on the promises of God. I can almost hear Caleb laboring in the hot Egyptian sun, or sweat pouring off his brow and singing all the while,

*Standing on the promises of Christ my King,
Thro' eternal ages let His praises ring;
Glory in the highest, I will shout and sing,
Standing on the promises of God.*

*Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
By the living Word of God I shall prevail,
Standing on the promises of God.*

I do not know how many promises there are in the Bible but I do know that Jesus alone made 108 to us and he has never broken any promise spoken. As Caleb stood on the promises of God so we need to stand. That's the kind of faith we need-faith to take God at his word.

Walking In The Wilderness

Second, we need a faith confirmed by our walk with God. Not only had Caleb heard of God's promises to his people as he grows up in Egypt but through 18 months of wandering in the wilderness he had seen the wonderful works of God. He had tasted of the manna from Heaven, eaten quail from the hand of God, drunk water that flowed from a rock, seen their enemies defeated and witnessed Jethro, Moses' father-in-law and a Midianite

priest, come to believe that Jehovah was the one true God. In short, he had seen that God could be trusted. God always kept his promises.

The Psalmist gave testimony to the faithfulness of God when he said, "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging for bread." (Psalm 37:25) Come to think of it, neither have I!

For over 60 years I have walked with God and I can say from experience we can trust his leading. And, whenever I or my church stepped out in faith God was always faithful. I had a sister who was born deaf. We were poor Piney Woods people from deep East Texas and knew nothing about schools for the deaf or people trained in sign language. We developed our own, home-made, way of communicating. But because of her, I always had a heart for deaf people and longed to have a deaf ministry in our church. When I inquired about the possibility of this I was always discouraged. I was told it would never succeed.

One Sunday, out of the blue, a deaf young man and his girlfriend came to our church. They asked if I would allow her to sign for him. As you know, the interpreter stands in front of the people and repeats the sermon in sign language and it can be distracting to other people watching and trying to listen at the same time. They wanted to make sure they had my permission and, of course, I gave it. Would you believe that same day another deaf person came to our church and inquired if we had anything for deaf people. I said, "Yes, we do. We have someone who will sign for you." In more than 50 years of ministry that was the first and only time that a deaf person ever came to inquire about such a ministry.

Without any effort on our part the next Sunday we had seven deaf people present. The next Sunday after

that we had fourteen. This was the beginning of a deaf ministry. Once we decided, God provided. He always does.

Later some of my staff members wanted to build a mobile medical-dental clinic and take it to the Texas Valley to minister to the poor along the Mexican border. I said, "That's a great idea. We will build the clinic but you can't take it out of Tyler. There are poor people here that need our ministry. We are always thinking of going off some place to minister and overlooking the people here at home."

The next Sunday I mentioned our desire to the congregation. The next day Bruce Brookshire, a wonderful Presbyterian man who often attended our church called and asked to take me to lunch. Over lunch he said, "Would you allow a Presbyterian to give the trailer for that mobile clinic?" You know my answer to that.

We now had a trailer but we also needed a doctor's office on one end and a dental clinic on the other. The doctor's office was fairly easy to equip. Since we were dealing with minor illnesses the doctors would bring their own equipment and medicines with them. The dental section was different. It would require a dentist chair, drill, and other necessary equipment. That can be expensive.

The next week a salesman who was not a member of our congregation stopped by the church office for counseling. He was depressed and needed someone to talk to. I was busy so he went to my associate, Dennis Parrot. In the course of the conversation Dennis asked him what he did for a living. He replied, "I sell dental equipment."

Dennis then told him about our plans. He quickly responded by saying, "The day I install their new equipment I take their old equipment as a trade in. It's perfectly

good equipment it's just not the latest technology. I have an entire warehouse of good used dental equipment and I will give you everything you need and I will install it for you." Once again, once we decided God provided.

In the 34 years I was a pastor, the churches I served built 23 buildings—a parsonage, 5 educational buildings, 12 mission churches and a retreat center with 5 buildings. Never once in those 34 years did we know what the future held for the economy. Never once could we be sure about future interest rates. But by the time I left those churches every building we built was paid for. After these years of walking with God and seeing His hand do you think I can doubt Him?

You say, "But that was all in the past." Yes, but God is not in the past. He is ever present. And we can believe in Him not only because of the word of God but because of our walk with God.

A Communicable Disease

Third, it is a faith undaunted by the wavering of others. When the congregation heard the report of the spies their courage failed and their faith wavered. They wept all night long. First they began to murmur against their leaders. Then they called the "Back to Egypt" committee into session. It is a standing committee in most churches. Doubt and fear prevailed and the children of Israel decided to abort the mission.

You can expect any venture of faith to be met by the naysayers who focus on the giants rather than God and the obstacles rather than the opportunities. But Caleb would not allow their wavering to silence him. He stood against the majority.

It is never easy to stand against the crowd but if the choice is to stand with God or against the majority we must not waver. We must muster our courage and stand

with God.

It is faith that gives us courage to do that. One of my heroes is Sam Houston, a hero of Texas Independence. In the Sam Houston Museum in Huntsville, Texas, there is on display a vest worn by General Houston. It was a gift from his brother Cherokee Indians. Although it was made of jaguar skin he enjoyed telling his friends and especially his enemies that he wore a leopard vest because "a leopard never changes its spots." Sam Houston was a man of courage, conviction and faith that did not waver when others disagreed with him.

In order to go forward we sometimes have to crawl over the bleached bones of the naysayers, the "Back to Egypt" bunch. But we must not let the whiners set the agenda for the church. People of faith must lead the way. We need to remember that the majority may rule but the majority is not always right. And it definitely was not right in this case. If the people had only had faith enough to take God at his word and go in they could have taken the land right then. Instead they wandered in the wilderness for the next 40 years, and all those over 20 years of age did not survive the discipline of God to enjoy it at all.

When Joshua led them back to the Promised Land 40 years later, he, like Moses, sent spies into the land to get a feel for what they would encounter. To their amazement they discovered the people of Canaan were scared to death of them. They had heard how God had led Israel and it caused their hearts to melt (Joshua 2:24). The Canaanites actually believed God more than his own people did.

We don't meet Caleb again for 40 years. This time the Israelites were back at the borders of the Promised Land. They had been sufficiently disciplined and were now ready to obey and take the land.

Caleb speaks again. He reminds Joshua who is now the leader that in that first visit to the Promised Land he had “wholly followed the Lord God” and through Moses he had been promised an inheritance for himself and his children. And he further reminds Joshua that the Lord had kept him for the past 45 years and that he was now 85 years old and was as strong now as he had been the day Moses sent him out as a spy.

Someone has said, “Any man who says he could do as much at 85 as he could at 45 wasn’t doing much at 45.” That wasn’t true of Caleb. The Lord had kept him strong as he had promised.

Then he said to Joshua, “Now therefore give me this mountain.” He referred to the mountainous hills of Hebron where the Anakims, the giants, lived. Then he said, “If the Lord will be with me I will be able to drive them out of the land, as the Lord said.” (Joshua 14:6-12)

Amazingly when Caleb moved into the land of Hebron, supposedly inhabited by the giants, he only encountered three sons of Anak (Joshua 15:14). From the first report of the spies you would have thought the whole land was filled with giants. But Caleb only encountered three. The scriptures speak of “the valley of the giants” on three occasions but to our knowledge there were no giants. The giants were mostly in their minds.

Fear and doubt can do that to a church, a nation, to an individual. I like the words of the late E.K. Bailey, a black pastor in Dallas who said, “Faith is acting like what ain’t so is so, so that it will be so.”

That’s the kind of faith we need. A faith grounded in the Word of God, confirmed by our walk with God, and unshaken by the wavering of others.

A faith that acts as if it’s so. That’s a “Can-Do” faith.

Chapter 5

“Living For Christ In The Home”

I Peter 3:1-7

I sat next to a man on a flight to New York City recently and noticed that he had his wedding ring on his index finger. I said, “Hey fellow, you’ve got your ring on the wrong finger.” He replied, “Yeah, I married the wrong woman.”

Every year approximately 4 million people stand before a preacher or a justice of the peace and say, “I do” but in time half of them stand before a judge and say, “We’re through.”

They begin by making a life long commitment to what they believe to be the right person, somewhere something happens and half of them decide they are married to the wrong person.

How do you know whether you are marrying the right person or the wrong person? I’m not sure. But I am sure of this: if you treat the wrong person like they are the right person they could very well end up being the right person. And if you treat the right person like the wrong person you will likely discover they are the wrong person.

Or, to put it another way, it’s more important to be the right person than to marry the right person. The scriptures tell us what we must do to be the right kind of person in the marriage relationship.

The Apostle Peter in his first Epistle deals with a domestic problem Christianity was likely to produce in the first century world. If one member of the marriage became a Christian and the other was untouched by the Gospel it would likely produce tension in the marriage relationship. If it was the husband who became a Christian he would probably bring his wife into the faith with him and there would be no problem. But, if it was the wife who became a Christian while her husband did not she would have taken a step which in the ancient world was unprecedented and which would produce an acute problem.

In every sphere of the first century world women had no rights at all. She was a thing; she was owned by her husband in the same way he owned sheep, cattle, and goats. On no account could she leave him, although he could dismiss her at any moment. All he needed to do to divorce his wife was to say three times, "I divorce you." That, by the way, is still practiced among some Muslims today.

So, for a wife to change her religion while her husband did not was almost unthinkable. That's the problem Peter is dealing with in this passage of scripture. His advice is simple and straightforward. It is nothing other than to be a good wife and by the silent preaching of a good life to break down the prejudices, barriers and hostility he may hold and perhaps win him to faith in Christ.

Then he cautions Christian wives not to give primary attention to their outward appearance such as how they fix their hair, the wearing of jewelry and expensive clothes but rather to major on inward beauty. Principally that of a kind and gentle spirit. We must not take this to mean that a wife should neglect her appearance. She should not. But inward beauty is to be primary.

Then he points to Sarah, the wife of Abraham, as a model of this kind of woman. Then he tells Christian husbands to be understanding of their wives and to value them, to hold them in high esteem as joint heirs of God's grace. Finally, he reminds them that they must do all of this so that they can have an effective prayer life.

You will notice in this passage that the scriptures say very little about our rights and very much about our duties. This is because it's more important to be the right person than to find the right person. If we approach all of life with more emphasis on our duties and less on our rights and privileges we would be better people and the world would be a better place.

In this teaching the scripture set out five principles for living in the home.

They are:

- Live your faith in the home as well as in the church.
- Major on developing your character and not just on your outward appearance.
- Be understanding of your mate.
- Respect each other's strengths and weaknesses.
- Keep your prayer lines open.

No Easy Assignment

The first principle is to live your faith in the home as well as in the church (verses 1-2). In her book "Ashes to Gold" Patty Roberts, the ex-wife of Richard Roberts, the son of Oral Roberts, tells how they enjoyed a life of luxury and glamour as singing stars on their weekly television program. They were depicted as a model couple and all the while their marriage was disintegrating. Someone asked her, "Did the devil just attack you all of a sudden?" Her reply was, "No. Our divorce was the

direct result of the lives we lived. We prayed on camera and treated each other kindly on center stage and then ignored one another in the living room. We paid more attention to our ministry than our marriage and we lost both.”

That’s easy to do. It’s a lot easier to live the Christian life in the church, or on center stage, than it is in the privacy of your home or the intimacy of marriage. Marriage is one place where there is no pretense. If a person is selfish, irritable, moody, it soon comes out. And, if we are Christians that comes out, also.

So the challenge is to live your faith in the home as well as in the church. And that’s especially true if your partner is not a Christian. Most non-Christians are apt to look at Christianity much like a mechanical engineer. What they want to know is, “Does it work? Does it help? Does it make a difference?” If so, they are more likely to be open to your witness.

We know, of course, that in most instances just living a good life is not enough. Our lives are to speak louder than our words but they often do not and perhaps can’t. How can we by being good tell people that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again on the third day. To do that is asking too much of us and too little of him. But if we live consistent Christian lives it adds great weight to our witness.

If you have a non-Christian mate you must be careful, not to be overbearing in your witness. It can easily become nagging. Show them that Christ makes a difference and then trust the Lord to bring conviction in time.

It is no easy assignment to live for Christ in the home. G. Campbell Morgan, the great English preacher had five sons who were all preachers. On one occasion, when all the family was present, a visitor asked, “Which of you six is the best preacher?” Without hesitancy they all

pointed to the kitchen where Mrs. Morgan was finishing the dishes and replied, "She is."

You do not have to stand behind the pulpit to be a preacher. In fact, the best preaching is done outside the pulpit as we live our lives in the home, in the workplace, or where we spend our leisure time. That's the secret to a good witness. That's the secret to a good marriage.

The Only thing That Endures Is Character

The second principle to having a Christian marriage is to major on developing a beautiful character rather than on your outward appearance (verses 3-4). Inward beauty should be the primary goal of every life. The outward appearance is and always has been of great interest to most women. That's why Peter's advice to women is to not give primary attention fixing their hair, the wearing of jewelry or the putting on of fine clothing; but rather to developing a beautiful spirit.

A man was having financial trouble and said to his wife on one occasion, "Honey, we need to cut back on our spending. I think you shouldn't buy any new clothes for awhile. Not until we get our finances in order." She agreed but within a few days she brought home a very expensive new dress. When he saw it he said, "Honey, I thought I told you we needed to cut back on our spending. Why did you buy that new dress?" She replied, "The devil made me do it."

He responded, "Why didn't you say, 'Get thee behind me Satan?'" She replied, "I did, and he said it looked good from that side, too."

Women like to look good and we want them to but that shouldn't be our first concern. We all know of people who have beautiful hair, beautiful eyes, beautiful lips, beautiful hands, beautiful clothes and an ugly, ugly spirit.

This is not to suggest that you need to neglect your appearance. You may not be able to look like Angelina Jolie but you don't have to look like Rosanne either.

Peter does not leave us to guess what he is talking about when he speaks of inward beauty. He has reference to a "meek and quiet spirit." The Greek word translated "quiet" really means "to keep one's seat, to be still." When we are upset the tendency is to get out of our seat, to stand up, to defend ourselves. What he is suggesting is that we develop a kind and gentle spirit. You cannot constantly nag, complain, find fault and be a good mate. Grumbling is the death of love. This can wreck a home. More marriages are wrecked by slow leaks than by blow outs. These are two of the most important qualities in a Christian's life and in particular in a Christian marriage.

We live in a cold, cruel world where people are often more courteous to the most casual stranger than they are to their mate. A man was seated on a crowded bus when a lady boarded and couldn't find a seat. He got up and offered her his seat and she was so surprised that she fainted. When she came to she said, "Thank you," and he fainted. We need to be kind and gracious to one another, especially in the marriage relationship.

If there is little courtesy in the world there is less in the home. The poet put it this way:

*Hearts, like doors, can open with ease
To very, very little keys
And don't forget they are these
"Thank you, sir," and "if you please"*

Peter describes kindness and gentleness as being "incorruptible." "That means they are not subject to decay. They are lasting. Time takes a toll on most things. Iron

rusts. Wood rots. Paint peals. And beauty fades. Age takes its toll on all of us.

When I see people I haven't been with in a long time they often say to me, "You haven't changed a bit over the years." I usually respond, "I sure hope I have. I'd hate to think I looked this bad 20 years ago." The years have taken a toll on me. My hair is thinning, my hands are wrinkled, and I've got spots all over my face. Time is a wrecker. As somebody said, "Time is a great healer but a lousy beautician." But, in this decaying world, there is one thing incorruptible that lasts. It is Christian character. It is a kind and gentle spirit.

In the made for TV movie "O.J." about O.J. Simpson when he was acquitted of the murder of his wife and her boyfriend, Willie Mays, who also went to the University of Southern California was quoted as saying, "Fame is vapor; popularity is an accident; money takes wings; the only thing that endures is character."

The scriptures agree. If you want to have a Christian marriage then concentrate on building a beautiful character. Don't neglect the outward appearance but don't make that primary. Make sure you develop a kind and gentle spirit.

What Time Is For

The third principle in building a Christian marriage is to be understanding of your mate. (verse 7) When Solomon was anointed King of Israel the Lord appeared to him the first of two times and told him to ask whatever he would and it would be given him. His request was, "Lord, give me an understanding heart." The Hebrew word translated "understanding" literally means "to listen, to hear." Solomon was asking for a listening heart so he could understand and meet the needs of his people.

We need that same gift in marriage, the gift to listen, the gift to hear what our partner is saying so we can meet their needs. I'm not sure we fully understand how different men and women are. Not just physically but emotionally. Men are moved by what they see. Women are moved by what they hear. Men need to be needed. Women need to be cherished.

Some homes have a lot of operation without cooperation because we don't pay attention to one another. A man asked his wife to alter his pants legs one inch. She fussed and said, "No, I don't have time." So, he tossed them on the bed and walked out of the room.

Later his mother, who lived with them, feeling sorry for her son made the alterations herself and placed them back on the bed. Later that evening when the wife came home from work she had realized she had not acted right so she picked up the pants and cut another inch off them, pressed them and laid them back across the bed.

When the man came home from work he saw his pants still lying on the bed so he took them to the cleaners and had the alteration lady cut an inch off each leg. That's what your call operation without cooperation. It takes both to make a good marriage.

If you ask a man to do some small chore around the house he may grumble but the fact is, he needs to be needed. He wants to feel that he is important and he makes a contribution. On the other hand, if a wife dresses to go out and asked her husband, "How do I look?" She really wants him to say, "You are beautiful."

Ardis Whitman told the story that once, in one of his father's little country pastorates, a farmer's wife died—a plain good woman who had brought up a fine family of sons and daughters. They had all grown up and gone away and she had been left to struggle alone for years with a silent, gnarled man who was her husband. She

simply collapsed over the wash tub one day and died. At the funeral her husband did not weep and he made no sign of grief as he plodded to the grave.

But when the ceremony was over he lingered behind to talk to his pastor. He had a small shabby book in his hand, and he held it out, "It's poems," he said humbly. "She liked them. Would you read one for her now? She always wanted us to read them together, but I never had time. Everyday on the farm there was always something to do. But I got to thinking, nobody is doing them today and it doesn't seem to matter. I guess you don't get it in your head what time is for until it's too late."

That tragedy is reenacted too often in too many lives today. Billy Graham reminds us, "If you want your wife to be like an angel, don't treat her like the devil." Be understanding of your mate.

Learn To Pull Together

The fourth principle to a Christian marriage is to respect each other's strengths and weaknesses. We all have them. Peter says specifically that husbands should honor, esteem, highly value their wives as "the weaker vessel" and as "heirs together" of the grace of God. I'm not sure why he speaks of women as "the weaker vessel." Women are not weaker than men intellectually. They are as smart as we are. They are not weaker spiritually. They have carried the church through the years. They are not weaker emotionally. They may show their emotions more readily but they do not feel more deeply. And they are not weaker physically. Women live 6.9 years longer than men.

And women are joint heirs of the grace of life. We need to remember that and treat each other as equals, respecting each other's strengths and weaknesses. We

all have them.

A part of being a good mate is to respect and accept one another instead of spending our time trying to change them. Jimmy Carter said one of his pet peeves was punctuality. On the other hand, his wife Rosalyn was habitually late. This was a continual problem between them until he finally decided to accept her as she was. So, on one occasion he gave her a card that said, "As proof of my love for you I will never again make an unpleasant remark about your tardiness." She responded, "That's the nicest gift you ever gave me."

If we pull together we are not as likely to pull apart. The little brown church in Nashau, Iowa has a unique way of demonstrating this. When a couple is married in the church they are instructed that as they leave the chapel they are to stop in the vestibule and the wife is to grab the bell rope and ring the bell. Invariably the bell is too heavy for her to ring by herself so her husband instinctively reaches up and helps her. Then the preacher says to them, "Never forget that as long as you pull together you can ring the bell."

Get Along So You Can Get

The last principle for a Christian marriage is prayer. He assumes that God would be a part of any Christian marriage and that prayer would be offered up in the family. A strained relationship in the marriage hinders prayer on both ends of the line. Peter urges all of this so that their prayers will not be hindered. The Apostle Paul uses that same word "hindered" when he writes to the church at Thessalonica to say he wanted to come to them but "Satan hindered" him (I Thessalonians 2:18).

The word "hindered" in the Greek literally means "to cut off" or "to cut into." It is a technical word for putting

up a road-block calculated to stop an army on the march. It is Satan's work to throw obstacles in the Christian's way in the same way the enemy would throw obstacles in the way of an on marching army.

If an army was marching toward a city the citizens might cause an avalanche or burn a bridge to slow the approaching army down or prevent their advance. Peter is saying that strife in a marriage is like static on a phone line, it prevents the message from getting through.

In his book "Letters to Karen" Charlie Shedd points out that one in four marriages end in divorce. If a couple goes to church regularly it is one in 54 marriages that ends in divorce. And if they pray together it is one in 500 that divorce.

I don't know about the trustworthiness of those statistics but I do know this, "If we don't get along on earth we won't get through in Heaven."

Marriages fail because people fail, and people fail because they try to live without the Lord. A man needs a wife and a wife needs a husband. But they both need Christ to build the right kind of marriage. The scriptures say to us, "Except the Lord build a house they labor in vain that build it." (Psalm 127:1) That's the real secret. Take Christ into your life and into your marriage and both will be better.

Chapter 6

Christ's Yoke and the Burdens of Life

Matthew 11:28-30

Laura Lynn Drummond, a college professor at St. Edwards University, Austin, took a job as a cop for nine years to pay her way through school. In an interview about her book, *Anything You Say Can and Will Be Used Against You*, she was asked, "What did you learn from your years as a police officer?" The first thing that popped out of her was, "There are a lot of sad, lonely, desperate people out there." (*Dallas Morning News*, 5/5/04)

There always have been. That's why Jesus invites us to come under his yoke and allows him to help us with the burdens of life (Matthew 11:28-30). As you know, a yoke is a harness made of wood that is designed to distribute the weight of a load across the shoulders of an animal to make the load easier to bear and enables you to attach a plow or a cart to the animal so it can pull it.

It is one of three implements Jesus used as a symbol of discipleship—a cross, a plow, and a yoke. All three were made of wood, all three may have required the services of a carpenter, and all three involved blood, sweat and tears.

Ordinarily in scripture, the yoke is a symbol of oppression imposed by a tyrant and was grievous to be born. The scriptures speak of the yoke of Egypt (Le-

viticus 26:13); of Assyria (Isaiah 10:27); and of Babylon (Jeremiah 27 & 28).

They also speak of the yoke of Solomon (1 Kings 12:4), i.e., the heavy tax burden he laid on his people. And, the law in New Testament times was referred to as a yoke (Acts 15:10; Galatians 5:1).

The Ten Commandments, God's simple rules for living, had been interpreted and reinterpreted by the scribes and Pharisees until there were thousands of rules that dictated what a person could or could not do. There were hundreds just for the Sabbath day alone. They limited how far you could travel on the Sabbath day, forbade eating an egg laid on the Sabbath day because the chicken had to labor to lay the egg, and said it was wrong to pluck a hair out of your head on the Sabbath because in so doing you went through the same motions as the person plucking grain from the field. There were so many man-made rules that trying to obey God's law had become a burden instead of a blessing. It was a yoke under which the people chaffed.

However, the yoke Jesus speaks about is different. These other yokes were imposed by someone else. His yoke is voluntary. He said, "Take my yoke upon you." Other yokes were imposed by heartless tyrants, but Jesus is "meek and lowly at heart." And these other yokes were oppressive, but his yoke is "easy" and his burden is "light." The Greek word for easy means well-fitting. Jesus' yoke fits well.

This passage is a great invitation to become his disciple and let him help us with the burdens of life. There are single yokes and double yokes. In a single yoke an animal pulls the load by itself. In a double yoke the load is shared. Jesus knows that the load of life is too heavy for us to bear by ourselves. He invites us to yoke up with him, and he will help us with the load of life.

Jesus is the great burden bearer. He will help us with life's burdens. There are at least five burdens that Jesus will help us to bear:

- The burden of a guilty conscience.
- The burden of a broken heart.
- The burden of shattered dreams.
- The burden of a bitter spirit.
- The burden of a lonely life.

The Forgotten Word

First, Jesus helps us with the burden of a guilty conscience. Sin is the forgotten word in American society today. Oh, it's still in the dictionary and still very present in our lives but it is not much on our minds or in our speech. In fact, the most horrendous acts of brutality – murder, rape, and abuses of every sort are described as a sickness or mental illness as though all those who commit them need is medication or counseling.

As a result we're trying to get our sins explained when we need to get them forgiven. We're trying to get people adjusted when they need to get converted. What we really need is to get them out of the counselor's office and on the mourner's bench.

We need to stop all this foolish talk about illnesses and call things what they are – just plain old-fashioned sin. We don't need rehabilitation, medication, education, but salvation.

Sin, breaking God's law, brings with it two tragic consequences – alienation from God and a guilty conscience. A guilty conscience is the haunting memory of sin. We do wrong and it keeps coming back to trouble us. We fear both the repercussions and the discovery of our sin.

John Newton, who wrote the hymn "Amazing

Grace," had once been captain of a slave trading ship. In March 1748, he was caught in a great storm at sea, and he began a search for God that led to his conversion. In time, he became a wonderful parish priest in the village of Olney and built a great church of over 600 in attendance. The church almost didn't ordain him because they thought he was too enthusiastic.

As an old man and blind, dictating his memories, he said, speaking of the thousands he transported on his slave ship, "I lived my life in the shadow of 20,000 ghosts."

Sin can do that to you. As the scriptures say, "The wicked flee when no man pursueth." (Proverbs 28:1) Our memory keeps returning to our sins often long after they are forgiven.

How do we deal with the burden of a guilty conscience? Ruth Graham, the wife of Billy Graham, said that one night she was so burdened by her sin that she went to her sister in desperation and said, "What shall I do?" Her sister suggested that she take the fifty third chapter of Isaiah and put her own name in it.

She said, "When I read that he was wounded for Ruth's transgressions, he was bruised for Ruth's iniquities, the chastisement of Ruth's peace was upon him, and with his stripes Ruth was healed. I realized that night Jesus Christ, dying on the cross, had died as my substitute. The burden left and it has never come back."

There is an old song we don't sing much anymore entitled "Burdens Are Lifted at Calvary." It's true. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). And he's made provision for our continual forgiveness. 1 John 1:9 is the Christian's bar of soap. "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness."

How often do I wash my hands? As often as I need

to. How often do we apply 1 John 1:9? As often as we need to. Every time we sin, we go to him for forgiveness. He lifts the burden of guilt from us.

Our Walk Through the Cemetery

Second, Jesus lifts the burden of a broken heart. A few years ago I received a letter from a woman in Wisconsin whose daughter had been brutally murdered eleven years before. Someone shared with her one of my books and she wrote to ask, "Do you know what heaven is like? Has anyone ever come back from there to tell us about it?"

Her letter and her question expressed the deep longings of our hearts. It had been eleven long years and still the grief was there. It never goes away. It is a burden we bear for a lifetime.

It is sobering to realize that every human relationship ends in sorrow. Think of it, they end in death – yours or theirs; or in divorce, that's another kind of sorrow; or in departure, our children grow up and leave home and that's still another kind of sorrow. I spent the last twenty years criss-crossing this country preaching in churches all over America. I said to my wife recently, "It looks like I'm always leaving." Behind that was the awareness that one day I'll leave for the last time, and I don't want to do that.

S. H. James was a long-time pastor in San Antonio. He pastored one church for over forty years. He had three brothers who were all ministers. One of them delivered the eulogy at his funeral service. He told about a school girl in Alabama who rode the school bus home every day. Her home was the last house on the route, so she was always the last one on the bus. In the wintertime it was dark when they arrived home.

She didn't live on the main road but up a dirt road and down a sandy lane. As they approached her house one evening she looked out across the field and could see the lights were on and said to the driver, "If you'd like, you can let me off here at the main road and I can walk across the field to my house."

The driver replied, "No, I don't mind making the drive up to your house. If I let you off here you'll have to walk through the cemetery to get to your house. She replied, "I don't mind going through the cemetery, I can see the lights are on and everybody is home."

Then the brother said, "This is S. H.'s walk through the cemetery."

We all have to walk through the cemetery either by ourselves or with a loved one. But, thank God the lights are on. Joyce Kilmer wrote in a poem:

*Because the way is steep and long
And through a strange and lonely land,
God placed upon my lips a song
And put a lantern in my hand.*

Job's friend reminded him that God gives us "songs in the night" (Job 11:25). Because of Christ we are able to sing even in the midst of sorrow. And God has given us a lantern. His word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119:105).

Back to the lady's letter, "Does heaven have anything to say to us in our sorrow?" And the answer comes, "And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them." (Revelation 14:13)

There is hope in Christ for the burden of a broken heart.

Life's Most Useless Statistic

Third, he helps us with the burden of shattered dreams. We begin our lives with great hopes and aspirations about our careers, about our marriages, about our children. Then something happens. Our career goes south, our marriage goes sour, our children go awry, and our dreams are shattered.

So many of our hopes and dreams are bound up in our children that when they disappoint us we feel as though we are failures. That has gone on a long time. Adam and Eve had two sons and one killed the other; Noah, a preacher of righteousness, had three sons who disgraced him; Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and he threw young Ishmael out of the house as a teenager to keep peace in the family (Genesis 21:14); Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau, and Jacob cheated his brother out of his birthright and Esau threatened to kill Jacob; and Jacob had twelve sons and out of jealousy they sold Joseph into slavery. They broke their parent's hearts and they didn't have Hollywood, television, automobiles, or drugs to blame it on. Children have a mind of their own, they make their own choices, and parents are not necessarily to blame.

There is hope, even, for the failures of life. Jesus once said to Simon Peter, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." (Luke 22:31-32)

Jesus prayed for Peter not to fail, and he failed anyway. Jesus' prayers weren't always answered. But he

gave him a second chance and recommissioned him as an apostle by the Sea of Galilee when he said, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-17)

Meadowlark Lemon, the old Harlem Globe Trotters star, said, "The most useless statistic in sports is the half-time score." More than one game has been won in the second half, in the last two minutes, and even in the last second. As Yogi said, "It ain't over 'til it's over." And our God is the God of a second chance.

The poet expressed it this way:

*I played with my blocks, I was a child
Houses I builded and castles I piled
'Til they tottered and fell all efforts in vain
But my father said kindly, come try it again.*

*I played with my time, what's time to a lad.
Why pour over books, play, play and be glad
'Til my time was all spent and like a sweet
summer's rain
But my father said kindly, come try it again.*

*I played with my soul, my soul that is I.
The best that is me, I smothered its cry.
I lulled and dulled it and O God! the pain
But Jesus said kindly, come try it again.*

There is hope and help even for the burden of shattered dreams.

He Has Chained Himself

Fourth, he helps us with the burden of a bitter spirit. Years ago I helped a friend who was out of the ministry get back in. In a sense, I bet my reputation on him. So

I said to him in the process, "Boy, don't you ever disappoint me." He said, "I would die first."

I said, "No, you won't have to die. I'll kill you." I think that's what you call the second death. But the fact is people do disappoint us, and we disappoint them. And sometimes those disappointments and hurts can canker into bitterness and resentment that ultimately destroy us.

Bitterness and resentment is a destructive force even when it is justified. The editor of the Dallas Morning News wrote an article several years ago about O. J. Simpson's shadow haunting the family of the man he killed. In response Donna Diorio wrote to the editor, "Every time I see Fred Goldman on television, I feel so sorry for him. Not only did O. J. murder his son, but now Mr. Goldman's life is being consumed by the bitterness of revenge. Mr. Goldman is to be pitied because he has chained himself to O. J. and will never be free unless he chooses it for himself."

"His life is over except what is driven by revenge. I hope his daughter frees herself from the same self-destruction." (*Dallas Morning News*, 11/27/07) Maybe now that OJ is finally in prison, Mr. Goldman can deal with his bitterness.

The scriptures warn us to beware "of the root of bitterness that can spring up and trouble us as it did Esau ..." (Hebrews 12:15) Bitterness almost destroyed Esau and will do the same to us.

The illusion is to an old root that is left after a tree has been cut down. And new shoots sprout out of it. The root of bitterness dies hard, but we must kill it out completely or it will kill us.

How do we do that? The apostle Paul told us and he showed us. He wrote to Timothy, "Alexander the copper smith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according

to his works." (2 Timothy 4:14)

Alexander hurt Paul, and Paul hadn't forgotten it. It is impossible to forget. But he doesn't dwell on it. He doesn't even tell us what Alexander did. If it had been me, I'd have gone into every detail. In fact, I'd have embellished it some. But not Paul, and he didn't try to get even and hurt him back. He is content to leave judgment to God. And you can do the same. If you have been hurt by others, leave judgment to God. Life is too short to waste time hating anyone. "Vengeance is mine saith the Lord." By God's grace, you can forgive; after all, God forgave you.

In conversation with his soon-to-be wife, William Wilberforce the British reformer alluded to the difficulties he encountered in Parliament in his fight against slavery but said he did not want to talk about them. In encouraging him to talk about his problems and not repress them she said, "It seems to me if you have a bitter taste in your mouth, you ought to spit it out and not swallow it."

If you've got a bitter taste about someone or something, spit it out. Don't keep it in you.

Are You Lonesome Tonight?

Fifth, he helps with the burden of a lonely life. The first thing in all of creation that God named as not being good was loneliness. He said in the garden to Adam, "It is not good for man to be alone."

It's as true now as it was then. Some of us are old enough to remember the song by Elvis Presley, "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" He sang that song with such feeling that it was one of his best. Sometime after his death I read something that gave a clue to his singing with authority about lonesome nights. Someone asked him

why he abused drugs and the King confessed, "Because I'd rather be unconscious than miserable."

Anyone here know what I'm talking about? Loneliness is being the new kid at school and nobody knows your name. It's moving to a new town and leaving all your friends behind. It's your parents going through a divorce and you don't know which one you're going to live with. It's coming home from your daughter's wedding or your mate's funeral to an empty house. It's driving away after leaving your child at college for the first time. It's being retired and feeling no one needs you anymore. It's an empty chair at the table, an empty pillow in your bed at night, an empty spot in your heart.

One of the greatest loneliness is for God. As someone wrote:

*O, to have no Christ, no Savior
How lonely life must be!
Like a sailor lost and driven
On a wide and shoreless sea.*

*O, to have no Christ, no Savior
No hand to clasp thine own!
Through the dark, dark veil of shadows,
Thou must press thy way alone.*

Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age." This is not just a promise for missions, it is a promise for life. Jesus is the answer for the burden of a lonely life.

The bottom line is this, we have something wrong with us—Jesus can fix it. We have a load of guilt on us—Jesus can lift it. We have a hole in our soul, and Jesus can fill it. Come to him, take his yoke upon you, and you shall find rest for your soul.

Chapter 7

“Hot Air Or True Religion”

James 1:26-27

Hot air or true religion – which one describes your faith?

A young woman, in her early 20's, entered St. Mark's church in Atlanta for worship one Sunday morning. She remarked to the pastor following the service, "This is the first time I was ever in church."

"Really!?"

Yeah, "The young woman answered.

"Well." Fred said, "How was it?"

She said, "Kind of scary.

He asked, "Kind of scary?"

She said, "Yeah."

"Why?"

She said, "It just seems so important. You know I never go to anything important anymore. This just seems so important."

It's possible for young people to grow up nowadays, go to lots of places-to pep rallies, ball games, movies, dances, parades, parties, amusement parks, and even school and never go anyplace that seems important.

Regardless of how it seems, what we do in church Sunday after Sunday is one of the most important things you will ever do. It is a time when we invest in the sacred and the significant by reflecting on and committing ourselves to what is most important in time and eternity.

One of our problems is that we so complicate the Christian faith. It really consists of three things: piety, compassion, and purity. Piety is devotion to God. Compassion is reaching out in service to others. Purity is living a righteous life.

The scriptures speak of these when they say, "If any among you seems to be religious, and bridles not his tongue, but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep themselves unspotted from the world." (James 1:26-27)

I like the way Eugene Peterson translates these verses in his translation called "The Message." He writes, "Anyone who sets himself up to be 'religious' by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father is this: reaches out to the homeless and loveless in their plight and guards against corruption from the Godless world."

What's the difference between real religion and hot air religion that's just talk? Real religion is characterized by three things:

- Surrender to God
- Service to Man
- Separation from the World

Stoop To The Savior

The first true religion consists of surrender to God. James speaks of our life as "before God the Father." It is the idea that our lives are lived before Him, that He is watching us and that we must live the kind of life that "passes muster" with him. The word "muster" is a military term. It refers to the commander calling the

troops together for inspection. It's the idea that our lives are lived under the watchful eye of God and lived for his approval of "well done" my good and faithful servant.

That means that we live a life surrendered to Him. Several years ago an outstanding basketball coach at a major Christian university lost his job and ruined his reputation by forgetting this. He, like a number of other coaches, was giving money under the table to some of his poor athletes. While he had absolutely nothing to do with the tragedy that ensued, one of his athletes was murdered. When the police investigated and he was questioned about his relationship to his players he was not forthright and honest. The end result was that he resigned in disgrace and shame.

I maintained some contact with him through correspondence letting him know of my continued concern for him. He said to me in one of those candid and sacred moments, "Ambition and pride were my downfall. I was a carnal Christian. I accepted the salvation part of Christianity but not the surrender part."

There is a salvation part and there is a surrender part. We accept Jesus as Savior and we surrender to him as Lord. The first we do once and for all. The surrender part we must do again and again. And, if we forget that the devil can get to us even while we are working in a Christian environment.

Captain James A. Bailey, known as "Brit" Bailey, was a part of Stephen F. Austin's colony of early settlers to Texas. Bailey, like most of those early pioneers was fiercely independent.

When he was in his last sickness, realizing that the end was near, he said to his wife: "I never stooped to any man, and when I am in my grave I don't want it said, 'there lies old "Brit" Bailey.' Bury me so that the world may say, 'there stands Bailey' and bury me with my face

to the setting sun. I have been all of my life traveling westward and I want to face that way when I die.”

His widow, in compliance with his request, had a deep hole dug like a well, into which the coffin was lowered, feet first, facing the setting sun.” (*The Evolution of a State, or, Recollections of Old Texas Days*; by Noah Smithwick, University of Texas Press, Page 50.)

I like that! Captain Bailey wanted to be remembered as he had lived—standing up and facing the direction he had always traveled in—life-toward the setting sun. I’d like that to also be true of me in a spiritual sense. I want to go down standing up—standing up for truth and righteousness. I want to go down facing forward. Always looking to the future, forging ahead.

But, I hope old Bailey bowed to at least one man—to the Lord Jesus. To fail to “stoop” to Him is to fail in life in the highest sense, no matter how you stand or which way you face. If you don’t do that your religion is in vain.

The scriptures say that one day “...at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11).

Stand before men but stoop to the Lord Jesus, that’s the difference in true religion and hot air.

Helping One At A Time

Second, true religion consists of serving others, especially the poor and needy. John N. Buchanan spoke volumes when he said, “Nobody gets into Heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.” (*Christian Century*).

The truth is, I can care about the whole world, but I can only help one person at a time. That must always be our goal. As John writes, “But whosoever has this world’s

goods, and seeth his brother have need and shuteth up his bowels with compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" Then he adds, "My little children, let us love not in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth." (I John 3:17-18)

There are over 2,000 verses of scripture that call on us to minister to the poor and oppressed. No subject can measure up to the call for the poor. That is at the heart of our Christian calling and that's the difference between hot air and true religion.

The most radical and challenging example of this in our generation was Mother Teresa, the diminutive, Albanian nun sometimes called "the saint of the gutters" who planted her life among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India.

Her father died when she was seven, leaving her mother with three children to support. She took up sewing in order to care for her family. But in spite of her own difficulties she taught her children that giving to the poor was giving to God.

Mother Teresa said she often came home from school to a meal and found strangers at their table eating with them. When she would ask, "Who are these people?" Her mother would reply, "They are distant kinsmen." They were, in fact, just beggars her mother befriended and sought to help.

At the age of 18 she decided to dedicate her life to the service of the poor as a nun. At the age of 36 she received what she termed "a call within a call." It was a call to leave the convent and live among the poorest of the poor.

She asked the Archbishop of Calcutta for permission to work outside the convent and among the poor and not return to the shelter of the convent at night. He refused for safety reasons. Her request went all the way to the

Vatican and eventually permission was granted. So with five rupels (about \$1.00) she left the convent and found a room with an Indian family. It was a small upper room with very little furniture. The wealthy owner offered her more furniture. She declined, saying, "The fewer possessions I have, the better. I should have nothing to distract me from the poor."

She did laundry, cleaned houses, and looked after the sick and even began a school. As others joined in her work she refused to allow them to have modern conveniences like washing machines, fans, and comfortable beds. These were considered luxuries. The poor did not have them and she and her helpers would not have them either.

She went into the streets of Calcutta against the advice of her superiors arguing, "In the face of every suffering man, woman and child I see the face of Jesus." She called this, "God's distressing disguise." "When I wash the leper's wounds" she said, "I feel I am nursing the Lord himself." (*Christianity Today*, 10/27/97)

In time, the world recognized her wonderful work and awarded her the Nobel Peace Prize. When she arrived to receive the Prize, the representative who greeted her said, "The King will look forward to seeing you tomorrow evening at the banquet." She responded, "Banquet? Have them cancel the banquet and use the money to feed the poor. It will feed hundreds of poor for an entire year in Calcutta, India."

When Pope Paul VI visited India he gave her the Lincoln Continental Limousine he rode in. She auctioned it and used the money to establish an orphanage. She warned, "If we turn our back on the poor, we are turning our back on God. And at the judgment we shall be judged by what we have done for the poor."

What about you? How much of your money do you

give to the poor? I'm talking about from your budget. Can we with a clear conscience spend everything we make on ourselves and have true religion? If we do isn't our religion just hot air? And what about your church budget? How much of it goes to help the poor? Can we spend everything we take in on our own comfort and on our programs and to be true to Christ? Do we have true religion or is our religion just hot air?

There is something we can all do. "If you are not involved in any service of ministry, what excuse are you going to use? Abraham was old, Jacob was insecure, Leah was unattractive, Joseph was abused, Moses stuttered, Gideon was poor, Sampson was co-dependent, Rahab was immoral, David had an affair and all kinds of family problems, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was reluctant, Naomi was a widow, John the Baptist was eccentric to say the least, Peter was impulsive and hot tempered, Martha worried a lot, the Samaritan woman had several failed marriages, Zacchaeus was unpopular, Thomas had doubts, Paul had poor health and Timothy was timid. That's quite a variety of misfits, but God used each of them in His service. And he will use you too if you will stop making excuses." (*The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren, Lifeway Press, Page 233)

So, find a place of service. Volunteer to serve in a soup kitchen. Work with the Salvation Army. Deliver Meals on Wheels. Serve as a volunteer at Hospice. Find a place or make a place of service. Form a group of repair men and make yourself available to the widows in your church or in the community. Spend one Saturday a month repairing leaking plumbing, changing light bulbs, trimming limbs, cleaning gutters, adjusting doors, decorating for the holidays, or whatever may need to be done for people who can't do those things for themselves.

We need to be ministering to the helpless and the

hopeless. That's where Jesus would be. He wouldn't be content to just come week after week and sit in a comfortable pew. He would be among the needy and so should we. That's at the heart of true religion.

It is service as much as anything that marks the difference between true religion and hot air.

The scriptures sum up the life of Jesus by saying, "He went about doing good." We, therefore, cannot be content just to go about. We must reach out to the poor, needy, lonely, hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, sick around us and minister to them in His name otherwise our religion is just hot air. And, as Mother Teresa admonished us, "If you do good, do it without a fuss."

Moral Men In An Immoral World

Third, we must live a life of separation from the world. In the NBC movie "Uprising" (November 4, 2001) a Polish Jewish man raised a question to a Jewish man who had gone to work for the Nazis, "Can a moral man keep his morality in an immoral world?" That's a question for us to ponder. But you won't do it accidentally. It will be done by steadfast resolve and determined actions.

Billy Graham is arguably the most influential religious leader of our time and one of the most respected men in the world. He served as a pastor and counselor to 10 presidents, everyone from Dwight Eisenhower to George W. Bush. He has lived under public scrutiny for over 60 years and there has never been a hint of impropriety. But it was not by accident. He and his team were conducting a revival in Modesto, CA, when they realized many evangelists lose their ministry through indiscretions. The team got together and drew up what they call "the Modesto Manifesto." They agreed on four things:

- Money: Many evangelists got into trouble with money so they decided to show financial accountability. They would select an independent committee to handle all finances. In time Graham decided he should go on a salary to avoid the “money-grabbing evangelists” image that was so prevalent.
- Women: They would never be alone with a woman other than their wife. This would help them avoid temptation and would protect them from criticism by the media.
- Criticism: They would never be critical of local pastors or their churches.
- Integrity: They would never falsify publicity or exaggerate the size of their crowds. They would let the local media report those things and tell the story as they saw it.

Whatever is necessary for us to do to keep ourselves pure we must do it. We can and must live a moral life in an immoral world. But it takes conscious effort and safeguards. The challenge is to keep ourselves pure in a world of alcoholism and illegal drugs, suggestive advertisements, vulgar language, internet pornography, sexual promiscuity, dirty movies, and business and political greed and dishonesty. That’s one of the differences between true religion and hot air.

Dave Freeman was co-author of “100 Things to do Before You Die,” that inspired readers and imitators. He said in the introduction, “Life is a short journey. Make sure you fill it with the most fun and you visit all the coolest places before you pack those bags the very last time.”

Unfortunately Mr. Freeman died at the age of 47 after hitting his head on something at his home. According to his relatives he visited only half of the places on his

list before he died. They said, “He simply didn’t have enough days.”

We will all run out of days sooner or later. So I encourage you to make lists and to plan for the future. But the future is uncertain. Make sure you plan for that one sure event-death. And that you live your life of surrender to God, service to others, and separation from the world. Otherwise your religion is nothing but hot air.

Chapter 8

Our Ultimate Accountability

Romans 14:10-12

While visiting Hong Kong several years ago I asked our guide about his religious faith. He replied, "I am a free thinker." I asked Dawn Gouslin, a missionary to Hong Kong who had once been a member of our church, what he meant by that. She said, "It means he has rejected the gods of his ancestors and now wants to be the god of his own life."

We have become a nation of free thinkers in America. We have elbowed God from the center of our lives and have taken over ourselves. In so doing, we have lost our moral and spiritual compass. We no longer know or at least can agree on what is right and what is wrong, or if there is such a thing anymore.

You have heard the statement, "With God all things are possible." I saw a bumper sticker recently that said, "Without God all things are permissible." So the former governor of New York State who resigned after it was revealed that he was consorting with high-priced prostitutes, has become the symbol of our age. He not only broke the law of man and God, but also violated a public trust and dishonored his oath of office. But in his brief statement he simply said that he failed to live up to a standard he set for himself as if right and wrong are determined by an individual's standards for himself – or herself.

The end result of this kind of thinking is corporate greed, government corruption, people sleeping around, children out of wedlock, abortion on demand, same sex marriage, easy divorce, spousal abuse, child pornography (really all pornography), priests molesting altar boys, prisons with revolving doors, and celebrities writing tell-all books bragging about things they ought to blush about (Jeremiah 6:15, 8:12). Anything to sell a book and to make a buck.

Did we really expect it to be any different? As C. S. Lewis wrote, "We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst."

Even the church has joined in this charade. Reinhold Niebuhr criticized modern theology that preaches "a God without wrath bringing men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the administration of a Christ without a cross." (*The Big Small Church* by David Ray, p. 18)

We need today to return to the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we return to Him we will rediscover guiding principles for our moral and ethical behavior.

Our generation needs to hear that right is right because God said so, and wrong is wrong because God said so. And if a thing was wrong yesterday it is wrong today, and it will be wrong tomorrow and if the world shall last a thousand years it will still be wrong. And if a thing was right yesterday it is right today, and when the stars in the heavens are but cinders in eternity it will still be right. It doesn't matter what Hollywood says, what athletes do, what laws politicians pass, what judges rule, what the polls show, or what you think. Right and wrong depend on eternal principles given to us by the Almighty.

That's the truth of scripture (Romans 14:10-12). The background to these verses is the church in conflict. In the Old Testament certain foods were forbidden and should not be eaten and certain feast days were holy and should be observed. Some in the Roman Church felt that these laws were still binding. They had not been completely emancipated from these practices.

Others had grasped the principle that acceptance of God depended on faith alone and under the New Covenant these dietary laws and special days had passed away and were no longer necessary. To them all foods and drinks were clean and every day was a feast day, a holy day. They felt the Lord had made that clear in revelation to Simon Peter and his church (Acts 10:15).

But these differences were threatening to divide the church. Those who observed the old dietary laws and feast days were being called legalists, and they who ignored them were being called liberals. Paul wrote to tell them to stop judging and criticizing one another but rather to remember that Jesus was lord and master and we are all his servants (v. 8), and no man has a right to criticize another's servant.

If I go into a department store and I don't like the way the clerks are doing their work, I have no right to correct them. That's the responsibility of their boss. If I visit a friend's home and don't like the way their maid is cleaning the house it's not my place to correct her. That responsibility belongs to the master of the house. Paul's argument is that we are all the Lord's servants, He is the master, and no man has the right to criticize another person's servants. We have no right to judge one another in these matters. That right belongs to God. He is the judge and we are the judged.

In passing, Paul gives some practical advice concerning these questionable practices. First, each person must

decide for himself about these things (v. 5). He is not saying that we are the sole judge of right and wrong in morals. He is in no way implying that anything we think is okay is okay and that all morals are personal decisions. That idea is the furthest from Paul's mind. He is speaking of things that are not sinful in themselves. We are not free to do as we please. We all affect one another and should consider our responsibility to our brothers.

Second, we must be true to our own convictions. If you believe that a thing is wrong, it is wrong to you. If you violate your conscience you're acting in a rebellious spirit (v. 14).

Third, we should respect one another's honest convictions and not be a stumbling block to them. If Christ gave his life for your brother, can't you give up a prescribed food for that brother? It would be monstrous to destroy God's church for the sake of food or drink (v. 15). Cherish your own convictions but don't impose them on another. Respect the other person's right to differ and still be a Christian.

Finally, and above all, do not judge/criticize one another. We are not to judge. We are the judged. I am not your judge. You are not mine. We don't have that right. That right belongs to God. Our ultimate accountability is to him.

There are three things the apostle underscores about our ultimate accountability to God:

- It is as sure as God is.
- It is as broad as humanity is.
- It is as personal as every individual is.

Dusting for Fingerprints

First, our accountability is as sure as God is. Paul writes, "For it is written, as I live saith the Lord, every

knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God" (v. 11).

The phrase "it is written" points to something God has already said in scripture. It always refers to an Old Testament quote. That phrase is found over one hundred times in the New Testament. In this instance it refers back to Isaiah 45:3.

In that passage the Lord has said, "I have sworn by myself that every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess." In this verse God is taking an oath. When we take an oath we take it on the highest authority we know. We put our hand on the Bible and we swear. If we really want to confirm something we say, "I swear on a stack of Bibles." In a court of law we say, "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God."

But who does God swear by? There is none higher than he. So he swears by himself. He needs no other authority. What does he swear? That every knee will bow and every tongue will confess him.

This statement is made in the context of God's offer of salvation. He has called upon Israel to turn from gods of wood and stone that cannot hear and cannot save and "look unto me, and be ye saved all the ends of the earth for I am God, and there is none else" (Isaiah 45:20-22).

But lest they get so caught up in God's offer of salvation, in his love and forgiveness that they forget his judgment, he reminds them and us that one day every knee will bow and tongue will confess. Judgment flows from the heart of God as surely as grace does.

The phrase "as I live" literally means "as surely as I live" every knee will bow and every tongue will confess. How sure are we that God lives? You might be surprised to know that the Bible never tries to prove the existence of God. And you might think the Bible is full of verses

dealing with atheism, but not so. The Bible opens with the affirmation, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". Thereafter the non-existence of God is never considered. The Lord makes only one statement about atheism and it is repeated twice, "The fool has said in his heart there is no God" (Psalm 14:1; 53:1).

Why is this? Why does God call atheists fools and then dismiss them from the pages of scripture? It is because God is self-evident. After all, we have a universe on our hands – the sun, the moon, stars, planets, and the earth. Where did they come from? There are only two choices. Either the universe made itself or someone else made it. Do you know of anything else that made itself?

I have on my wrist a watch. If you ask me, "Where did it come from?" I would reply "It was a gift from the Annuity Board. It has their emblem on it." Then if you asked, "Where did the Annuity Board get it?" I would reply, "I suppose they got it from a jewelry company." And if you asked, "Where did the jewelry company get it?" I would reply, "They bought it from the Seiko company." Then if you should ask, trying to get to the first cause, "Where did they get it?" I could give you one of two answers. I could say, "There was a skilled craftsman in the Seiko factory who made this watch." Or I could say to you, "There was an explosion in the Seiko factory and when the smoke had cleared and the dust had been brushed away, this watch and thousands of others just like it appeared. Nobody made it. It made itself." Now, which explanation would you believe? Which answer sounds most plausible?

Well, our universe is far more vast and complex and precise than this watch could ever be. In fact the movement of the stars and the planets are so exact that we set our watches by their movements. And, everything in

our world has been supplied in such a way that every need we have is met. Do you expect me to believe that all of that happened by accident do you? I am not that foolish.

The scriptures say, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork." (Psalm 19:1) As Barbara Brown Taylor said, "Sometimes the work of God's hand is so evident that you can see it a mile away and sometimes you have to dust for a fingerprint." (*Gospel Medicine*, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995, p. 120)

An atheist complained to a friend that Christians have their special holidays such as Christmas and Easter and Jews celebrate their national holidays such as Passover and Yom Kippur. "But we atheists," he said, "have no recognized national holiday. It's unfair discrimination."

To which his friend replied, "Why don't you celebrate April 1?" I don't mean to make fun of atheists because many are sincere in their disbelief, but the fact is God said, "The fool has said in his heart there is no God."

No Excused Absences

Second, our accountability is as broad as humanity is. "Every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess..." Many now dead never confessed Christ, but death does not nullify that. There will be no exceptions and there will be no excused absences. One day, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess. That's everybody.

The issues of eternity are settled in this life and the accounting will take place in the next. Pharaoh died without bowing before God but he will. The Pharisees died without confessing Christ, but they will. Pilate died without bowing his knee or confessing with his lips the

Lord Jesus, but he will. Mohammed, Hitler, and Stalin all died without bowing or confessing, but they will.

No person will be excused because God's law is written into our hearts (Romans. 2:15-16). Do you doubt that? If so let someone wrong you and you immediately say, "That's not fair." When you say that you are appealing to a standard that you believe is universally recognized. "You lied to me, that's not fair." "You stole from me, that's not fair." "You were unfaithful to me, that's unfair." These are universally accepted standards that are written into the heart of man. So the scriptures say that we shall be judged by our words (Matt. 12:36-37), by our acts (Hebrews 6:10, Matt. 10:42), by our knowledge (Luke 12:48), by our opportunities (Matt 11:21-22, 2 Peter 2:21), by our secrets and by our motives (1 Corinthians 4:1-5).

Every knee and every tongue means everybody. Our accountability is as broad as humanity is.

What Happens in Vegas Stays in Vegas

Third, our accountability is as personal as each individual is. "Every one shall give an account of himself to God" (v.12).

The Greek word translated account is logos. It means "to speak something." One day we shall stand before the Lord and we shall have to make a defense for ourselves. In the American judicial system a person cannot be compelled to testify against himself/herself. They can plead the Fifth Amendment. But in the court of eternity there is no provision for the Fifth Amendment. We must all give an account of ourselves to God.

Sometime ago somebody sent me a cartoon of two men sitting in Hell and one said to the other, "I was under the impression that what happened in Vegas stayed

in Vegas.” The fact is, it won’t stay there. It’s going all the way to the throne of God because you will have to tell it yourself.

And, in the judgment everyone will speak for himself. I can’t speak for you. You can’t speak for me. There is only one exception that I know of. The pastor must give an account for the way he led his congregation (Heb. 13:17). It is a solemn thought to realize that I must give an account for what I have preached and taught to my people, how I have lived before them, and how I have treated them.

Sometimes people escape judgment on the merits of others. Perhaps they have an influential parent or friend who can speak for them and they can escape a punishment on the merits of someone else. I pastored in Taylor, Texas years ago. The son of the mayor was habitually getting speeding tickets from the police. When they would stop him and write him a ticket, he would tear it up and throw it at their feet and drive away. His father was the mayor, and the police chief and the police force worked for the mayor and the city council. He escaped judgment on the merits of his father.

But, in God’s judgment we will stand alone. We will stand before God in the awful loneliness of our souls. We can take nothing and no one with us. Our money, our prominence, our power, our influence, our friends, our family name will be of no consequence.

In that day, our only hope will be in Jesus Christ. Duke McCall, former president of Southern Seminary, former executive director of the Southern Baptist Convention, former president of the Baptist World Alliance, tells that his father served as city judge in Memphis, Tennessee. When Duke was about sixteen years old he was arrested for speeding. He was going thirty mph in a twenty mph speed zone. His father’s policy was to

charge \$2 a mile or two days in jail for every mile over the speed limit. He was going 10 mph over the speed limit, so his fine would be \$20 or twenty days in jail.

When he was taken before his father Duke said, "Dad gave no indication that he recognized me when I appeared in his courtroom – just another case: 'Guilty or not guilty?' 'Guilty,' I answered. 'Thirty miles an hour in a twenty mile zone?' 'Yes sir.' 'Fine twenty dollars or twenty days.' All that was just routine. I stood there on one foot and then the other because there wasn't anything for me to do but go to jail. Finally he said, 'Come to the bench.' Then he gave me twenty dollars and said, 'Go pay your fine.'" (*Oral History*, Duke McCall, p. 21)

That's a beautiful picture of how it will be for us on the judgment day. The scriptures say, "My little children these write I to you, that you sin not, and if any man sin, we have an advocate (a lawyer, a defense attorney) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation (covering) for our sin..." (1 John 2:1-2) On that solemn day when we stand before God, Jesus will be with us and he will say, "Father, I represent the accused. He is guilty by his own admission, but I paid the price for him on Calvary and he should go free." And in the court of eternity, God will rap on his desk and say, "Penalty paid, you are free to go."

We are ultimately accountable to God. Our accountability is as sure as God is. It is as broad as humanity is. It is as personal as the individual is. But redemption has been provided through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 9

Learning to Let Go

Matthew 6:19-24

How do you catch a monkey in a jungle? I read in the paper several years ago how it was once done among the natives in certain areas. They would drill a hole in a coconut and put food inside. The hole must be large enough for the monkey to get his hand in, but small enough that he cannot get it once he grabs the food.

A chain fastens the coconut to a coconut tree. Once the monkey grabs the food, he is stuck. Refusing to let the food go, he is in bondage to the coconut. Now, all you have to do is come and collect the monkey's food who by their own choice are bound.

This is a parable for all who grab things and can't let go of them: food, alcohol, drugs, sex, pornography, television, tobacco, and especially money. If we aren't careful, we start out in life holding things and they wind up holding us. We start out possessing them and they possess us. This is especially true about material things.

To live nobly, we must learn to let go.

Learning to let go is no side issue in the Bible. There are 164 verses in the New Testament that use the word "money." Most of them are warning us against materialism, i.e., belief that money and possessions are the supreme value in life. And, 15% of everything Christ said relates to this topic. He had more to say about money than he said about heaven and hell combined.

Why all of these warnings?

- Wealth can cause us to forget God (Deuteronomy 6:10-12; 8:11-18). Money has the greatest potential to replace God in our hearts. I need to hear the message again and again, because I drift into a mindset as certainly as rain falls to the ground and flames go up. I am wired by nature to love the same toys the world loves. I start to fit in. I start to love what others love. I start to call earth “home.” Before you know it, my luxuries have become needs, and I am using my money just the way unbelievers do.
- Wealth can make us proud and self-sufficient. Paul said to Timothy, “Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they may be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, when they may lay hold to eternal life.” (I Timothy 6:17-19)
- Wealth can choke out the gospel. In the parable of the sower, Jesus spoke of the gospel seed that fell among the thorns, and the thorns choked out the young plants. The thorns he identified as the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. (Mark 4:19)

It is a danger, not just to the individual, but also to churches. Warren Bailey left the St. Mary’s United Methodist Church of St. Mary’s, Georgia, \$60 million. After a lot of discussion, the 750-member congregation decided to give the money away. They were afraid it would result in in-fighting over how to spend the money,

the collection plates would dry up because people would assume the church was wealthy, and the church would become distracted from its mission (*Tyler Morning Telegraph*, 12/9/96).

And at the height of his popularity and prosperity, Jim Baker was building a massive empire of bricks and mortar. One of his friends warned him, "Jim, you are committing fornication with bricks and mortar."

After years of prison Bible study, Baker was sickened to realize that he has been doing just the opposite of Jesus' words by teaching people to fall in love with money. (*Christianity Today*, Dec. 9, 1996)

One of the clearest teachings on this subject is what Jesus said to us in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:19-24). He told us not to lay up for ourselves treasures on earth that can disintegrate or be stolen, but rather to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven where they are secure forever.

Then he reminds us that "the eye is the lamp of the body and if the eye be single, the whole body is full of light. But if your eye is evil, then the whole body is full of darkness." The word "single" means to twine, plait, twist together. It is the idea of a single focus. He is saying to us that if we focus on heavenly things we will be able to see the earth, people and things clearly. But if we focus on the earth, then our vision of both heaven and earth will be obscured. It will be distorted.

There is nothing like generosity to give us a clear view of people and things. There is nothing like greed and selfishness to give us a blurred, distorted view of life.

Then Jesus warns, "No man can serve two masters, either he will hate the one and love the other, cling to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

The word "mammon" is Aramaic for riches or mate-

rial possessions. Jesus personifies materialism by calling it a master a man serves. Things can dominate our lives so that we became a slave to them. We can begin to serve them instead of letting them serve us.

Nothing separates us from God and binds us to this world like material possessions. And the only way to break the chain that binds us is to learn to let go. Why do we need to learn to let go?

- It is the way to true riches.
- It is the way to spiritual maturity.
- It is the way to lasting happiness.

How Much In That Direction?

First, letting go is the way to security, the way to true riches. Jesus warned us about “the deceitfulness of riches.” Wealth has the ability to create an illusion for us.

For one thing, it can create the illusion of happiness. We think if we only had money, we would really be happy. It creates the illusion of importance. It makes us think we are more important than we are. People who have money are usually waited on and catered to, and they often begin to think that it is an entitlement. They expect it from waitresses and clerks, and if they don’t get special attention, they get a bit snippy. It’s an illusion that we are more important than we are. And, wealth can create the illusion of security. But it is a false security.

Jesus said, “Lay not up for yourself treasures on earth where moth and rust doth corrupt and thieves do break through and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moths nor rust doth corrupt and thieves do not break through and steal.”

Pat Neff, who was one-time governor of Texas and later president of Baylor University, spoke to the South-

ern Baptist Convention in Florida during his presidency. He said, "All of my life I've heard preachers tell their congregation to lay up treasures in heaven, but none of them ever told me how to get my treasure into heaven. I had to figure it out for myself. The only way to get our treasures into heaven is to put them into something that is going to heaven. Cattle, land, houses, stocks and bonds, all have no life and are not going to heaven. Only men and women, boys and girls, are going to heaven. Therefore, if I am going to lay up for myself treasures in heaven, I've got to put them into work in the mighty task of redeeming souls that will be fit for heaven."

George W. Truett, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas for many years, was visiting a wealthy West Texas rancher on one occasion. After they had dined, the rancher said, "Come, walk with me, out across my land."

They walked to the hillside near his home, and he began to talk about his best land holdings. He said, "Look yonder to the north as far as you can see. I own all of that land." Then he turned to the east and said, "Look as far as you can see in that direction I own all of that land."

He then turned to the south and pointed and said, "As far as you can see in that direction; I own all that land."

Then he turned to the west and he said once again, "As far as you can see in the west; I own all that land. Look in any direction you want, north, east, south, west, as far as you can see; all that land belongs to me."

There was a long pause and then supposedly Truett turned and pointed up to heaven and said, "Yes, but how much do you own in that direction?"

I simply remind you that no man is a fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot

lose. The way to real security is to let go.

Net Worth and Self Worth

Second, letting go is the way to maturity. Dr. Ernest Campbell, former pastor of New York's Riverside Church, in a sermon to his congregation, made the following statement:

"Many people in this church are in the middle-income bracket. They got there not by dropping down from a higher bracket, but by coming up from a lower. One of the hardest things to learn when you come up is how to let go."

"I grew up in the Depression years. I can recall my mother giving us those little envelopes every Sunday—five cents in one side and one cent in the other. It was about all we could spare at that time. When you grow up poor like that, you become imbued with what has been called 'the ethic of privation.' You feel you had better hold onto what you have."

"The pity is that some have not matured. We are still in the 'taking-in stage' and think that's all there is to the Christian life."

"To be young is to study in schools you did not build. To be mature is to build schools in which you will not study."

"To be young is to swim in pools you did not dig. To be mature is to dig pools in which you will not swim."

"To be young is to sit under trees you did not plant. To be mature is to plant trees under which you will not sit."

"To be young is to dance to music you did not write. To be mature is to write music to which you will not dance to."

"To be young is to benefit from a church you did not

make. To be mature is to make a church from which you will not benefit.”

Bernice Washington, a businesswoman, author, and motivational speaker was featured in the “High Profile” section of the Dallas Morning News several years ago. She is the highest-ranking woman of color in the international pharmaceutical company, Bayer Diagnostics. In her book, *How to Ride Thunder and Catch Lightning: Success Principles from a Father to His Daughter*, she describes the life of her share-cropper father James Jones as he worked in the Louisiana cotton fields as “hard-scabbed.”

Her father told his five children that he was going to give them an opportunity to have a better life than his. He would send his one of them to college once or get them out of jail once.

She said he was the absolute head of our household. He insisted that if God was good enough to allow us to live together as a family, we should spend the rest of our lives showing gratitude. Then she said that he taught her many great lessons in life:

- He taught her to use things and value people.
- He taught her “you are no better than anyone else and no one is better than you.”
- He taught her to reach for the stars, stand tall, and when hurricanes and tornadoes came to look for the best in life.
- But perhaps the greatest lesson came when one of her classmates at her all-black school made her aware of a shocking discovery. She was, at the time, a seventh grader. “Bernice, you are poor,” her classmate told her, “Your mama is poor, and you sisters and brothers are poor, your entire family is poor.”

She immediately burst into tears and couldn’t be

calmed until her father hugged her and passed onto her one of his many wise sayings that served as a cornerstone of her motivational lectures.

“Baby,” he said, “we’re not poor. We just don’t have any money.”

She said that was a deciding moment in her life. Her definition of poor was totally different after that.

Maybe we need to have a more mature definition of poverty and riches. There is more than one way to be rich. A person can be rich in good works, rich in friendships, rich in memories. There is difference in net worth and self worth.

The truth is, as Jay Campbell White, Christian missionary leader, said, “If a man is growing large in wealth, nothing but constant giving can keep him from growing small in soul.”

Everything But Happiness

Third, letting go is the way to happiness. I spoke early of the deceitfulness of riches. It can make you think it can bring happiness to your life. But, it can’t. It’s been said that for money you can have everything, but you cannot. You can buy food, but not an appetite; medicine, but not health; knowledge, but not wisdom; glitter, but not beauty; fun, but not joy; acquaintances, but not friends; servants, but not faithfulness; leisure, but not peace. You can have the husk of everything for money, but not the kernel.

That’s why Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” The apostle Paul quoted that as he explained his ministry to the Ephesian elders. He pointed out that in his time with them he had coveted no man’s gold, silver, or clothing. He had paid his own expenses and the expenses of those who worked with him. And

he showed them how they should not forget the poor. Then he quoted the words of Jesus that are not found in the gospels, "There is more happiness in giving than there is in receiving."

Doris Duke, New York socialite and heir to the American Tobacco Company fortune, was featured in a television miniseries several years ago.

Duke University is named after her grandfather, and her family has been a benefactor of that school. She was left \$100 million when she was 13 years old. It grew to \$1 billion by her death in 1993.

Lauren Bacall who played Doris Duke in the series said, "She had all the money she needed but none of what she really wanted—love." She was always seeking for something she couldn't find. People always think money is the answer to everything. But it is one of the most destructive forces there is. It has ruined many a relationship and many a life.

I think that is why John A. Jackson who left an estimated \$272 million to the University of Texas, one of the largest in the university's history, said that he believed that the value of money was not in collecting it but in giving it away (*Dallas Morning News*, 9/25/03).

John had his values in order. He drove a 17-year-old car and ate at Wendy's and Subway. And Warren Bennett who has a net worth of \$36 billion agrees. He lives in the same house he bought in 1958 for \$31,500.

It is not a sin to have wealth but it does bring enormous responsibility. By the way, I think that Jesus teaching on giving up all must mean giving over everything. People with money are not so much to be envied as prayed for. At the end of your life, you will be evaluated and rewarded according to how you handle what God has entrusted to you—that includes money. That's why we need to learn to let go.

Rudyard Kipling was once speaking to a group of students at McGill University in Montreal. He warned them against being too concerned with money, position, and personal glory; thereby missing the deeper satisfaction which life always has to offer. He said, "Someday you will meet a person who cares for none of those things. Then you will know how poor you are."

I simply remind you that the Lord Jesus, who though he was rich yet for our sake became poor, that we through his poverty might become rich (II Corinthians 8:9).

He let go for us. Now we need to let go for him. Letting go is the way to security, to maturity, and to lasting happiness.

Chapter 10

Blueprint for Right Living

Titus 2:1-8

Lord Chesterfield said, “We are in truth more than half of what we are by imitation. The great point is to choose good models and study them with care.”

That’s the emphasis of the apostle Paul when he encourages Titus to show himself as a “pattern” of good works. The word pattern means an example, a model, a mentor.

The word “pattern” is used only in one other place in the New Testament. There the Lord tells Moses that he should build the tabernacle according to the “pattern” that he was given on Mount Sinai (Hebrews 8:5). In this instance the word means “blueprint.”

So the apostle Paul is encouraging Titus to be a blueprint, a human blueprint in holy living. This counsel is given in the context of the Christian home. He addresses in the preceding verses four different age groups and four different classes of people who would make up an ordinary home in that day – aged men, aged women, young women and young men. His advice is that they be examples, models, mentors of right living—that they be human blueprints.

This is no isolated teaching of the scriptures. The apostle Paul claimed that he was the chief of sinners. However, he said he obtained mercy from the Lord that

the Lord might show his mercy and patience as a “pattern” (a different Greek word, but the same idea) to all who should hereafter believe in him for everlasting life (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

Nor did he hesitate to hold himself up as a blueprint for holy living. He writes to the church at Philippi to say “the things that you have learned, received, heard and seen of me, do” (Philippians 4:9).

He encouraged Timothy to be an example of a believer in his words, manner of life, love, spirit, faith, and purity (1 Timothy 4:12). And James points to the prophets of the Old Testament as examples of staying faithful to God in the midst of affliction (James 5:10).

The challenge of this message is for us to either be a blueprint for right living or to find one that we can imitate. It is to either be a mentor or find a mentor for our lives. I can safely say that at least half of what my life is today is because of human blueprints God brought into my life. People like Elmer Nelson, who coached our boys’ softball team and basketball team in the church league when I was growing up in Port Arthur. He didn’t know much about either sport but he loved the boys and spent time with them. People like Pete Pence, my high school basketball coach, who took a special interest in me. Both of them followed me well into my fifties. People like Charles Tope, an older, more mature pastor who took me under his wing when I was a young pastor and taught me much about preaching and ministering effectively. People like Fred Ellis, a deacon at the church who encouraged me.

The only thing necessary to being a good mentor is to have a shared interest and to spend time with the individual. I come back again to the thesis of the sermon – either be a mentor or find one. Either be a blueprint for right living or find one to copy.

In this larger passage the apostle Paul sets out what it means to be a blueprint for right living. There are four things;

- Live a disciplined life.
- Keep a healthy faith.
- Let your love grow.
- Stay faithful as long as you live.

It Will Affect You Eternally

First, to be a blueprint for right living you need to live a disciplined life. Paul's first advice to aged men is that they be "sober, grave and temperate..." The Greek word translated "sober" literally means to be sober in contradistinction to over-indulgence to wine. The word "grave" means to take life seriously, to live life in the light of eternity, with an awareness that God sees us. The word "temperate" means to live in moderation, to live a life of self control—to govern your instincts and passions.

When he writes advice to young men he simply says that they should be "sober-minded." That is the same Greek word that is translated "temperate" in the earlier verse. The four words together suggest that we are to practice self restraint, to live a disciplined and self-controlled life.

They mean that we are to let our lives be governed by reason, convictions and moral restraint and not by our passions, appetites, desires or peer pressure.

This principle is as broad as life itself. It refers to alcohol, drugs, pornography, an uncontrolled temper, or an unruly tongue—to any addiction. It suggests that we are to practice self restraint. Our lives are not to be governed by our instincts or our passions or our appetites but brought under the control of the Lord.

I want you to think about this truth in particular as it relates to the use of alcohol. This principle is as broad as life itself, but in each of these four age groups he points directly to the use of alcohol as a problem.

Alcoholism is one of, if not the, major health and social and moral problem of America today. You don't have to ask the minister about that. Ask your physician. Ask law enforcement officials. Ask your insurance agent. Almost without exception they will say that alcoholism is the number 1 major health, social and moral problem in our country.

Recently I visited with our local sheriff. Our city was facing a \$60,000,000 bond issue to build a new jail. He said eighty percent of the people in jail were there due to alcohol or drug related crimes. In dollars and cents that means that \$48,000,000 of that bond issue was alcohol related. But that isn't half the picture. In addition to building the building it must be maintained and staffed. And what about the cost of policemen to apprehend the criminals, the court system to try them, the probation officers to supervise them, and the insurance companies to cover the cost of automobile accidents and health problems that stem from its use.

It is a problem for every age group – the aged men, older women, young men, and young women. Because of that I say to you without the slightest hesitancy that I recommend total abstinence. For your sake, for you family's sake, for society's sake, for God's sake leave alcohol and drugs alone.

P. T. Barnum, the entertainer and circus owner, was at one time a heavy drinker. One day he heard a sermon on temperance and decided to become a total abstainer. Not only did he become a total abstainer, he took to the platform and began to speak against alcohol. On one occasion he was interrupted by a heckler who said to him,

“I want to know, how does alcohol affect us – internally or externally?”

And his reply was, “It affects us eternally.” (*The Famous Showman: The Life and Times of P.T. Barnum*, 157-158). Alcohol affects you internally. It affects you externally. But it also affects you eternally. The Bible is clear, “No drunkard shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

But beyond that, drunkenness robs society and God of a useful citizen who rather than adding to life takes away from it. Rather than building a better community, it tears it down.

An old Ann Landers article puts it this way:

We drank for joy and we became miserable.

We drank for sociability and we became argumentative.

We drank for sophistication and we became obnoxious.

We drank for friendship and we made enemies.

We drank for sleep and we awakened exhausted.

We drank for strength and we felt weak.

We drank to feel exhilaration and we ended up depressed.

We drank for medical purposes and we acquired health problems.

We drank to get calm and we ended up with the shakes.

We drank for confidence and we became afraid.

We drank to make conversation flow easily and the words came out slurred and incoherent.

We drank to diminish our problems and we saw them multiply.

We drank to feel heavenly and we felt like the devil.

We drank to cope with life and invited death.

I do not think I am overstating the seriousness of the problem at all when I encourage you, admonish you for the sake of eternity to live a disciplined and self controlled life. And that includes living without alcohol.

Deepen Not Diminish

Second, to be a blueprint for right living you need to keep a healthy faith. The word the apostle Paul uses is "sound." We used to use the phrase "sound as a dollar" meaning that dollar was strong and healthy. We can't use that word in relationship to our U.S. dollar anymore. But it does still apply to faith.

The passing of the years and the experiences of life ought to deepen our faith in God. Far from taking away from faith, they often make our faith even stronger. The years must teach us, not to trust God less, but to trust him the more.

But, sometimes what happens to us and what happens to others around us shakes our faith in God. It diminishes it rather than deepens it.

Then too, sometimes when the children are grown and gone we feel that we no longer need the church or Sunday School as much as we once did. Worship takes second place to other things in our lives. But if we're going to be a blueprint for right living then we need a faith that is healthy and strong as long as we live.

The Psalmist wrote, "O God, you have taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works. Now also when I am old and gray headed, O God, forsake me not; until I have showed your strength to this generation and your power to everyone that is to come" (Psalm 71:17-18).

The Psalmist had walked through the years and in his old age he had not lost his enthusiasm about sharing with the younger generation the wonderful things

God had done in his life and his faithfulness through the years.

The need for parents and grandparents to do that was expressed beautifully in the poem "Daddy Had a Little Boy".

*Daddy had a little boy,
His soul was white as snow;
He never went to Sunday School,
Cause daddy didn't go.*

*He never heard the word of God,
That thrills the childish mind...
While other children went to class
This child was left behind.*

*As he grew from babe to youth,
Dad saw to his dismay,
A soul that once was snowy white,
Become a dingy gray.*

*Dad even started back to church,
And Bible study too,
He begged and begged the pastor,
Isn't there a thing you can do?*

*The preacher tried and tried,
And said, "We're just too far behind;
I tried to tell you years ago,
But you paid me no mind.*

*And so another soul was lost,
That once was white as snow:
Sunday School would have helped,
But daddy wouldn't go.*

If God has given us children, and grandchildren, he has given us the opportunity and the responsibility to lay before them the blueprint of right living. That involves a growing faith that is deeply rooted in our walk with God and in our faithfulness to worship, Bible study, and prayer.

Don't Make the Christians Mad

Third, if we are to be a blueprint for right living we need to let our love grow. The Greek word for love used here is *agape*, God's kind of love. We are to let God's kind of love flow, show, glow, and grow in our lives.

It may well be that the greatest danger in getting old is that we will drift into being critical, negative and fault-finding. That sympathy and kindness will fade from our lives and we will become more and more intolerant of others.

Sometimes the years can take kindness and sympathy away and we come to the place where we resent new thoughts and resist every new idea and venture. The opposite ought to be true. The passing of years ought to cause us to have an increased tolerance and sympathy for the views and the mistakes of others. My constant prayer is, "Lord, don't let me become a grumpy old man." It has happened before and it could well happen again.

The passing of the years ought to cause us to grow sweeter, kinder, gentler in our dealings with all people.

I had a friend who was having trouble in his church and was on the verge of being fired. He came to me one day to pour out his heart of frustration.

He said he had a man in his church whose mother claimed to be a Christian but his father was not. They had through the years continual strife in their marriage.

She was forever critical, complaining, carping about something. The father said to his son one day, "Son, don't ever make those Christians mad at you."

Then my pastor friend said to me, "Paul, that was my mistake. I made the Christians mad."

What a tragedy and what an indictment. The older we grow, the sweeter we ought to be. If we walk with Christ and our relationship is not making us kinder, gentler, sweeter then there is something wrong with our relationship.

Quarter Horses or Plow Horses

Finally, if we're going to be a blueprint for right living we need to be faithful all of our life. The word Paul uses in this admonition is "patience." It literally means "to remain under, to stay faithful, to endure." It is that strength of character that causes a person to stay in there, to stay at their post, to carry out their duty to the end.

There is no substitute for faithfulness if you're going to be a blueprint for right living. As we grow older our bodies grow weaker but our faith ought to grow stronger. The apostle Paul wrote, "Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). That ought to be true of all of us. The years can diminish our physical stamina but they ought not to affect our spiritual stamina.

The years ought to temper a man like steel, so that he can bear more and more and emerge more and more the conqueror over life. In the nature of things we must grow weaker in body, but in the divine nature of things we should grow even stronger in the faith which can endure the slings and arrows of life, and not fail.

An old cowboy, a deacon in his church, was helping his new pastor get acquainted with the community.

Leaving one home where the couple had been exceptionally zealous, the young pastor remarked that the family promised to be a great help in the program of the church. The old cowboy commented wisely, "Yes, preacher, they are fine folks and good quarter horse Christians."

"Quarter horse Christians? What sort is that?" the pastor enquired.

"A quarter can move mighty fast for a quarter of a mile but after that he just ain't much good in a race. There are a lot of church members like that," said the cowboy.

That's a problem with a lot of churches. People start well but fizzle before the finish.

Then the old cow poke said, "What we really need in our church are some plow horse Christians. I mean the kind you can hook up to plow early in the morning and they stay at the task all day long. Then, when the sun is going down in the evening and the day's work is done they are still pulling, still doing their job."

Now plow horses don't get nearly as much attention as a quarter horse. But in the long haul they get the work done. And in the work of God that's what we need, more plow horse Christians and fewer quarter horse Christians.

Well, that's the challenge before us, either be a blueprint for right living or find a blueprint. In the words of the apostle, "In all things show yourself to be a blueprint of good works..."

Chapter 11

The Tragedy of Unbelief

Mark 6:1-6

The saddest verses in all the Bible are these, “And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief” (Mark 6:5-6) That’s the tragedy of unbelief. It limits God. It ties the hands of the Savior.

The scene is this: Jesus has returned to his hometown of Nazareth. By this time he has become well-known as a preacher, teacher and miracle worker. As was his custom he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day.

Since Jesus was a well-known rabbi, he was invited to bring the sermon that day. That was often the case of visiting rabbis. He opened the scroll to Isaiah 61:1-2 and read aloud. Then he sat down and began to preach, and those who heard him were astonished at his wisdom. It was clear, distinct, arresting, and gripping. They began to question where he received his wisdom – was he not one of them when with them? So they were unable to explain the source of his wisdom and the depth of his power.

Then they said, “Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary?” The fact that Joseph is not mentioned suggests that he has died by now. Apparently Jesus had taken up the trade of Joseph who was also a carpenter.

“Don’t we know his family?” they ask. And they even named his brothers, James, Joses, Juda and Simon

and mentioned his sisters. So there were at least six other members of his family.

But then the scriptures add this sad commentary, they were “offended in him,” i.e., they stumbled over what he said and the fact that they knew him so well. There is an old saying, “Familiarity breeds contempt.” They could not believe that one who had grown up in their midst, one with whom they had done business before could be the Messiah and Jesus responded by saying, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country.”

Then comes this sad tragic ending, “And he could do no mighty works . . . because of their unbelief.” What a marvelous opportunity was presented to Nazareth that day. They faced a wide-open door. They ought to have brought the sick, the lame, the halt, and the blind to be healed and blessed. But Nazareth failed to seize the opportunity that was theirs because of their lack of faith. Instead his return was greeted with an atmosphere of doubt, unbelief, and offense.

If one had gone to Jesus and asked why he failed in the little village among his former neighbors and friends, he would have answered, “Not because of the lack of my power, but of their faith.” When the father came to Jesus on behalf of his son, and said, “If you can do anything . . .” Jesus replied, “If you can? You’ve got the ‘if’ in the wrong place. All things are possible to him that believes.” Only believe, only believe! Faith in Nazareth would have given Jesus the opportunity that he desires everywhere.

“He did not many mighty works there.” He had done mighty works elsewhere. He had healed a man of loathsome leprosy. He had spoken the word, and the believing centurion’s son was cured the very hour he spoke. He had stilled the sea, tossed and churned by the storm when he commanded, “Peace, be still.” He

spoke to the demons in the raving Gadarene demoniac, and the demoniac was clothed and in his right mind. He had turned pale water into red wine at the marriage of Cana. Yes, elsewhere he had healed the sick, opened blind eyes, loosed dumb tongues, unstopped deaf ears, and raised the dead to life, but there in the atmosphere of doubt and offense, he did not do many mighty works because of their unbelief.

Their unbelief limited what Jesus could do. It tied the hands of the Savior so he could not do many mighty works. This is the tragedy of unbelief.

What did he say that led to this tragic response? We have to go to Luke's account of this same experience to know (Luke 4:18-30). Jesus boldly announces that he is the Messiah and that all God has is for all people—Gentiles as well as the Jews. That offended them, and they refused to believe, so he walked away.

This is not the first time God was limited by the unbelief of his people. A parallel experience in the Psalms says, "They . . . limited the Holy One of Israel" (Psalm 78:41).

The scriptures say that Israel, after the Lord brought them out of Egyptian bondage, forgot all the marvelous things he did for them; how he parted the waters of the Red Sea, how he led them and fed them, guided them and provided for them through the wilderness. So when they came to the Promised Land and heard there were giants in the land, their faith wavered and they would not go in. And thus they limited God. He could not give them the land if they would not go in.

If Israel represents the church in the wilderness, and it does according to scripture (Acts 7:38), then both churches and individuals can limit God. It is an awesome thought that the great God of the universe could have his hands tied because of our unbelief.

The fact is, the Lord has chosen to limit himself to the faith of his people. He saves us in response to our faith; he answers our prayers in response to faith; he works miracles in response to faith. He leads us in response to our faith. If we don't believe enough to trust him, to ask him, to obey him, then we limit what he can and will do in our lives.

There is simply no substitute for belief, trust, faith in the Lord. This experience of Jesus at Nazareth teaches us three things about limiting God and the tragedy of unbelief.

- It's not enough to hear the gospel—we must believe it.
- It is not enough to admire Jesus—we must accept him.
- It is not enough to know his family—we must become a part of it.

Two Astonishing Things

First, it is not enough to hear the Gospel – you must believe it. Those in the synagogue in Nazareth that day heard the Gospel loud and clear. I wish I could have been there to hear it from his own lips. What did he say? We do not know all that he said, but Luke recounts that he opened the scroll of Isaiah and read chapter 61, verses 1 and 2 that tell us what the Messiah would come to do. Then, as was customary, he sat down and said to them, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.” (Luke 4:21)

It was a bold proclamation of who he was and what he had come to do. He had come to heal the broken hearted. I have a friend who said he once saw a sign in a blacksmith's shop that read, “We can mend anything but the break of day and a broken heart.” Jesus was

saying, "I have come to mend broken hearts."

He came to preach deliverance to the captives, i.e., to set free those enslaved by sin and habits hard to break; to restore sight to the blind, i.e., to open the eyes of those blinded by prejudice and hate; and to set at liberty them that are bruised, i.e., to lift up those who are bruised, battered, and beaten down by life. And to announce that God's salvation is now available to all men everywhere. The sermon went well until he suggested that what God had to offer was for all people, the Gentiles as well as the Jews. And he gave two illustrations, one from the life of Elijah and one from the life of Elisha, both indicating that God's blessings was for Gentiles as well as Jews. This offended his listeners, and they rejected him and sent him on his way.

There were two astonishing things about his sermon:

- They were astonished at his wisdom.
- He was astonished at their response.

They heard the Gospel but they did not believe it or believe him. It is not enough to hear the Gospel. You must believe the Gospel. (James 1:21a-22)

Many have heard the Gospel without believing the Gospel. Joseph Stalin, the dictator of the Soviet Union and head of the Communist party was executing 40,000 people per month at the height of his power. But, as a boy his mother sent him to a Christian school. He was a good student and earned a scholarship to Tbilisi Seminary where he studied for the priesthood until he was expelled in 1899. Nikita Khrushchev, who followed him as the dictator of the Soviet Union and head of the Communist party, also attended a Christian school as a young boy and he memorized the four Gospels. (*Soul Survivor* by Philip Yancey, p. 17) Both Stalin and Khrushchev were brilliant men.

Several years ago I took a tour to Israel and then into Jordan. The guide assigned to us in Jordan was a Muslim young man who had a better knowledge of the Bible than any person I've ever known. He challenged our entire bus to stump him on scripture. He said, "You quote any verse in the Bible and I will tell you the chapter and verse where it is found, and I will quote the verse that comes before it and the verse that comes after it." Or, he'd further challenge, "Give me any text in the Bible, and I will tell you what it says and quote the verses on either side of it."

For the better part of an hour we gave him verses and texts from the scriptures to him and not once did we stump him. He knew the scriptures, the Old and the New, but he did not know the author of the scriptures.

It is not enough to hear the Gospel, you must believe it. Jesus said, "You search the scriptures; for in them you think you have eternal life: and they are they that testify of me. And you will not come to me that you might have life." (John 5:39-40) It is not enough to know the Scriptures. We must know him.

An Admirer or a Disciple?

Second, it is not enough to admire Jesus – we must accept him. Those who heard him that day were clearly impressed. They were "astonished" at his wisdom and at the mighty works they had heard of him doing in other places. It was obvious that he had wisdom "given" him, bestowed upon him that made him no ordinary prophet. But while they were impressed by him they did not accept him as the Messiah.

Clarence Jordan, who translated *The Cotton Patch New Testament*, established Koinonia Farms in Georgia. The farm was both interracial and controversial. He

often stirred the ire of Southern audiences with his call for racial justice.

James McClendon tells about a time in the early fifties when Clarence asked his brother Robert, who later served as a Georgia state senator and eventually as a justice on the Georgia Supreme Court, to represent his Koinonia Farm in a suit designed to discriminate against them based on the fact that they were interracial. Robert replied, "Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got."

"We might lose everything, too, Bob," Clarence replied. "It's different for you," his brother answered.

"Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked you about the same question he asked me. He asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' And I said, 'Yes.' What did you say?"

Robert said, "I follow Jesus...up to a point."

"Could that point by any chance be...the cross?"

"That's right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I'm not going to get myself crucified."

"Then I don't believe you're a disciple. You are an admirer of Jesus, not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you're an admirer, not a disciple."

Mohammed, the founder of Islam, was an admirer of Jesus. He repeatedly spoke well of him in the Koran and even acknowledged that he was a virgin-born son of Mary and a great prophet. (*Koran, The Surah 3:45-49*) But he did not accept him. Ask him what he believed and he'd have said, "There is no God but Allah and I am his prophet."

Mohandas K. Gandhi is considered the father of

India and one of the greatest leaders in modern history. He helped to free India from British colonialism by his nonviolent resistance. He, in turn, was the primary influence on Martin Luther King's nonviolent resistance in the American civil rights movement. But it was Jesus and his teachings about turning the other cheek that was the primary influence in Gandhi's life.

Gandhi was a great admirer of Jesus, often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount, and sought to live by the teaching of Jesus, but he remained a Hindu. His interest in Jesus began early in life. In England, sent to learn law in 1888, the young Hindu was persuaded to read the Bible even before he had studied the Bhagavada Gita and other Indian classics. The Sermon on the Mount he said, "went straight to my heart."

E. Stanley Jones, the great Methodist missionary, once met with Gandhi and asked him, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is it that you appear so adamantly to reject becoming his follower?"

Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject your Christ. I like your Christ. I don't like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." (*Dallas Morning News*, November 18, 2006, by Jeffrey Weiss)

When Gandhi was killed in 1948 among his sparse worldly possessions were about a dozen books, including *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ* and the Gospel of John. On the wall by his side was a picture of Jesus with these words, "He is our peace."

But Gandhi summarized his position on Jesus when he said, "I cannot concede to Christ a solitary throne." (*Soul Survivor* by Philip Yancey, p. 174)

The essence of Christianity is this—Jesus Christ is God. He is not just sent from God; he is not just a representative of God; he is not just a part of God. He was and

is God. And if you're going to be a Christian, then you must concede to him the solitary throne of your life.

It Is Not a Family Matter

Third, it is not enough to know the family of Jesus – you must become a part of it. The passage makes much over the fact that these people knew the family of Jesus. They named his brothers – James, Jose, Judah, and Simeon – and mentioned his sisters. But knowing his family was not enough. They needed to know him and believe in him.

I may be stretching a point but it is not enough for us to know his family either. We need to be a part of his family. You can know fine Christian people. You may even sit with them often in church. You may have had a devout mother or grandmother. But understand this, God has no grandchildren. We all come to him by personal faith. It is not enough to know the family then or now – you must become a part of the family by being born again.

How do you do that? You may recall the time his disciples told him that his mother and brothers were outside waiting to talk with him. His reply was offensively revolutionary: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Then, pointing to his disciples, he said, “Behold my mother and my brothers! For whosoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33-35).

With that Jesus redefined family for us for all time. It is not a matter of birth but of rebirth. It comes by surrendering to the will of God, and you can join his family today by faith and trust in him as Savior.

God does speak to us today. “The Holy Ghost saith, Today if you will hear his voice, harden not your

hearts..." (Hebrews 3:7-8)

When I was pastor of Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler there came to the services every Sunday a lady who was not a Christian. She was a Unitarian. But she came faithfully with her husband and sat down near the front and listened to me preach. One week I received a note from her that said, "If I had known the difference between your voice and the voice of God I would have been standing down front by your side last Sunday."

I wrote her back, "Dear Jenny: You don't fool me so don't fool yourself. You know the difference between my voice and the voice of God. I speak to the physical, God speaks to the heart. When I stop talking you can no longer hear my voice. But his voice lingers with you wherever you go."

Jenny is dead now. And she never responded to the voice of the Holy Spirit (Heb. 3:7-8). Listen! Listen, are you listening? He is speaking right now. If you hear his voice, harden not your heart. The average American is exposed to 3,000 commercials a day – on television, radio, billboards, and newspapers. The result is that we build up a resistance to appeals. The danger is that we will build up a resistance to the appeal of God. That's why the scriptures say, "Today if you will hear his voice harden not your heart."

Chapter 12

Finishing Well

Hebrews 12:1 & 2

Pope John Paul II was perhaps the most popular pope in history. From the time of his death in 2005 his followers wanted him put on a fast track to sainthood. At his funeral people began to chant “saint subito,” “sainthood now.”

But the rules for beatification in the Roman Catholic Church, i.e., recognized as a saint are very strict. First, there must be a five-year waiting period before allowing the beatification process to begin. Second, the person’s life and writings must be studied for their virtue. Third, the Vatican requires that a miracle attributed to a person’s intercession be confirmed before they can be beatified, the last formal step before formal sainthood.

His advocates claim what they believe is a miracle due to his intercession. A French nun claims that she was cured of Parkinson’s after she and her community of nuns prayed to John Paul. His life and writings are well known. So people are asking the new Pope Benedict XVI to waive the traditional five-year waiting period and allow the beatification process to begin now. (*Tyler Morning Telegraph*, March 29, 2007)

From the Biblical perspective, none of this is necessary. Sainthood does not require a vote of the Vatican; there is no waiting period, and you don’t even have to die.

According to scripture all you have to do is believe in

Jesus. The word saint is just another name for a Christian. In fact, it is the most common word in scripture. It is used over 60 times in the New Testament and over 100 times in the Bible.

While becoming a saint is quick and easy, living a saintly life is a long and challenging task. And there is no fast track to saintly living. It is a never-ending process.

Shawn Pickette, Page Coordinator, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, said in jest, "People don't realize how easy it is to be a saint. You just do the duty of the day, but it's so hard to do the duty of the day."

That's the truth set out in Hebrews 12:1-3. Here the writer pictures the Christian life as a race. The Christians to whom he is writing are undergoing great persecution and some are considering going back into the safety of Judaism. The purpose of the writer is to challenge them to not go back but to go on and finish the race. As an encouragement he reminds them the priesthood of Jesus is superior to the Old Testament priesthood and that the sacrifice of Jesus is greater than the Levitical sacrificial system.

The Old Testament priesthood included Melchizedek, Aaron, and the Levitical priest. In the new covenant Jesus has become our high priest. In the Old Testament the priest offered up the blood of bulls and goats for the sins of the people. In the new covenant Jesus offered up his own blood. In the Old Testament the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies once a year to make atonement for the sins of the people. In the new covenant Jesus entered into the presence of God once and for all to atone for our sins. Jesus then has become both priest and sacrifice in that he offered up himself for our salvation. So he reminds them that if they go back to Judaism they go back to nothing. Then he calls the roll

of the great saints of the past who by faith stayed true to God through difficult times and dark days.

Then he calls on them, because of these great examples of faith to continue in the race and finish well. To do this three things are necessary. We must:

- Remove all hindrances
- Run with persistence
- Rivet on Jesus

Sins and Weights

First, to finish well, we must remove all hindrances, i.e., strip off anything and everything that slows us down or holds us back. The Scripture says we must “lay aside every weight and the sin that can trip us up.” Everyone knows that in a race a runner removes all excess clothing and strips down as much as possible so he can win the race.

The scriptures speak of laying aside both weights and sins. They are not the same thing.

Weights are not necessarily sins. They are not wrong with themselves; they are things that keep us from being faithful and true to Christ. It may be our children and their sports activities, a hobby such as golf, hunting, fishing, our work, a friendship, some failure in the past, or an unfortunate childhood.

Sins are acts of disobedience to God, breaking God’s law. There are two kinds - commission and omission. Sins of commission are doing what God expressly forbids. Sins of omission are not doing things that are right. A teacher asked on a high school religious exam, “What is a sin of omission?”

One student wrote: “A sin I should have committed but didn’t.”

That’s not exactly right. Sins of omission are failing

to do those things that God tells us to do (James 4:17).

But the writer is specific. He speaks of “the sin that so easily besets us.” Everybody has a weakness. Everybody. What is yours? Is it alcohol? Gambling? Pornography? Infidelity? Drugs? Temper? Profanity? Bitterness? Pride? A critical spirit? Gossip? One lady said, “I never say anything about people unless it’s good . . . and boy is this good.” Satan, the enemy of God’s people is a master technician in spiritual warfare. He knows what our besetting sin is and attacks us at that point, and so we’d better know it, also.

General George S. Patton was perhaps the greatest U.S. field commander in World War II. Field Marshall Erwin Rommel was Hitler’s best known and most famous field commander. Rommel was nicknamed the “Desert Fox” because he was an expert at surprise attacks and desert warfare.

He was sent to North Africa to command Hitler’s Panzer troops and to stop the Allied invasion from there. (As a side note, he was later accused of attempting a plot to assassinate Hitler and though he knew nothing of the attempt he was forced to drink a vial of poison to avoid the gallows. Hitler then buried him with full military honors in order to cover up the suggestions of a plot.)

Patton’s and Rommel’s forces met in the battle of El Guithar (a part of the Tunesian Campaign) on March 17-18, 1943. It was Rommel’s 10th Panzers against Patton’s II Corps. It was the first battle in which U.S. forces defeated the experienced German tank units and surprised everyone except Patton.

Rommel had written several books on the art of warfare including “The Tank in Attack.” As he observed the victory from the vantage of a hillside Patton said, “Rommel, I read your book.” Because he had read Rommel’s book he knew his tactics and anticipated his

moves before he made them.

Satan has read your mail. He knows what our besetting sin is and he is always ready to attack at our weakest point. That is why we must lay aside the sins and weights that hinder us in our Christian race.

How do we do that? William Wilberforce, the British statesman and one of the greatest reformers of all times, helps us at this point. Though already a member of Parliament, he became a committed Christian partly through the influence of John Newton, a man he had admired since boyhood and the author of the great hymn "Amazing Grace." After his conversion he contemplated giving up politics but Newton persuaded him that he could serve Christ in the political arena effectively. And that he did, committing himself to the abolition of slavery in England and many other benevolent causes.

In 1787 Wilberforce, after visiting with John Newton, wrote in his diary: "God has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners (i.e., morals)." He saw the debauchery of his country, adultery, dueling, bribery, drunkenness, cruel living conditions and the church itself plagued by immorality and apathy. A mere nominal belief in the Christian creeds was common place. It was said that "the spirit of religion slumbered" and many members of the clergy were absent from their churches and were often more concerned with hunting and card playing than with the spiritual and physical needs of their congregation.

As Wilberforce set himself to reform the morals of his nation he said, "Let reform begin in my nation, and let it begin with me." People at every level were encouraged to take ownership of the idea of returning to a moral life. Wilberforce himself visited jails, paid the debts of men in prison for their debts, helped the blind and the poor in every way he could, provided education for students

who could not pay their own costs and was instrumental in over 70 different ministries to help people. John Burton, one of his friends, called him “an oak tree of righteousness.” And one biographer wrote of him, “Good causes stuck to him like pins to a magnet.”

Garth Lean in his biography on Wilberforce said that after his conversion he “made a serious (daily) examination of himself in the early morning and on Sundays and kept a list of his ‘chief besetting sins’ and ‘chief Christian graces which I have to cultivate.’”

He made a pact with his spiritual mentor that each would pay a fine to charity “for lapses pointed out by the other.” Eventually Wilberforce and his reformed-minded Christian friends established a kind of live-in-community in which they felt free to “help each other overcome their various defects of character or temperament.”

David Gushee, tells of being in a book store and finding a book of Catholic prayers which contained the “examination of conscious” questions to ask oneself prior to going to confession. These questions included the following: Have I neglected my home or family duties? Have I been lazy, neglectful or easily distracted during prayers? Have I used God’s name irreverently or taken false or needless oaths? Have I missed church through my own fault? Have I worked unnecessarily on Sundays? Have I disobeyed, angered, or been disrespectful toward my parents or those in authority? Have I quarreled with or willfully hurt anyone? Have I caused another to sin? Have I been sinfully angry? Greedy? Proudful? Jealous? Have I neglected to care for the poor and the needy? And so on. It was a rich moral inventory. (*Christianity Today*, November 2005, page 88)

Our early Puritan ancestors and the followers of John Wesley used to engage in such practices, but they have largely disappeared. We, as a result, have grown morally

sloppy and need to recapture this kind of seriousness about morality in our own lives. In the words of Wilberforce, “Let reform begin in my/our nation, and let it begin with me” needs to be the prayer of every Christian today. If we hope to turn America back to God this is where we must begin also – with ourselves.

Stay in the Race

Second, to finish well, we need to run with persistence. We need to “run with patience the race that is set before us.” The word patience literally means to remain under. To persist, to stay all in, to never quit.

Driving home from a revival meeting late one night, listening to the radio to stay awake, I tuned into a Ft. Worth station that was playing goldie oldies. A line from a Frank Sinatra recording captured my attention, “When I find myself down on my face I pick myself up and get back in the race.” That’s what the writer of the book of Hebrews was saying here. Stay in the race. We all stumble. But even if you fall down, you don’t have to stay down. Don’t give up, get up!

Some Christians go up like a rocket and down like a rock. They start out with a fever and end up with a chill. As a result, they never become all that God wants them to be.

A father was talking to his son about persistency. “Son, don’t ever give up. The only people who succeed in life are those who refuse to give up. Robert Fulton didn’t give up. The Wright Brothers didn’t give up. Columbus didn’t give up. Thomas Edison didn’t give up. And then there was Irvin McPringle.”

The boy was surprised and asked: “Who is Irvin McPringle? I never even heard of him.” His father replied, “No wonder, he gave up!”

I mentioned William Wilberforce, the great reformer and statesman, earlier. In 1787, after visiting with John Newton he committed himself not only to the reformation of morals in England but also to the abolition of the slave trade in his country.

The suppression of slavery was no easy matter. It was ingrained in society and was a highly profitable business. He was challenged to duels, his life threatened and countless other atrocities inflicted on him because of his stand. Every year for 20 years he made a motion before the Parliament for the abolition of slavery. Time and again it was defeated. Finally on the night of February 23, 1833, eight years after he retired, three days before he died, the law was passed to abolish slavery. He persisted and because he did, the whole world won the victory.

During the filming of Ben Hur, Charlton Heston had trouble learning to drive a chariot. With much practice he was finally able to control the vehicle, but still had some doubts. He reportedly explained his concern to the director Cecil B. DeMille by saying, "I think I can drive the chariot, but I'm not sure I can win the race."

DeMille responded, "You just stay in the race, and I'll make sure you win."

God reminds us to never give up! It is not our responsibility to win the race but to stay in the race. He will see to it that we win.

Keep Focused/Look to Jesus

Finally, to finish well, we need to rivet on Jesus. He is the author and finisher of our faith. The Greek work translated "looking" means to look away from one thing so as to see another, to concentrate the gaze upon. It suggests the idea of not being distracted. We are to put our eyes on Jesus and not be distracted by other things

or people. Looking at some preachers can distract you. Looking at church members can distract you. Looking at some churches can distract you. They can act so unchristian and make you want to give up and quit.

Johnny Weissmuller for many years played the role of Tarzan and Jungle Jim in movies. Before he became a movie star he was a great swimmer. He tells in an old Reader's Digest article how his first swimming coach, William Bachiach, took an interest in him when he was 15 years old and gave him some advice that he said, "I have used, wet or dry, ever since."

His coach worked with him day after day in the Illinois Athletic Club pool on his strokes, breathing, starts and turns. He taught him to keep his body high, to swim over the water, not through it. And he progressed so that he could eventually do 100 yards freestyle in 52 seconds. But there was one catch. All his training had been in the same pool.

The I.A.C. pool was one of the finest in the country but the bottom was laid out in lanes, with heavy black tile stripes to guide swimmers in competition. Johnny didn't realize it, but subconsciously he had come to depend on those lines to keep him on the straight course.

His coach didn't realize it either, until he clocked him one day in an unmarked pool. His time dropped a full tenth of a second. The coach made him swim the length of the pool again and again and then exploded.

"Johnny!" he roared, "You aren't swimming straight. You don't have the black guideline and you're wobbling all over the pool!"

He slammed his hat down on the kick board at one end of the pool, and sent me to the other.

"All right now," he added, "that hat is your goal, fix it in your mind, draw a mental line to it, and swim for it. Follow your own lines and you'll get there faster."

Weissmuller said, "That advice led me to two Olympic Games and five Olympic medals, 52 national championships and 67 world records." Then he said, "Another kind of test came a number of years later when an accident endangered my life.

One night, my wife Allene, her parents and I were cruising to Catalina Island for a week-end of fishing. We were headed out for a cabin on the isthmus toward the open end of the island.

Soon after passing the middle of the channel, we ran into a squall. The others were in the forward end of the cabin, and I in the aft, at the wheel. I got up to batten down the hatch, and all of a sudden pitch of the boat caught me unaware. I went right over the side, yelling, that when I came to the surface, the stern light was disappearing in the darkness. No one had heard me.

At first I panicked. I knew my absence would soon be discovered, and they would start circling. But in the darkness, the odds of their finding me were pretty slim.

I tread water for I don't know how many minutes. In my jumbled thoughts, the word 'lifeline' came to -and instantly contracted to 'line.' I calmed down and began to think I took a mental bearing in on Catalina. The island is about 25 miles long and I figured if I could set a straight line in my mind, and follow it, I had a pretty good chance of making shore. With more confidence than I had any right to feel, I struck out.

Three hours later the lights of the island broke through the darkness, and I could have wept. I dragged myself ashore, less than a mile south of the cabin. It was a terrifying experience, but it solidified the philosophy that has kept me afloat in more ways than one.

That mental line has guided me through 18 years of Tarzan, and 7 years as Jungle Jim. I've had a lucky life.

I've been able to make my living doing the thing I most loved to do – swim. Now I am the head of a company that builds pools to my specification – with nary a black line at the bottom. “

Our goal is to be like Jesus. He is far ahead of all of us in every conceivable respect. He is the author and finisher, the beginning and the end of our faith. He originates and culminates it. He is the one toward whom we move.

He endured the cross. To reach his exalted state he had to walk unflinchingly to the cross and he endured the shame of it for us.

The cross was a humiliating experience. It was reserved for the worst of criminals, for those whom society regarded as the dregs of humanity. Yet he accepted it for our benefit.

Now he is the enthroned, present, working and soon-to-be-coming Christ.

He did not grow weary. He did not give up. He endured all of this and so should we.

The challenge then, is for us to lay aside our besetting sin and the weights that hinder us. Stay in the race keeping our eyes ever on Jesus. We should never drop out. He will see that we win if we stay in the race.

Make sure you are in the right race, the Christian race not the rat race. Put your faith in Christ and finish well.

Somebody asked Johnny Weissmuller what was the secret to playing Tarzan. He replied, “Holding on to the vine.” That’s basic.

Jesus said, “I am the vine.”

That’s what we need to do. We need to grab hold of Christ by faith or let him grab hold of us and not turn loose and you will finish well.

