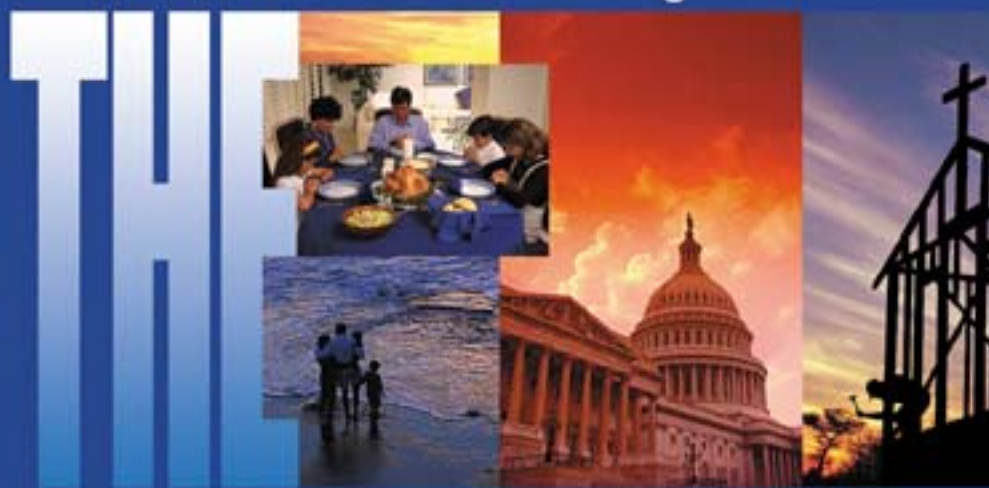


REBUILDING

God's Answer to A Crumbling Civilization



PAUL W. POWELL

REBUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS

God's Answer to a Crumbling Civilization

by
Paul W. Powell

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*Dedicated
to*

*Dr. Herbert H. Reynolds
Educator*

*George C. Anson
Attorney*

*W. Dewey Presley
Banker*

Three of the Greatest Men I know.

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Introduction

At the height of President Clinton's impeachment trial by the U. S. House of Representatives, the Dallas Morning News carried a cartoon drawn by Bill DeOrel that pictures Uncle Sam sitting on Santa Claus' lap. Uncle Sam speaks, "oh yeah, and a moral compass."

Who can deny that present day America has lost its moral and spiritual bearings? When the leader of our nation is not even sure what the meaning of "is" is, as we would say in east Texas, "We 'is' in trouble."

We are living in a cut-flower civilization, When flowers are cut from their roots they will live a few days, but their days are numbered from the time they are cut. That's why the beauty of America is wilting. Even Ann Landers agrees. She wrote recently, "Lets face it, America is sick."

Our sickness is a sickness of the soul. As a result our music is noise. Our dances are convulsions. Our language is unprintable. Our art is junk. Our worship is irreverent. Our jails are overcrowded. Our streets, park, offices, courthouses and post offices are unsafe, and, when a couple walks down the aisle to get married, odds are their marriage won't last seven years - not as long as the warranty on their washer or dryer.

The psalmist, in the midst of similarly perplexing times asked, "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3) It is a question we need to seriously address.

What can we do you ask. Is there any hope? Sure there is! We can take a fresh look at our own lives, at our churches, at our families, and at every level of government and begin to reconstruct our moral and spiritual footings, We can

rebuild the foundations.

Regardless what secularists may say, our nation was founded on moral and spiritual principles. Our most prized documents attest to this. And it will survive and thrive only so long as those moral and spiritual foundations stand firm.

Erskine, the eminent British author and jurist, reminds us of this when he said, “Depend on it; the world could not hold together without morals, nor can morals maintain their situation in the human heart without religion”.

French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, echoed the same sentiments when he said, “I searched out America to find why America was great. I went to the virgin forest where the trees stretched to the sun, and it was not there, I visited the manufacturers where dedicated workers changed raw materials into the necessities of life; it was not there. I went to many cities where people from all nations have come to become one, but it was not there. I went to the nation’s churches and synagogues and that is where I saw the real America, I learned that America is great because America is good, and when America ceases to be good it will cease to be great.”

That’s what this book is about. Its about restoring America’s greatness. It is about rebuilding the foundations. That is and always has been an important plan of the mission and message of the church.

I am not an alarmist, but I believe the four horseman of the apocalypse are already out of the barn, they are saddled up; they are riding.

So lets get to the task. Let’s give our crumbling society something firm to stand on. Let’s help people develop inner braces for the outer pressures of life. Let’s preach the old book with new boldness. Let’s rebuild the foundations. Our world needs this like never before.

Chapter 1

Rebuilding the Foundations

The Sure Foundation Psalm 11:3

I had lunch in the Terrace Club at Kaden Tower in Louisville, Kentucky, several years ago. As we approached the building, my host said, “This is a most unusual building. It was built from the top down.” My immediate thought was, “that can’t be. A building must begin with a foundation and be built from the bottom up.”

From a plaque inside I learned the building was a creation of famed architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. He had designed it around a large truss in the center of the building and then hung everything else from it. Therefore, the building did, after all, start with a foundation, though it was a most unusual one.

The fact is, everything must have a foundation — buildings, marriages, businesses, society, our nation, and life itself. The trouble with our world today is that the foundations of our lives are in jeopardy.

Ours is a culture unhinged from the important values of life. We have been cut loose from our spiritual moorings. The result is turmoil, violence, lawlessness, uncertainty, and moral decline.

Francis Schaeffer put it succinctly, “Modern man has his feet firmly planted in mid-air.” A bumper sticker I saw recently best expresses the spirit of the age, “Honk if you believe in anything.”

We, today, like never before, need to check the foundations of our society. Because, once you start tampering with the foundations you are in trouble. The

psalmist is encouraging us to do just that when he asks, “If the foundations be destroyed, what shall the righteous do?” (Ps. 11:3).

Behind this verse is the fact that Saul, the king, is trying to kill David, the future king of Israel. Friends recommended that he flee to the mountains to save his life. Then they asked, “If the foundations be destroyed what else can the righteous do?” David refused to run, affirming his faith that God reigned. He was confident God watched over him and would ultimately judge them.

Today in many ways our day parallels that of David’s day. The foundations seem to have been weakened and the saints are worried.

What are the foundations of life? What are the things indispensable to the survival of godliness? There are four: eternity, morality, accountability, and charity.

In our shaky society we, like the psalmist, need to reaffirm our faith in God. We need to remember, “The Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord’s throne is in the heaven: his eyes behold, his eyelids try, the children of men” (vs. 4).

If the foundation is destroyed, what can the righteous do? I will tell you what they can do. They can rebuild them. That is what we need to begin doing today. What can the righteous do?

We can live for eternity.

We can stand for morality.

We can hold to accountability.

We can act in charity.

Born to Believe

The first foundation of life is eternity. The writer of Ecclesiastes said, “Thou hast set eternity in our hearts” (Ecc. 3:11). There is in all of us an awareness of, a belief in, and

a longing for something beyond this life.

We all have a capacity and a longing for the infinite and we cannot be satisfied with the things of time and sense alone. This sense of the eternal is unshakable. Prime Minister Disraeli said, "Man is a being born to believe." Without eternity life is devoid of meaning. Go where you will in the world and you will find religion. This itself is an indication of our higher heredity. There is in all of us an awareness of and a need for God.

That is exactly why there is so much unhappiness in the world. We have left God out of our lives. Even religion has contributed to this effort. In the fall of 1993 6,000 representatives of more than 150 world religions met in Chicago for the Parliament of Religions. They hoped to endorse a statement on global ethics. However, the Parliament disintegrated into an argument and alienation among the representatives. One of the things said during the meeting was, "We can practice religion with or without God."

Religion without God? Perhaps the poet was right:

*First dentistry was painless
Then bicycles were chainless
And carriages were horseless
And many laws enforceless.
Next cookery was fireless
Telegraphy was wireless
Cigars were nicotine-less
And coffee was caffeine-less.
Soon oranges were seedless
The putting green was weedless
The college boy was hatless
The proper diet fatless.
New motor roads were busless*

*The latest theme is restless
Our tennis courts are sodless
Our new religion godless.*

It is a tragic thing when people lose their sense of eternity. The apostle Paul described some that he called “enemies of the cross of Christ.” He says of them, “Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is their shame, who mind earthly things” (Phil. 3:19).

In this verse Paul begins at the end and moves to the beginning. He says, “their end is destruction.” That is their final fate. Then he moves back to the cause and effect. These are people “who mind earthly things.” This means the earth is the limit of their horizons. They see nothing beyond this life. What happens when this is true? It follows that their god is their appetite, and they brag about things they should blush about.

What happens when people lose their sense of eternity? They lose their sense of shame. Recently a reporter asked Tim Robbins, the husband of Susan Sarandon, “What’s it like to get into bed with Susan Sarandon every night?” Robbins countered, “Aren’t you embarrassed to ask that question? If you asked that to a stranger, he would sock you in the nose. I think the love between two people is a sacred and private thing. It cheapens it to talk about it to millions of people.”

Was the reporter ashamed? Not at all. Nothing is sacred to most people today. Ours is a shameless society. Having lost our spiritual moorings we have let celebrities such as Woody Allen and Madonna determine what is right and wrong for us. We let them set our ethical standards because they are elitists. And these are people who not only live godless lives, they write “tell all” books bragging about it.

Let people lose their sense of eternity and their god

becomes their belly, i.e., they live only for what satisfies and what gratifies. And a world that lives only for pleasure is a world awaiting judgment.

I remind you that we are creatures of both time and eternity. We have some time here on earth, but beyond there is an eternity. We must not live as though this life is all there is.

If the foundation of eternity is destroyed, what can the righteous do? We can keep living for eternity. We can keep trusting in God. In a world where the foundations are crumbling, it is awfully easy to be despondent. What can we do? We wonder is there any hope? G. K. Chesterton said, "At least five times in the twentieth century the faith has, to all appearances, gone to the dogs. In each of those five cases it was the dog that died." Our crumbling beliefs do not diminish him.

Some anonymous poet put it best:

*I mused on one of my morning jogs,
"Things are going straight to the dogs."
But, my father, in his house of logs,
Said things are going to the dogs.
His father, in his buckskin togs
Said things are going to the dogs.
And his father, in the Flemish bogs
Said things are going to the dogs.
On reflecting on this I'm glad to relate
The dogs have had a good long wait!*

When the Japanese invaded Yangcheng more than fifty years ago, Gladys Aylward, missionary to China, was forced to flee. However, she could not leave her work behind. With only one assistant, she led 100-plus orphans over the mountains toward free China. During the harrowing journey out of war-torn Yangcheng she grappled with despair as

never before. After passing a sleepless night, she faced the morning with no hope of reaching safety. A 13-year-old girl in the group reminded her of their much-loved story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea.

“But I’m not Moses,” Gladys cried in desperation.

“Of course you aren’t,” the girl said, “but Jehovah is still God.”

We must not let the world shake our confidence in God. We must hang on to hope. We must keep living for eternity.

Amusing Ourselves to Death

The second foundation of life is morality. When people lose eternity they then lose morality. As Dostoyevsky reminds us in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “If God does not exist everything is permissible.” Without God, there can be no morality. You cannot have fruit without roots. We live in times when all is permissible. Patterson and Kim, who wrote, *The Day America Told the Truth*, did a survey that revealed the characteristics of our society. The survey said that morality is elastic in America today. We are making up our own rules and our own moral code. There is very little that is absolute anymore.

There is no moral consensus as there was in the 1950s. Only 13 percent of our people believe in all the Ten Commandments. There is a low respect for law. Lying is an integral part of our culture. In fact, we do not give a second thought to lying. One out of eight Americans have been sexually abused. One out of six have been physically abused. While we still marry we have lost faith in the institution of marriage.

More babies and young children die today at the hands of their parents than in car accidents, house fires, falls, or drownings. Violence in the home is as much a danger to

young children as street gunfire is to teenagers. Today's young people are the most ignored, misunderstood, and disheartened generation our country has ever seen.

Does that surprise you? It ought not to. In a country in which nothing is ever wrong, anything is possible.

In a society where values are disintegrating and no absolutes exist, what can the righteous do? We can keep standing for morality. The church is a good place to start.

The church is the only institution in the world that bears witness to the eternal and the moral. The problem today is not so much that the church's moral leadership is being ignored as that it has been abdicated. Many of our churches seem to exude the same relativism and insecurity about right and wrong as the world around them.

We need to get back to the basics. We need to stop preaching a watered down gospel to a washed out generation. We need to stop giving six easy steps on how to keep joy in your life because people know that life is not easy.

We need to stop trying to compete with the world in entertainment. Neal Postman has written a book entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. It is an expose of the entertainment frenzy that has gripped America. It refutes the idea that everything in life must be fun — work, school, and church.

He writes, "I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing it is another kind of religion altogether."

So many churches have been sucked into the entertainment syndrome that it may be that the friends of Christ are doing him more harm than his enemies. The leaders of the church may be hurting it more than its critics.

They are perverting the gospel by presenting it as something it is not — easy and amusing.

I was preaching in the Dallas area recently and invited my son and his wife to attend the services. He told me they already planned to attend another church with a friend. His friend said to him, “I think you’ll like our church. It has a band and loud music. It is more like a show. It’s fun. But what they do has Christian overtones.”

When worship is more like a show, when it is primarily entertaining, when it just has Christian *overtones*, we had better reevaluate it.

When Jesus calls us, he bids us come and die. That is not easy or amusing.

The church today needs to return to preaching the narrow way. We need to tell people that right is right because God said so and wrong is wrong because God said so. We must tell them that if a thing was right yesterday it is right today, and if the world shall last a thousand years it will still be right. In addition, we must tell them that if a thing was wrong yesterday it is wrong today, and if the world shall last for another millennium it will still be wrong.

It Is In Ourselves

The third foundation for life is accountability. If there is no eternity there is no morality and if there is no morality there is no accountability. After all, if nothing is ever wrong, no one is ever responsible. Moreover, if anything is ever wrong, it is always somebody else’s fault.

We blame our sins on everyone and everything except ourselves. We blame our heredity. There is a new strand of psychology called evolutionary psychology. It sees man as an organism being acted upon by biological forces, rather than agents of free will. It views offenders not as sinful or

criminal, but as “sick.” We justify everything with eight words: “I can’t help myself. It’s in my genes.” If you are a homosexual you were born that way. If you are an alcoholic it is because of your genetic make-up. If you are unfaithful to your mate you were born with the tendency. That is a convenient way of escaping responsibility for everything. The Bible calls all of these things sins. God never calls anything a sin unless we have a choice in the matter.

On the other hand, we blame society. A woman bank teller wrote Ann Landers to complain that recently the bank where she worked began hiring its first male tellers. She and a male teller worked in the drive-in window until the bank closed. They became involved sexually. He promised to marry her, but then did not. She was left heartsick and in shock.

She wrote: “I’m not asking for advice, Ann. I just want businesses to know what can happen when they create situations where men and women work closely together in isolation.”

Not once did she suggest that she or he were to blame for what happened. The bank was to blame. It was society’s fault.

In a world like this, where no one accepts responsibility for what they do, what can the righteous do? We can hold to accountability for ourselves and for others. I am convinced that to hold people responsible for their behavior is the most moral and effective thing we can do. We need to start with ourselves.

I preached once in the First Baptist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Following the sermon a woman came up to me and asked, “Are you for real?” I think she wanted to know if I was sincere. She was going through a

tough time in her marriage and wanted to know if I really believed what I had said and if I practiced what I had preached.

That's what the world wants to know of us, "Are you for real?" They want to see lives of integrity. Integrity is the quality of being able to be trusted. It means we do not lie to each other. What we say we do, that the affection we profess is genuine and the praise we give is honest.

When the world is falling apart, we need to cling to accountability. It is the only way society can be held together.

Beyond Bumper Stickers

The final foundation of life is charity. If there is no eternity there is no morality; if there is no morality there is no accountability; and if there is no accountability there will soon be no charity. People will live for themselves and kindness and compassion and benevolence will die. Jesus warned that as we approach the end time, "Because iniquity shall abound the love of many shall grow cold" (Matt. 24:12). Indifference always accompanies iniquity.

Have you ever known of a time of so much anger and violence? Turn on the talk shows and you will hear angry people. Listen to the ten o'clock news and see anger everywhere. Read the newspaper and you will read of anger. Get on the highway and you will encounter road rage. Moreover, with the increase of anger there is a loss of charity. Recently a friend was returning from an out-of-town trip to Arlington, Texas where she lives. She was going through an unsafe part of the city when she developed car trouble. Fortunately, she saw a post office with a well-lit parking lot just ahead and she was able to coast to a stop in it. As she got out of her car, a well-dressed man came out of the post

office. She told him of her trouble and asked him for help. He responded, “No, I’m sorry, I’m in a hurry,” and got in his car and drove off. As he pulled away, she noticed the bumper sticker on his car. It read, “Jesus loves you and so do I.”

We have got to move beyond bumper sticker benevolence. We need to be good Samaritans on the toll road as well as the Jericho road.

Someone has said, “The world belongs to the wolves, but it is changed by the lambs.” They are right. The Lamb can change our world — and those who follow him — if we will live for eternity, stand for morality, hold to accountability, and practice charity.

“But,” you say, “I’m just one person. What can I do?” Plenty. Everything is a process of radiation. You start with your kids, your employees, and your friends, and it radiates out from you. Listen to the words of the poet:

*One man awake can awaken another.
And a second can waken his next door brother
And the three awake can waken the town
By turning the whole place upside down.
The many awake can make such a fuss
That it finally awakens the rest of us.
One man up with dawn in his eyes
Multiplies.*

On April 19, 1775, 77 minutemen were lined up on the Lexington Green outside of Boston, Massachusetts. Up came Major Pittkern, riding ahead of six companies of British infantry — 800 men. The British moved smartly into position, just 150 feet away from the minutemen.

Major Pittkern yelled out, “Curse ye, damned rebels, disperse ye villains! Lay down your arms.” Captain John Parker, commander of the minutemen, walked along behind

his men and said, “Don’t fire unless fired upon, but if they mean to have war, let it begin here.”

If the foundations are going to be rebuilt, we have to start somewhere. I say, “Why not here? Why not now? Why not you?”

Today I take off my coat, loosen my tie, and roll up my sleeves to start rebuilding the foundations. But I need help. Will you join me?

Chapter 2

The Power of Your Thoughts

Proverbs 23:7

Columnist Hal Borland said for years he was told by those who should know that man became a superior creature because of his opposable thumb, a thumb which enabled him to hold tools and use a pen or pencil to make a record of his ideas, if any. He observed that an opossum also has an opposable thumb. It is particularly evident on the hind feet, although the forefeet are almost as clearly defined in the fingers and thumb. “But,” he asked, “did the opossum ever learn to hold a hammer or use a pen? He never even learned to use those unusual feet very adeptly for the simplest animal tasks. He cannot even climb very well without the help of his tail.

“So, when someone begins to pontificate on the amazing things man has done because of an opposable thumb, I ask, ‘What about the possum?’ And the talk shifts to the matter of brains, where it really belongs.”

The capacity to think, the wondrous power of imagination, is one of the things that lifts man above the physical world around him and separates him from the animal kingdom. This unique gift has launched him on his greatest adventures. It is because of this power that man has been able to achieve so much.

Everything we see about us was first a thought. The house in which you live was first a thought in the mind of the architect. The public address system by which you hear was first a thought in an inventor’s mind. In addition, all of

creation was a thought in the mind of God before it was spoken into existence. But not only are things the outgrowth of thoughts, so is character. The Bible affirms this fact when it records, “As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23:7).

Different people have often expressed this spiritual truth in different ways. Emerson said, “A man is what he thinks about all day long.”

Dale Carnegie said, “A few years ago, I was asked to answer this question on a radio program: ‘What is the greatest lesson you have ever learned?’ That was easy. By far the most vital lesson I have ever learned is the importance of what we think. If I knew what you thought, I would know what you are. Our thoughts make us what we are. Our mental attitude is the X-factor that determines our fate.”

“I know with a conviction beyond all doubt that the biggest problem you and I have to deal with — in fact, almost the only problem we have to deal with — is choosing the right thoughts. If we can do that we will be on the high road to solving all our problems.” Then he quoted the great philosopher Marcus Aurelius who said, “Our life is what our thoughts make it.”

Norman Vincent Peale wrote a best seller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Later he wrote a book about the power of negative thinking. He could just as well have written a book on the power of any kind of thinking. The truth is, to put it simply; “You are not what you think you are. But, what you think — you are.” How could it possibly be otherwise?

Since this is true there is no sudden rise to or fall from virtue. There is no such thing as a man living an honest, upright, decent life for ten, twenty, or thirty years and then suddenly falling. We live in a moral universe in which such

a thing would be impossible.

Men fall slowly, and moral deterioration may proceed without being observed by either the man who is its victim or by those who know him best.

On an autumn day, tramping through the woods, you have set your foot upon the trunk of a fallen tree and the moment your weight came upon the bark, it gave way and your foot crashed through to the rotten heart of the tree. That final collapse was instant, but the rotting and decomposition of the tree was not sudden, but the process of months and years, the rains of summer and the snows of winter. It is the same with us. We may be startled at the sudden fall of a religious person, but be assured that long before their collapse, rotten thinking had been going on. Let us, therefore, take heed to our thoughts.

However, you will agree the control of our thoughts is an exceedingly difficult matter. The biggest battle of life is the battle to control our thoughts — our silent, secret, inner heart where no one sees or knows our thoughts and their control is purely personal.

This is a realm in which the individual is master. No one can control our individual thinking. Others may influence it, but they cannot control it. Yet a destiny determining battle is waged at this point. Here is the arena where the victory of life is won or lost. If you can win here, you can win life's battle.

Because this is true, I want to offer some suggestions about our thoughts. There are three of them:

We should cultivate our thoughts.

We should concentrate our thoughts.

We should consecrate our thoughts.

You are Your Own Gardener

First, we should cultivate our thoughts. Think of your mind as a garden and your thoughts as seeds. What you plant in it grows. Good thoughts bear good fruit, bad thoughts bear bad fruit — and a man is his own gardener.

Thus, we cannot allow our thoughts to go untended. Just as a field untended yields more weeds than good fruit, so it is with our minds. Evil thoughts crop up in an untended mind like weeds crop up in an untended field. Our minds must be cultivated and evil, wrong thoughts must be rooted out. It is a law of life: the untended garden will soon be overrun with weeds.

In the words of Dag Hammarskold, “You cannot play with the animal in you without becoming wholly animal, play with falsehood without forfeiting your right to truth, play with cruelty without losing your sensitivity of mind. He who wants to keep his garden tidy does not reserve a plot for weeds.”

This is true because sin enters our lives through the mind. All transgression begins with sinful thinking. You therefore have to close only one door to sin — the door to your mind. The scriptures say of Noah’s day, “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5).

The people of Noah’s day had evil imaginations and in time lived evil lives. James says essentially the same thing when he writes, “Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lusts, and lust, when it is conceived bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (James 1:14-15).

Do you see the pattern? First there is the desire, the thought, then the act, and finally the judgment. Many people

dream of sin, imagine sin, and if granted the opportunity would indulge in sin. All they lack is the occasion to sin.

This is precisely the difference in lust and sinful thoughts. Lust is a thought that is allowed to linger and grows to become a desire. We cannot keep evil thoughts from popping into our minds, but we do not have to let them stay there and grow. You should no more allow sinful thoughts to accumulate in your mind than you would allow garbage to accumulate in your living room.

Martin Luther had an answer when he said, “You cannot keep birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.”

Jesus spoke of cultivating the mind when he set forth the principle of spiritual amputation (Matt. 5:28-30). Sometimes it is necessary to remove a part of the body to save the life. I knew a woman who had an infection in her foot that her doctors could not cure. They said to her, “The leg must come off if you are to live.” She was old and had been in a nursing home for years. She said, “No. I do not want my leg amputated.” So, she kept her leg but she lost her life.

I know of another man who had a similar problem. The doctor said to him, “It’s your leg or your life.” He replied, “I want to live, amputate it.” He lost his leg to save his life. The principle is this — remove from your life anything that leads to lust. For lust is like a poison that will eventually kill you.

“The human mind is a fabulous computer. It is a matter of fact; no one has been able to design a computer as intricate and efficient as the human mind. Consider this: your brain is capable of recording 800 memories per second for 75 years without ever getting tired. Although there are a number of computers on the market today with amazing capabilities

packed into them, not one of them can match the service record of the brain” (Earl D. Radmacher, *You and Your Thoughts*, Tyndale House, 1977).

Computer programmers say, “Garbage in, garbage out.” The same holds true for the human mind, our built-in super-computer. Computer programmers know that whatever they feed into a computer will inevitably show up in the printout. So, if “garbage” goes in, “garbage” will come out - GIGO.”

Be careful what you allow to go into the program of your mind. It is easy to accept ideas that seem encouraging and helpful, but are really destructive intruders. I lock the doors of my car day and night because it is a wise precaution. You probably do the same with your car. However, if you are vigilant in protecting your property, how much more vigilant should you be in protecting your mind? Make no mistake — there are evil thoughts standing at the door of your consciousness, waiting to gain admittance.

What are you putting in your mind? That is a pivotal question, for what you put in your mind will shape your life.

An ancient proverb suggests, “Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character; reap destiny.”

The eyes and the ears are the entrance to the mind. So, be careful what you read, what you view and what you listen to. Be very careful of the books you read and be selective of the movies you see. There is much produced and is exceedingly entertaining and popular that is not fit for the Christian to see nor to hear.

Methodist Bishop Richard C. Rains was right when he said, “If it is wise to pay farmers for not planting wheat, it is even wiser to pay Hollywood for not producing movies.” Anything that could be classified as pornography, whether

it is in a magazine or on television or in the movies, should be eliminated from your mind. A reviewer said of a certain book, "This is not a book to be lightly thrown away. It should be thrown away with great force." The same could be said of some of what we read today.

When some of the people in Ephesus became Christians their reading habits changed. "They brought their books together (the things they formerly read) and they burned them before all men" (Acts. 19:19). We may need to do some book burning in our day.

How is your spiritual garden? Stay at the weeding. Keep pulling up the error; chopping out the evil; cutting away all that will neither produce good fruit nor give good seed for future gardens.

Think On These Things

Second, we need to concentrate our thoughts. Programming your mind is not just a matter of eliminating negative influences or bad thoughts. It is not enough to try to keep evil thoughts out of your mind. Sometimes the harder we try to keep a thought out the more deeply we drive it in. We need to lift our thoughts to a higher level. If bad thinking is a danger, it stands to reason that good thinking is help.

We are summoned in scripture to set ourselves to think the right and refuse to think the wrong things. Paul gives us this counsel when he writes, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (Phil. 4:8).

I am particularly interested in the form of Paul's appeal.

If I had been writing this passage, I would have said, “Whatsoever things are honorable just, pure, lovely, and of good report, do these things.” Paul knew better, and he said, “Think” on these things. He was following the characteristic method in the Bible in placing the emphasis upon the thought of life.

A godlike character is no accident. It is the result of putting your mind and heart on God and the good things of life. Alcoholic’s Anonymous has a saying; “It’s not the drinking, but the thinking, that makes us stinking.” There is a truth in that. Our stinking thinking creates so many problems.

What should we think about? In this verse we are given a list of ethically desirable qualities which should occupy our thoughts. God, knowing that the mind is a battlefield, provides us a list of positives around which we are to build our thinking. The list given here is intended to shape your mind and character. What things?

Things true (authentic or factual). A. W. Tozer, who wrote a great deal about Christian faithfulness, was right; “The heart that fails to cultivate truth and root out error will shortly be a theological wilderness.” (*Man: The Dwelling Place of God*, A. W. Tozier, 1966, Christian Publication Inc., Camp Hill, PA.) Things honest (honorable, worthy of respect). Things just (fair and right). Things pure (morally clean). Things lovely (kind, gracious, and winsome). Things of good report (are commendable about others). Things of virtue (morally excellent). Things of praise — here’s the decisive factor. Discipline your thoughts with anything, which has the approval of God. Focus on what you can praise God for, be thankful for.

There we have them; the eight qualities of thought which should characterize our thoughts. And you will notice that

they are all positive.

We should not allow impure, immoral, vulgar, profane thinking to linger in our minds. Our thoughts should not be critical, judgmental, or vindictive. Do not waste your time daydreaming, fantasizing, or in self-pity. There is no place for arrogance or fear or anxiety in our minds. Stay away from jealous, angry and prejudiced thinking. We should carry the banner of our thoughts high.

This is the way to transform character. Paul appeals to us not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed (Romans 12:1-2). However, how can this transformation take place? “By renewing your mind . . .” Continually put your mind on the things that are above and you will soon experience this transformation.

As Billy Sunday said, “It is more important to clean up a neighborhood’s mind than its streets.” “Guard well thy thoughts,” Owen Young said, “for our thoughts are heard in heaven.”

It Takes All Your Mind

Third, we need to consecrate our thoughts. Jesus said we were to love God with all of our heart, and mind, and soul, and strength. That’s all there is of you. God wants your mind as well as every other part of you. Richard C. Rains said, “It doesn’t take a great mind to be a Christian, but it takes all the mind a man has.”

We Christians seem to suffer from an inferiority complex. We act like we believe a person cannot be first rate intellectually and a dedicated Christian at the same time. Nevertheless, nothing could be further from the truth. Christianity has always been the handmaiden of education. Wherever the gospel has gone, it has encouraged truth and learning. In the beginning days of our nation the only

education was Christian education. Harvard University was named after Rev. John Harvard. And over the entrance of Harvard are these words: “That a learned ministry might not depart from the earth.”

Train your mind and make it as keen, as razor-sharp, as possible. Then offer it to the Lord. We should offer him the purest hearts, the strongest bodies, and the sharpest minds.

We need great Christian minds in our nation today. Great moral ideas depend on it. Truth does not rise. It filters down. Eventually, people are thinking what the thinkers are thinking. What is taught in the university, what is reported on the news, what is written in the press, what is spoken in the legislative halls and what is preached in the pulpits will in time be believed in the streets.

So offer your intellect to God for he will use it to his own glory. We know he deserves and wants the fruit of our hands. We know that he wants and deserves the fruit of our lips. But how about the fruit of our minds? There is no reason that Satan should have a claim on the great minds of today.

We need to have the mind of Christ. Paul states, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). Phillips and Moffatt expand this verse for our particular day, “Let Christ Jesus be your example as to what your attitude and purpose should be in life.” Paul J. Meyer, president of SMI International, reminds us that, “Attitude is actually a habit of thought.” Therefore, to be like Christ, we need to habitually think the thoughts of Christ.

Will you, then, do it? Will you cultivate your thoughts? Will you concentrate your thoughts? Will you consecrate your thoughts? I leave it with you — it is true in any area and with any man — as he thinks in his heart so is he.

Perhaps the most important question is this: What think ye of Jesus? If you will think right thoughts about him, if you will think enough about him, if you will think enough about him to trust him, your life can be changed. What do you think of Jesus? For whatever you think of him will determine what you do with him and what you do with him will determine not only your character but also your destiny.

Your mind is not only the devil's playground — it is your battleground. Paul says the devil has blinded the minds of those that believe not. Give your mind to Christ and follow him.

Chapter 3

The Goodness of God

Romans 2:4

Samuel McCrea Calvert said, “The worst moment for an atheist is when he feels grateful and has no one to thank.” There are moments in the life of every one of us when gratitude wells up within us. In those moments where can we turn except to God? Instinctively we lift our voice to heaven and express our gratitude to him.

So gratitude itself is an evidence for God. How else can we explain it if God does not exist? If evil and suffering cause us to doubt God, then goodness ought to cause us to affirm God. We cannot honestly accept one and reject the other. It is not right to concentrate on one aspect of life to the exclusion of the other. Talk about the problem of evil, what about the problem of good? It is one of the great mysteries of all time. Its existence needs to be explained also. Where does it come from?

James tells us that every good gift comes from God. (James 1:17). And the apostle Paul adds further insight into goodness when he asks, “Or despiseth thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and long-suffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4).

This question is set in the context of the universality of sin. In Romans 1 Paul says that Gentiles are sinners. In chapter two he says that Jews are sinners also. And in chapter three he declares that all people are sinners (Romans 3:23).

The Jews who read this would have given a hearty “amen” to the fact that Gentiles were sinners. But they would never have had that they were. They felt they were God’s chosen people and the goodness of God that had been showered upon them was proof of that. His goodness to them led them to believe they were not like other men. They became arrogant, proud, and self-righteous.

Paul does not argue the fact that they have been blessed of God. But he does disagree with their interpretation of God’s goodness. He declares that the goodness of God was intended to lead them to repentance. So he asked this probing question, “Will you take for granted, the goodness and the patience of God, which was intended to lead you to repentance?”

In this statement Paul sets out God’s desire for and demand of us. It is that we repent of our sins. But how does God attempt to get us to repent? He does not, by sending trials and tribulation, try to drive us to repentance. He does not by threats try to scare us to repentance. He rather, by his goodness and patience, seeks to lead us to repentance. He wants us to serve him out of love and gratitude, not out of compulsion or fear.

The tragedy is that we often take his goodness for granted. The question of the apostle Paul is pertinent and personal, “Will you take for granted God’s goodness which was intended to lead you to repentance?”

I want you to look at the goodness of God as it is expressed in three ways:

His initial creation

His continual preservation

His eternal salvation

Behold, It Was Very Good

First, the goodness of God can be seen in his initial creation. I say “initial” because ours is a creation gone awry. Today, the scriptures say, “All creation groans” under sin. The Bible opens with the affirmation, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

But God’s original creation was good in every way. The Bible does not try to prove God. It simply presents him. You might think the Bible is filled with statements about atheism. Not so! There is only one verse in the entire Bible about the atheism: “The fool has said in his heart there is no God” (Ps. 14:1, the verse is repeated in Ps. 53:1). Having thus classified atheist, thereafter the non-existence of God is never considered again.

Incidentally, Zig Zeigler tells that the Brown Trucking Company out of Atlanta, Georgia, when it was legal to do so, used to give all its prospective employees a lie detector test. They tested thousands of people all across the United States. One of the questions they asked was, “Do you believe in God?” Moreover, without exception, 100 percent of the time, when the person said, “No,” the needle literally jumped off the machine. They were not telling the truth. Even a fool knows there is a God.

The first thing you notice as you read of God’s creation is its goodness. Seven times in the first chapter of Genesis alone, the creative work of God is described as “good.”

- God created the light “and it was good” (vs. 3-4).
- God gathered the waters of the earth in one place and let the dry land appear. “And God saw that it was good” (vs. 9-10).
- He created the grass, the trees, and the flowers, and God saw that it was good (vs. 12).
- He made the two great lights — the sun and the

moon and the stars. And “he saw that it was good” (vs. 15- 18).

- He created the great whales and every living creature that moves in the water and “he saw that it was good” (vs. 21).
- He created all the living creatures on the earth and he “saw that it was good” (vs. 24-25).
- Then he made man in his own image and when he was finished the scriptures conclude “and God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (vs. 31).

Recently I was in the Grove Park Inn in Asheville, North Carolina, the hotel of celebrities and dignitaries through the years. I saw an inscription on one of the fireplaces written by Elizabeth Stanton that captured my attention. It read:

“This Old World we’re living in is mighty hard to beat. We get a thorn with every rose, but ain’t the roses sweet?”

God has given us a wonderful creation to live in. There are thorns among the roses, but the roses make them worth it.

The first thing God names in his creation as not being good was loneliness. He said, “It is not good for man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Adam needed someone to love and someone to love him in return. Therefore, the Lord put Adam to sleep and taking one of his ribs he created Eve. Then he gave her to him and in marriage when he said, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, cleave unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).

So, marriage itself is another expression of the goodness of God. Years ago the condensed book selection of Reader’s

Digest was “*First, Do No Harm*” (November 1978) by J. Kenyon Rainer, M.D. It was his personal account about the making of a neurosurgeon.

It was a moving story of the skills, emotions, and time demands of a neurosurgeon. And the agonizing choices he had to make for his patients, his family, and himself.

Dr. Rainer married his college sweetheart the day after he completed his internship. The next day he began his residency. In the years that followed they had two children, a boy and a girl. He had only snatches of time for them.

After six years he and his wife divorced. Dr. Rainer admitted, “I had not provided the support and security she needed.”

Later he left Memphis, where he had been working as a neurosurgeon, and moved to Auburn, Alabama, where he had been raised. Auburn was at the time a small town of 20,000 population and he hoped for a quieter and more peaceful life there.

He writes, “Early in my new practice I met a farmer named Charlie Henderson. He was 78 years old, but looked 60. When he was 16, his father had died and he had taken over the dairy farm. At 18 he married Ruth Langston, the county vet’s daughter. They had three children: a son who had moved away, a son who had died of tuberculosis, and a daughter who was divorced.

“All this and more he had told me during his three-week stay in the hospital, where he was recuperating from a stroke. And we had discussed my divorce and my children living in Atlanta. Why an interest in me? Because of sons he couldn’t talk to? Advice he never got to give? Perhaps. He always ended our conversation with a smile and a wink, saying, ‘One day I’ll tell you the secret to a happy marriage.’”

He continues, “From the doorway I watched Ruth Henderson help him sit up in bed. Once upright he helped support his weight. He was six feet, four inches, tall and had big, muscular arms — with his good right arm. Ruth had begun to massage his back when his head suddenly dropped and he slumped over onto the floor. I rushed over and helped her lift him back into the bed. Then I ordered a nurse to bring me I.V. fluids and the EKG machine. I pasted the electrodes on his chest and waited for the readout.

“I was shocked by the results. The EKG showed that he had suffered a massive heart attack, a peculiar silent type, not accompanied by chest pain. Now I knew why his blood pressure was so low. Much of his heart muscle had been destroyed and was now too weak to pump blood.

“I also knew he would die. I sat down on the edge of the bed and told him he had suffered a heart attack and that he would have to stay in bed more. ‘It’s worse than that, isn’t it?’ he asked.

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“A few hours,” I said softly. “Henderson reached up with his right arm, placed it around his wife’s neck, and pulled her to him. I injected dopamine into the I.V. to strengthen the heart contractions and raise the blood pressure.

“Charlie Henderson watched me. ‘Nothing fancy, okay?’”

“Yes, sir.”

“Henderson continued to hold his wife, running his gnarled fingers through her white hair. He touched her cheeks and lips with his fingers. When her tears began to drop on his chest, he rubbed her eyes with the back of his hand — a rough, working man’s hand, but delicately soft

whenever he touched her.

“We had 60 good years together, didn’t we, Ruthie?”

“We sure did.”

“You were always the prettiest girl on the block.”

“In 1920, Charlie, I was the only girl on the block.”

“Well, you’re still the prettiest.” He was shivering now, his falling blood pressure making his body cold. Soon he fell silent, and only the movement of his fingers through his wife’s hair was noticeable. Then I saw his hand fall by his side. He had died.

“I led Ruth out of the room and down the hall to the day room. Her daughter was there, and Ruth tried to console her, ‘We had a wonderful life together, dear,’ she said. ‘Our love will keep us together while we are apart.’”

“Mrs. Henderson,” I said, quietly, “may I ask you a question? Mr. Henderson used to say that one day he would tell me the secret to a happy marriage. He never told me. Could you tell me what he would have said?”

“I don’t know for sure,” she replied, “but I know he lived his love every day, and he was never afraid to show me his emotions.”

“I see,” I said.

“And, I’ll tell you something else,” Ruth continued. “I don’t think Charlie would mind. Most nights I went to bed before Charlie. When he turned back the covers, I put my book down and turned out the light and held his hand. He always hugged me and held me for a few minutes, no matter how tired he was. And every night after he kissed me good-night he whispered in my ear, ‘Ruthie, this is the best part of my day.’”

Has God given you a mate like that? Has he given you someone to love and someone to love you in return? That too is an expression of his goodness to you.

Will you take it for granted? Or will you allow his goodness to turn you to him, to cause you to put your faith and trust in him? Don't you know that the goodness of God is intended to lead us to repentance?

How Many Bullets Have Missed You?

Second, the goodness of God can be seen in his continual preservation. God created the heavens and the earth in six days and rested on the seventh. He rested not from exhaustion but from satisfaction. But God did not withdraw himself from the world. He continues to be operative in it, guiding, directing, preserving us. He ceased the work of creation and began the work of providence. He is still at work in our world today. Jesus said, "My father worketh hitherto and I work" (John 4). And Paul said, "By him all things hold together" (Col. 1:7).

In the apostle Paul's first sermon to a pagan congregation at Lystra he pointed them to the living God who made heaven and earth.

Then he said, "Nevertheless, he (God) left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17).

In this verse, Paul points to God's continual preservation through the sunshine and the rain, through the bountifulness of the earth, as an expression of his goodness to us. In countries where people draw their livelihood directly from the earth they see this more readily than most of us. But, if we are wise, even we will recognize that man, despite his artistic pretensions, his sophistication and many accomplishments, owes the fact of his existence to a six-inch layer of topsoil and the fact that it rains.

After a tour of the United States, a European was being

interviewed on his impressions of our country. He saw our gigantic cities with their skyscrapers towering into the heavens. He inspected our great factories that belched out their smoke into the sky. He visited our large universities and saw young people in the process of education. But when the reporter asked him what impressed him most about America, he replied, "The size of the American garbage can."

Our garbage cans have a tale to tell. The average American throws away ten times his weight in rubbish each year. The average Englishman throws away five times his weight. The average Israeli throws away three and a half times his weight. But most of the rest of the people in the world do not throw away anything. They need everything they have. So when you feel like complaining, remember that your garbage disposal probably eats better than 30 percent of the people in the world.

This very fact ought to cause us to turn to him. We have food to eat, water to drink, medicine for our bodies, all in abundance, all of which are expressions of the goodness of God.

But not just what he has given to us, but what he has kept from us. We must all at reflection feel like the young soldier back home from the war in Vietnam. He tried to get out of telling his experiences by saying that nothing dramatic happened to him. But his questioners were persistent. One said, "Something must have happened. Now tell me in all of your experiences in Southeast Asia, what was it that struck you most?"

"Well, sir," replied the soldier after some thought, "the thing that struck me most was the number of bullets that missed me."

How many bullets have missed you? How many

illnesses? Accidents? Tragedies? What have you been spared?

A young man was killed in a tragic accident. His father and mother gave a huge gift to the church as a memorial to their son. When the gift was announced to the congregation, another mother whispered to her husband, "Let's give the same for our boy."

"What are you talking about?" responded the father. "Our son hasn't lost his life."

"That's just the point," replied the mother. "Let's give it because he has been spared."

Must we wait until some tragedy befalls us to recognize our need of God? His blessings upon our lives? His providential goodness and care are to remind us to turn to him.

Paul's question comes to our hearts again, "Will you take for granted the goodness of God which is intended to lead you to repentance?"

God's Only Forgotten Son

Third, the goodness of God can be seen in his eternal salvation. Paul speaks of the forbearance and the grace of God. God's grace has been manifested to us throughout history. Loving us with an everlasting love, he chose the nation of Israel as the people through whom his son would come into the world.

When the fullness of time came, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He grew up in Nazareth. He worked in his father's carpenter shop. He came, in time, to manhood. When he at last presented himself as the Messiah his people rejected him. They put him through the mockery of a trial and then nailed him to the old rugged cross. Thus, through his death, he became the savior of all humanity.

One of the saddest pictures in all the Bible is Jesus standing over the city of Jerusalem that has rejected him, crying, “Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou who stonest the prophets, how often would I have drawn you to myself like a mother chicken draws her brood to her wing, but you would not.”

In addition, by laying down his life he gave to us the greatest expression of God’s grace and goodness the world will ever see. Jesus described himself as “the good shepherd” who lays down his life for his sheep.

What an amazing, matchless patience God has displayed toward us. The word “patience” literally means “holding back.” If I were God, by this time I would have kicked this old world in its axis and out of its galaxy. But, the scriptures tell us that his patience continues even now as he strives with our hearts and delays his return that we might yet be saved (2 Peter 3:9). I ask you now, “Will you take the goodness of God for granted? Don’t you realize it was given to lead you to repentance? Will you not then turn to him?”

A chaplain tells of his experience during the Vietnam War. He preached the gospel to many men in his outfit and scores of them repented of their sins and turned to the Savior. But there was one young man who was most bitter. He would do his best to disrupt the work of the chaplain, make fun of those that had been converted and were trying to live the Christian life in the difficult environment of army life. The chaplain tried to befriend the boy, but the boy held him at arm’s length and would not cooperate.

Then the group went to the front lines in a dreadful encounter. Many of the boys did not come back. There were few survivors. Among those who did come back was this obstinate boy. He came back a different person. He looked up the chaplain and apologized to him, saying, “Sir,

I'm sorry for the way I acted prior to this rugged encounter. But out yonder in a rice field some nights ago I realized that I was not so smart after all. I promised God that if he would let me live I would serve him the rest of my life. Chaplain, I don't deserve it, but would you tell me how to be saved?"

The chaplain took the boy into a small tent and under the dim light began to read the third chapter of John to him. When he came to verse 16 he handed the Bible to the boy and asked him to read that verse aloud.

The boy read slowly, "For . . . God . . . so loved . . . the world . . . that . . . he . . . gave his . . . only . . . forgotten . . . son . . . that whosoever . . . believeth in him . . . should not . . . perish . . . but have . . . everlasting life."

The chaplain stopped him and said, "Son, you missed a part of the verse. The word is not 'forgotten,' son, but 'begotten,' son. Try reading it again."

The young man began to read again, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only . . ." And he stopped. He looked at the chaplain and said, "Sir, I read the verse right the first time. He has been forgotten in my life. I lived near a church when I was growing up, but I never went in. I went to high school and college and forgot about him there. I joined the service and came overseas and forgot about him here. But, sir, from this day on, I promise you, Jesus shall no longer be the forgotten Son of God in my life."

Have you forgotten him? In the rush of making a living, in the pursuit of learning, in the endless round of everyday living, have you pushed Christ aside? Do not do it any longer. Give him his rightful place in your life.

Recognize God's goodness. Respond to it in repentance and faith. That is one reason he has been so good to you.

Chapter 4

Three Ways to Tell Right From Wrong

Romans 14:21-23

In an episode of the television series, “Law and Order,” a political zealot who had killed several people who did not agree with his views was arrested. In response to a question by one of the detectives, he said, “I’m just a Band-Aid on a bullet hole.” The detective asked, “Who is bleeding to death?” The criminal replied, “America!”

Ask anyone who knows and they will tell you America is bleeding to death. Not from a bullet hole from an assassin, but from internal injuries. We are bleeding from a moral and spiritual cancer.

The bleeding can be seen everywhere. Our political leaders have moral problems; our athletic heroes have moral problems; our matinee idols have moral problems; our spiritual leaders have moral problems; our military — the Army, the Navy, and the Marines — have moral problems.

There are reasons for this. One reason is the changing family. Traditionally the strongest influence in people’s lives has been the home. But today almost one-third of all children are born out of wedlock and 40 percent of our children grow up in homes without their biological father. These things cannot help but tear at the moral fabric of society.

The second reason is the influence of media. The greatest influence on the values of people today is television.

The average teenager will see 23,000 hours of television, an average of three and one-half hours a day, by high school graduation. And, what they see will destroy, not strengthen moral values. I saw a two-part cartoon recently that depicts the state of American television. In the first picture a woman says to her husband, “Honey, will you take out the garbage?” In the next section the husband was walking out the door with the television in his arms.

I never thought I would see the day when TV dinners had more taste than TV. Many people are wondering why a government that is clever enough to devise ways to shield children from the dangers of prayer in the classroom is not clever enough to shield them from the evils of vulgarity in entertainment.

Another reason is moral relativism. Sixty percent of Americans do not believe in absolute truth. The only absolute they believe in is that there are no absolutes. A story about Willie Nelson (“Personal Glimpses,” from *Readers Digest*) typifies the attitude of many people about morality. Willie bought his own golf course. Someone asked him what par was. He replied, “Anything I want it to be. You see that hole over there? That’s a par 47 — and yesterday I birdied it.” They believe right and wrong is whatever they want it to be.

All of this represents a clear and present danger. For when morals die, laws die; and when laws die, the nation dies. Carl Henry, America’s foremost evangelical theologian, said, “Any nation that ignores moral absolutes is in danger of marching off the map.” We need to ask ourselves, “How close to the edge are we?”

In this kind of world, where can we look for guidance? How do we know right from wrong? Shall we let everyone do his own thing? I remind you that the dark ages of Israel’s

history was the period of the judges. In addition, that was the period “when every man did what was right in his own sight” (Judg. 17:6).

Shall we take a poll and decides by majority opinion? Shall we follow the crowd? The Lord said to Israel, through Moses, “Though shalt not follow a multitude to do evil” (Ex. 23:2). If we had followed the crowd in Noah’s day we would never have gotten in the ark. If we had followed the crowd in Lot’s day we would have been consumed with fire and brimstone. If we had followed the crowd in Jesus’ day we would have shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

The only safe answer is to turn to God. Morality is rooted in him. Right is right because God said so. And wrong is wrong because God said so. No less a historian than Will Durant said there is no example in history of any nation ever maintaining a moral standard without the aid of religion. In addition, as Dostovesky said, “If God does not exist, then all is permitted.”

Pollster George Barna put it succinctly, “America is facing one of two outcomes in the not-too-distant future — moral anarchy or spiritual revival.”

Nevertheless, even some people who believe in God are confused about moral issues. They are not sure what is right and wrong, or how to know the difference. How can we know right from wrong? The Lord gives us the answer in Romans, chapter 14. This entire chapter is dealing with questionable things.

The historical background will help us to understand what he is saying. The Gentile believers to whom Paul wrote were fresh out of paganism. As pagans they had worshipped idols. Part of their worship involved offering sacrifices to their gods. After they had made their sacrifice, they then took a portion of the meat and had a banquet.

And they invited their friends and neighbors to join in the celebration.

These new Christians still had old friends who had not come to faith in Christ. Often, they were invited back to these celebrations. As Christians they now knew there was nothing to an idol. So, some of them were accepting these invitations because it was, in their opinion, a harmless act.

Other believers refused to participate, believing that the followers of Christ should make a clean break with their old life and practices. To see some believers involved in these pagan celebrations was disillusioning and shook their faith. Moreover, Jewish converts were in disagreement over the need to continue observing Jewish holy days.

It was in this context that the apostle Paul set out three guiding principles for Christian conduct. The first was the principle of accountability. We are all ultimately responsible to God for our actions. We need to know what he thinks about a thing before we do it (vs. 10, 12). The second was the principle of love. We should be concerned about the effect of our conduct on others, especially those who are not as mature or as informed as we should be (vs. 13, 15, and 21). The third was the principle of conscience. We must not do anything unless we are absolutely persuaded it is acceptable (vs. 22-23).

From these three principles I have drawn three tests of right and wrong to help us in moral decisions. They are:

The test of scripture

The test of influence

The test of conscience

Have You Not Read?

First, the test of scripture — what does the Bible say? The first thing we need to remember is that we must all

stand before the judgment seat of Christ. We must give an account of ourselves to God (vs. 10, 12). Therefore, the first and foremost consideration in any moral question would have to be “what does God think about it, will this be pleasing to him?”

How do we know what is acceptable to the Lord? Clearly, God has not left us to grope in a moral and spiritual fog, with no sense of direction. That is why he gave us the Bible. The apostle Paul wrote, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto good works” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

This means that knowledge of the Bible is imperative if we are to know right from wrong. As far as our conduct is concerned, it is back to the Bible or back to the jungle.

This was the guiding principle in Jesus’ life. At the outset of his earthly ministry Satan approached Jesus with three temptations (Matt. 4:1-11). The first was to turn stones into bread, thus to build his ministry on the material. The second was to cast himself from the highest point of the temple, thus to build his ministry on the spectacular. The third was to fall down and worship him and he (Satan) would give Jesus the kingdoms of the world, thus building his ministry on compromise.

In each of these instances, Jesus answered by saying, “It is written . . .” When Satan tempted him to turn stones into bread, Jesus replied by saying, “It is written,” and then quoting Deut. 8:3, “Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”

When Satan tempted him to cast himself from the temple, assured that the angels would preserve him, Jesus again answered by saying, “It is written,” and quoting Deut.

6:16, “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.” And when Satan tempted Jesus to fall down and worship him and thus receive the kingdoms of the world he had come to save, he replied once more, “It is written,” and quoted Deut. 6:13, “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and him only shalt thou serve.”

All three times Jesus met temptation by replying, “It is written,” and quoting the scriptures. Where was it written? In Readers Digest? In the encyclopedia? In Newsweek magazine? No! It was written in God’s word.

No doubt, Jesus had learned the scriptures from his parents and from sitting at the feet of the rabbis in the synagogue schools in Nazareth. Had he not known the scriptures, he would not have known how to respond to temptation.

The psalmist said, “Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee.”(Psalm 119:11) That is what Jesus did and that is what we need to do.

Parents, teach your children the scriptures. Young people, memorize the scriptures. For the time will come when you will be in a parked car, or at a party, or away on a trip and you will have to decide on your own whether to do a thing or not. Your parents will not be there to advise you. Your Sunday School teacher will not be there to help you. Moreover, all of your friends will be urging you on. In those moments the only thing you will have to guide you will be the values, the convictions that you have put in your heart at an earlier time.

When Jesus was questioned about the rights or wrongs of divorce, he answered his questioners by saying, “Have you not read the scriptures?” Then he quoted what Genesis said about marriage (Matt. 19:4-6). That is precisely our problem. We have not read the Bible and thus we are under

a cloud of confusion. To know God's word is to know God's will in many things.

A. W. Tozier once said, "Put this down as an unfailing rule: never seek the leading of the Lord concerning an act that is forbidden in the word of God. To do so is to convict ourselves of insincerity."

Others, Lord, Yes Others

Second the test of influence — how will this affect other people? The Bible, while given to teach us what to believe and how to live, is not a rulebook. It is not like the rulebook of an athletic event that covers every conceivable situation that might arise. Many issues are not dealt with specifically in scripture. The Bible says nothing about abortion, the use of drugs (except alcohol), pornography, and scores of other things we are faced with today.

If an issue is not dealt with in scripture, where can we turn for guidance? We must then rely upon principles. One of the guiding principles for us is love. We are not only responsible to God, but we are also responsible to our brother. I am bound to ask myself about a questionable thing not only how this will affect God, but also how it will affect others — especially younger, more immature believers.

We are to walk charitably before one another (vs. 15). We are not to eat meat, nor to drink wine, "nor do anything" that causes a brother to stumble and fall (vs. 20-21).

To live by the principle of love means that I care more about others than I care about myself. It means my life is not governed by selfish desires. I do not think only of my own pleasure and wishes, but of my influence on others. As the hymn goes, "Others, Lord, yes others, let that my motto be. Help me to live for others, that I may live like thee."

There may be things I could do and places I could go that would be perfectly harmless to my spiritual life. However, if someone younger in years or in the faith, someone less mature and more impressionable saw me, it might hurt him or her spiritually and cause them to stumble. If so, I must not do it. I must put their spiritual well-being above my own pleasure. I voluntarily limit what I do and where I go, out of deference to their spiritual well-being.

It will help if I ask myself, “By doing this thing or going to this place will I influence others to follow my example? And would it be okay if everyone did what I am doing? Would it be okay for my parents to do it? My brother or sister? My pastor? Would I be disappointed in them or lose faith in them if they did the same thing? If the answer is “Yes,” then I know that thing is not right.

Not a Bad Moral Compass

Third, the test of conscience. Would I feel guilty or ashamed if I did it? I am responsible not only to God, and others, but also to my own inner voice called the conscience. Paul reminds us, “He that doubteth is damned” if he goes ahead and does a thing, and “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (vs. 22-23). The word faith in this instance means “conviction” or “persuasion.” The principle here is that I must be fully persuaded, I must be absolutely convinced that a thing is right before I do it. I must not ignore my conscience.

What is the conscience? It is a divinely implanted faculty to guide us in matters of right and wrong. Every person, unless they are deranged, has a conscience. While the faculty comes from God, the content of conscience depends somewhat on what we have been taught.

There are, of course, some universals. Everyone

recognizes that it is wrong to kill, wrong to steal, and wrong to lie. Even the person who says there are no moral absolutes will be found saying at times, “that’s not fair.” When anyone uses the word “fair” they are appealing to what they believe is a universal absolute everyone should adhere to.

But beyond those universals, the content of conscience depends on what we have been taught. If the conscience has been regenerated by the power of God and educated by the word of God, it becomes a safe moral compass. The conscience is much like a traffic light. When you drive up to a traffic light it may be red, yellow, or green. If it is red, stop! If it is green, you can go. If it is yellow, you should proceed with caution. If you disregard a caution light, you may wind up in a wreck.

It is the same with the conscience. If when confronted with a moral question there is a clear red light from God, we should not proceed. We know it is wrong. If on the other hand, there is a green light and we are convinced it is safe to go ahead, we may. But if the light is yellow, that means we are not sure. In such instances we must wait until we are fully persuaded that it is safe for us to proceed. If you violate your conscience you may wind up a moral wreck.

The rule, then, is if in doubt — don’t. To violate your conscience is a sin. It is to ignore the voice of God. In addition, as C. S. Lewis said, “Disobedience to conscience makes conscience blind.”

A good test of conscience is to ask ourselves, “Is this something I want to hide? Would I be ashamed if others found out about it? My mother? My children? My pastor?” If I would be ashamed for others to know about it, it is a good sign it is wrong. As Colin Powell said, “A sense of shame is not a bad moral compass.”

E. S. James, former editor of *The Baptist Standard*, said, “When I was an intermediate boy, my mother taught me a valuable lesson in very few words. The shirt I had selected to wear was slightly soiled, and I asked mother if she thought it was too dirty to wear. ‘My son,’ she said, ‘if there is any doubt, then don’t wear it.’”

It is interesting, I think, that military men are speaking out more boldly about morality today than preachers and teachers. First I quoted Gen. Colin Powell. Now, listen to Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, “The truth of the matter is that you always know the right thing to do. The hard part is doing it.”

That is where Christ comes in. He gives us the power to do the right we know to do. Without his internal strength and guidance, we are helplessly lost for time and for eternity.

Chapter 5

The Pleasure of Sin

Heb. 11:24-27

Erroll Flynn was for many years one of Hollywood's most popular actor-lover-playboys. A few weeks before his death, in an interview with a Hollywood reporter, he spoke of his life in the past tense, as though he knew something would happen. As he sat by his pool, taking a mid afternoon drink, he cheerily admitted he had been a scalawag and would change nothing if he had his life to live over. He recalled having squandered more than seven million dollars during his career, but said, "I have no complaints about my life. I've enjoyed every minute of it." Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he gave his favorite quotation, "The way of the transgressor is not as hard as they claim."

When I read that I made note of his quote because it points out an area of confusion. We go to church and hear the preacher say, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23) and "The way of the transgressor is hard" (Prov. 13:15). Then we hear a man like this tell how much he enjoyed his life of sin and we wonder who is right — the man of God or the man of experience?

The fact is, they both are. There is pleasure in sin; we may just as well admit it, else so many people would not be flocking to it. In addition, word would soon get around. But to say that there is pleasure in sin and to say nothing else is misleading. We must ask ourselves, "What kind of pleasure does sin offer? What is the nature of the pleasure of sin?"

We are allowed to see what the pleasure of sin is like in the life and experiences of Moses. Moses was born the son of a Hebrew slave when the Israelites were in Egyptian captivity. The slave population was increasing so rapidly it posed a threat to national security. Therefore, Pharaoh decreed that all male babies were to be put to death. But Moses' mother, believing God had a special mission for her son, disobeyed the order and hid baby Moses in a basket in the reeds along the banks of the Nile River. His sister stood off in the distance to watch over the baby by day and he was taken back to their little hovel at night.

One day, while she was bathing in the river, Pharaoh's daughter discovered baby Moses. Her heart went out to the child so she adopted him as her own son.

So Moses was a slave by birth and a prince by adoption. Thus, he had the benefit of two cultures. He received his spiritual heritage from the Israelites and he received his secular education from the Egyptians.

In time God's call came to Moses to lead his people out of bondage. That call placed Moses squarely at a fork in the road. He was compelled to make one of life's greatest choices. Would he decide to remain in Egypt and enjoy the pleasures and treasures it offered or would he cast his lot with the people of God — a despised group of slaves? His choice was between royalty and slavery, between the pleasure of sin and the reproach of Christ.

Now mind you, this was no easy choice. It was the hardest choice a person can ever make. Sin offered Moses much:

It offered him high social position. Now mind you, social position is not a thing we despise. Some people are willing to pay almost any price to gain social standing. To follow God's way meant that he would have to give up all

of this for the lowest position in the land. He would pass from being the son of the queen to the son of a slave.

It offered him wealth. Egypt was the granary of the world. To Egypt came caravans from all over the East. They carried away much needed grain and they left behind precious gold and silver. A part of this would belong to Moses if he stayed in Egypt.

Egypt offered Moses the playground of the world. It was the Riviera, the New York City, and the Las Vegas of the ancient world. There every pleasure and gratification imaginable was within Moses' grasp. To follow God meant to forsake all of this and be identified with a despised and rejected nation.

Yet, the Bible says, "By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:24-27).

How did Moses come to this decision? Why, we are bound to ask did he give up so much the world has to offer? It is because he saw sin in its full light. He saw sin unvarnished. He saw it with the glitter rubbed off. He saw undeniably that sin had pleasure, but he also saw that its pleasure was short, costly, and deceptive. So, taking God at his word, he turned his back on Egypt and obeyed the Lord. He was convinced the future belonged to God, not to pharaoh, so he cast his lot with the people of God.

Some of you are standing at the same fork in the road where Moses once stood. You are torn between the call of

the Lord and the pleasure of sin. If we could see sin as Moses did, we would make the decision he did.

Look at sin realistically for a moment. There is pleasure in sin. There is no doubt about that. But . . .

The pleasure of sin is short.

The pleasure of sin is costly.

The pleasure of sin is deceptive.

Temporary Pleasure, Permanent Despair

First, the pleasure of sin is short. The scriptures tell us Moses chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasure of sin “for a season” (Heb. 11:25).

Moses looked sin squarely in the eye and saw undeniably that it offered pleasure. He fully realized that Egypt could give him many things. However, he realized that it could not give him lasting joy. Therefore, he made his choice based on eternal values. He took the long look and made his choice based on that which is lasting rather than that which is temporary.

Augustine said, “Always see where a thing leads to.” And C.S. Lewis put it this way, “Always follow a thing out to its bloody end.” We would all do well to do that. In the made-for-television movie, “O.J.” about the life of O.J. Simpson, Willie Mays visited him to recruit him for USC. In their conversation Willie said, “Fame is a vapor; popularity is an accident; money takes wings; the only thing that endures is character.” An old poem read:

When wealth is lost, nothing is lost.

When health is lost, something is lost.

When character is lost, everything is lost.

If only O.J. had listened and learned.

Sin is only charming in the present or the immediate

future. It has no charm in the past. How fascinating sin seems now it is being committed. How absolutely necessary it seems to our happiness. But when it slips into the past it loses its attractiveness. Its pearly teeth become ugly fangs. Its shapely hands become unshapely claws. Its sunshine and song soon fade and we are left empty.

The sin of the future seems as fair as an angel from heaven, but the sin of yesterday is as ugly as a fiend from hell. The Bible ever confesses that fact.

Sin has its laughter and song and sunshine. Sin has its pleasures but they do not last. The most brilliant party soon ends. The brightest celebration is soon over. The sweetest drink is soon drunk. The fairest flower soon fades. Choose the way of sin if you will and though you may laugh, your laughter will be temporary. Though you may rejoice, your joy will be as fleeting as a shadow. Then one day when your laughter has all died and the music has all stopped and the flowers are all withered, you will have a whole eternity to curse yourself.

The scriptures say, "The bread of deceit is sweet to a man, but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel" (Prov. 20:17). Sin is always that way.

When I think of the shortness of the pleasure of sin, I think of Roy Reigels, who perhaps pulled the most famous bonehead stunt in all the history of sports. He played for California against Georgia Tech in the 1929 Rose Bowl game. While scrambling for a loose ball he received a blow on the head that dazed him and caused him to lose his sense of direction. He picked up the ball and galloped down the field in the wrong direction. He was tackled just short of the goal line by one of his own men. But, because of his mistake, California lost the game 8-7.

I have often wondered how he must have felt as he tucked

that ball near his breast and started to run. He did not realize he was headed in the wrong direction. All he knew was that suddenly everyone in the stands was on their feet, shouting at the top of their voices. He could not understand what they were saying, only that they seemed to be cheering him on. Then he was tackled by his own teammate, only to realize he had been running toward his own goal line. In addition, he then had to go through life being called “Wrong Way Reigels.”

The pleasure of sin is like that. It offers momentary pleasure and permanent despair. Remember that the pleasure of sin is real, but it is fleeting.

There is No Bargain Basement

Second, the pleasure of sin is costly. The Bible says Moses esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: “for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward” (Heb. 11:26).

The word “respect” means, “to look intently . . . to look away from everything else.” Moses had a keen eye for the things of real value. So clearly did he see the end of things that he considered the reproach of Christ to be worth more than all the riches that Egypt could offer.

Moses put sin on the scales of eternity and it was found wanting. He compared the pleasure of sin with the price of sin and decided it cost too much. He asked himself, “What is a man profited if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” and he did not like the answer that came back.

We would do well to learn the same truth. There is no bargain basement with sin. The devil runs no discount store. If you sin you pay full price. “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23) and the economy never affects that.

If you want to know something of the high cost of low

living, look at the life of Samson. Never was there a person born with more potential or with a greater opportunity than Samson was. Blessed with supernatural strength from God and a physique that would be the envy of any pro athlete, he was chosen by God to deliver his people from the oppression of the Philistines.

However, Samson was selfish, arrogant, and lustful. He thought only of himself. He became involved with the beautiful but treacherous Delilah. She tricked him, cut off his hair, the source of his strength, and betrayed him to the enemy he had once harassed. The Philistines quickly arrested Samson, wrapped him in chains, and took him to prison. They gouged out his eyes, harnessed him to a mill where he was forced to grind grain as an animal. Daily they came to taunt him as he labored like an animal.

Look at poor, pathetic Samson now — bald, blind, and bound. He has lost his strength. He has lost his sight. He has lost his dignity. In addition, most of all, he has failed to achieve the great purpose God had for his life. Now ask him, “Samson, was it worth the price?” You do not need to wait for the answer. We know what it is already. Sin cost him too much.

Listen! The concept of sin has changed in America today . . . but the historic wages of sin have not.

Sin will take you further than you want to go

Keep you lower than you'll ever know

Make you pay more than you want to pay

Make you stay longer than you want to stay.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar wrote a poem that has become the autobiography of many a sinner when he penned these words.

*This is the price I pay -
Just for one riotous day —
Years of regret and grief,
Sorrow without relief.
Suffer it I will, my friend,
Suffer it until the end,
Until the grave will give relief
Small was the thing I bought,
Small was the thing at best
Small was the debt I thought
But, on God — the interest.*

Trading One Slavery for Another

Finally, the pleasure of sin is deceptive. It promises more than it produces. It can never satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. The scriptures say, “By faith Moses forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible” (vs. 27).

The prodigal son gives testimony to this. He went from a wanton life to a wanting life. He sat down at the devil’s table and wound up with food poisoning. He found that the husks of the far country could fill the belly, but not satisfy the soul.

In his famous sermon, “Payday Someday,” R. G. Lee told the story: “When I was pastor of the First Baptist Church of New Orleans all that I preached and taught was sent out over the radio. In my ‘fan mail’ I received letters from a young man who called himself ‘chief of the kangaroo court.’ Many nasty critical things he said. Sometimes he wrote nice lines — and nice lines were, in all the vulgar things he wrote, like gardenias in a garbage can.

“One day I received a call from a nurse in the charity hospital of New Orleans. It was about this fellow who so

often dipped his pen in slop and who so seldom thrust his pen into nectar. She said, ‘Pastor, there is a young man down here whose name we do not know, who will not tell us his name. All he will tell us is that he is the chief of the kangaroo court. He is going to die. He says you are the only preacher in New Orleans that he has ever heard — and he has never seen you. Will you come down?’ ‘Yes,’ I replied, and I quit what I was doing and hurried down to the hospital.

“The young nurse met me at the entrance of the charity ward and took me in. A glance around showed cots on the north side, cots on the south side, and beds on the east, and beds on the west side . . . and a cluster of cots in the center of the huge ward. In a place by itself, somewhat removed from the other cots and beds, was a bed on which lay a young man about 19 or 20 years of age — big in frame, though the ravages of disease had brought a slenderness. The nurse, with little ado, introduced me to the young man, saying, ‘This, sir, is the chief of the kangaroo court.’

“I found myself looking into the wildest, weirdest eyes I have every seen. As kindly as I could I spoke, saying, ‘Hello!’ ‘Howdy do,’ he answered, with a voice that was a discourteous and furious snarl, more like the voice of a mad wolf than the voice of a rational man. ‘Is there something I can do for you?’ I asked, as kindly as I could speak.

“‘No, nothing, not a thing. Nothing ‘tall, unless you throw my body to the buzzards when I am dead — if the buzzards will have it,’ he said, with half a shout and with a snort of fierce resentment that made me wonder why he had sent for me.

“Then his voice lost some of its snarl and he spoke again. ‘I sent for you, sir, because I know you will tell these young people here something for me. I sent for you because I

know you go up and down the land and talk to many young people. And I want you to tell ‘em, and tell ‘em every chance you get, that the devil pays only in counterfeit money.’

“I stayed with the young man nearly two hours. Occasionally he spoke. There was a desperate earnestness in the young man’s voice as he looked at me with wild eyes where terror was enthroned. After a while I saw those eyes become as though they were glass as he gazed at the ceiling above. I saw his huge, lean chest heave like billows. I felt his hand clutch at mine as a drowning man would grab for a rope. I held his hand. I heard a raucous gargle in his throat. Then he became quiet — like a forest when the cyclone is long gone.

“When he died the nurse called me to her, excitedly. ‘Come here,’ she called. ‘What do you want child,’ I asked. ‘I want to wash your hands.’ She meant she wanted to wash my hands with disinfectant. Then she added, with something of fright in her words, ‘It is dangerous to touch him. The devil had paid that young man off in counterfeit money.’

That is the way sin is. It is the most expensive and deceptive thing in the world. It will cost you your soul.

Sin is, by its very nature, deceiving and enslaving. It becomes habitual. A young man smokes his first cigarette and he could easily flick it away, never to touch another. However, he smokes repeatedly and he becomes a victim to his own vice.

A young person takes a drink. It tastes awful. But he takes another and another until he is in its’ grasp. Alcoholics have a saying; “The man takes a drink. The drink takes a drink. The drink takes the man.” That is the pattern.

It is the same with drugs, pornography, profanity, lying, stealing, or sexual encounters. Each sin makes the next one easier, until it becomes habitual in our lives.

The American poet Edwin Markham was thinking of this when he wrote the quatrain he calls “Even Scales”:

*The robber is robbed by his riches,
The tyrant is dragged by his chain;
The schemer is snared by his cunning;
The slayer lies dead by the slain.*

There are thousands around us imprisoned by chains they themselves have forged. Some of us are the slaves of destructive habits and crippling fears. Unworthy ambitions and shabby pursuits imprison some. Some are held captive by the relentless drive for power or wealth. Suspicions, superstitions, and prejudices chain others. We permit a host of inner tyrants to keep us in bondage.

Moses realized this and forsook Egypt. The word “forsook” means “to abandon, to leave behind.” How did he do it? He did it by faith. Faith is not a daring leap in the dark. It is man’s response to God’s command. Moses made a clean break with Egypt and so can you. No man has to stay the way he is. We all have choices. In fact, who we are, and what we are, and where we are all a result of our choices.

And, having made his choice, he endured. He stuck with it. So can you. Moses endured by seeing the invisible God. There is more to life than we can see. There is the visible and the invisible.

Moses saw the invisible God and he believed the future belonged more to him than to Pharaoh. Therefore, he paid more attention to the eternal King than to the temporal king. If you are wondering if you can endure, let me give you confidence.

Did Moses make the right choice? The New Testament assures us he did. Follow Jesus and his disciples to the Mount of Transfiguration. He is struggling under the burden

of the coming cross. He needs help such as only those deeply schooled in the mystery of suffering alone can give. Therefore, two men passed from earth long ago and came to talk with him of his coming crucifixion. Who are they? One of them is a man who esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt. Whence does he come? The one, to whom he speaks his own shining face, answers the question. He comes from heaven. He is fresh from the house of many mansions. There he has been for long centuries. Moreover, there he is at this hour, glad with the joy of those who are forever with the Lord.

We must conclude, therefore, that the best day's work that Moses ever did was when he made possible the writing of this experience.

He gave up the passing and the temporal, but he won the wealth that endures. He did it because he had vision to see, faith to believe, and courage to act. We, too, by the grace of God, can do the same.

You are standing at the fork in the road now. You must decide between the pleasure of sin and the promise of salvation. If you see the pleasure of sin as it really is — fleeting, costly, and deceptive, it will help you to decide as Moses did to cast your lot with the people of God.

Chapter 6

Home Improvement - Christian Style

Colossians 3:18-21

A man who was having marital difficulties went to a counselor. The counselor, a jogging enthusiast, believed jogging was the answer to almost every problem. Therefore, he advised the man to start jogging.

The man was desperate and replied, "Doc, I'll do anything you say. Just tell me what you want me to do." The doctor responded, "I think you ought to jog ten miles a day for fourteen days. That will relieve your tension, give you good rest and change your whole outlook. Then give me a call and we'll see how things are going."

So, the man got on his jogging program, and at the end of fourteen days he called the doctor as he had been told. The doctor asked, "How are you doing?" The man replied, "I'm doing fine."

"Have you kept up with your jogging as I recommended?" asked the doctor. The man replied, "I sure have, just like you said, ten miles a day for fourteen days." Then doctor then asked, "Well, how's your wife?" The man replied, "How should I know, I'm 140 miles from home."

When they have problems, the first inclination of some people is to try to run away from them. But we cannot escape our problems by running, especially problems in marriage and family. We were born into a home, reared in a home, and the home continues to live in us and through us all of our lives.

There is no greater joy in life than a good marriage and a happy home. In the television movie, "Sweetheart's Dance," two friends were talking of marriage. One's marriage was breaking up; the other was planning to be married. The one anticipating marriage asked his friend how marriage was. He replied, "Before I screwed up it was great. When I was happy, I was twice as happy. And when I was sad, I was half as sad."

And, there can be no greater blessing than a stable home life. I grew up in a home where we never had much materially. However, one thing I had was a stable home life. It never entered my mind that my mother would not be home when I got home from school or that my parents would not be together for the rest of my life. As I have looked back, I realize that those were stabilizing factors in my life though I never thought of it at the time. A child who does not have that assurance is missing something vital in their life.

Obviously, many homes lack that stability. Today, 40% of first marriages end in divorce; 60% of second marriages; and 75% of third marriages. This turmoil in the family is taking a tremendous toll on our society. Someone quipped, "Most Hollywood marriages take place in the morning. That way, if things don't work out, they haven't wasted a whole day."

Values, or the lack of them, crime, abuse, drugs, and most every other social ill can usually be traced back to some degree to the home. Perhaps the greatest need in America today is for home improvement - especially, home improvement Christian style. The Bible sets out for us what that entails in Col. 3:18-21. There are four essential ingredients:

Submissive wives

Loving husbands

Obedient children
Responsible parents

I am Not Any Other Woman

First, home improvement Christian style begins with submissive wives. Paul writes, "Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as if fit in the Lord." The word "submit" is a military term that means, "to arrange in order." The word "fit" means, "it is proper, appropriate, as he intended." The two words together suggest voluntary, mutual submission between husband and wife. That is because from the first God had a plan, an order for marriage and the home. His plan was that it be a partnership with the man as the lead partner. When the Bible says the wife is to be subject to her husband it is not suggesting in anyway that she is inferior to him or a second class citizen.

She was not made to walk behind her husband, but beside him. Not under his thumb but hand in hand and arm and arm as an equal. Someone has put it beautifully: Woman was not taken from the head of man that she might rule over him; nor from the foot that she might be trampled on by him; but from his side that she might be equal to him, from under his arm that she be protected by him, from near his heart that she might be loved and cherished by him.

And, it certainly does not mean that man should dominate his wife or lord it over her. A couple went to a marriage conference and the husband heard that he was to be the head of his house. When he got home he told his wife, "From now on things are going to be different around here. I am going to be lord and master of my home." Then he said, "I didn't see my wife for two weeks ... After two weeks I could see her out of one eye just a little bit."

God made man with superior strength physically to

provide for and protect his wife but not dominate her. And it definitely does not suggest that he should ever abuse her either physically or verbally. Spousal abuse has become a national epidemic. During the Vietnam era 50,000 American service personnel died in combat related deaths. During the same years 54,000 husbands, ex-husbands, or boyfriends murdered women in the United States. In addition, untold thousands of others were beaten or verbally abused. Let it be understood that to abuse your spouse in any way is a sin. They are always to be treated with dignity and respect.

Clearly this was not intended to be a declaration of worth. From the beginning God intended marriage to be a partnership of equals. And, in the Christian economy the scriptures say "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28)

What it means is that God has fitted man both physically and temperamentally to be the leader of the home. It is simply a matter of roles we are expected to observe. The biggest problem in marriages and homes today is not unsubmitive wives but delinquent husbands. Nothing could help our homes or our country more than for men to again assume leadership in their homes. Unfortunately, many men have abdicated their responsibility at this point. Too often they are detached from the home and the family. They come home, read the newspaper, watch television, but do not want to be bothered with the family. They live in their own private world. They seldom compliment their wives. They never fix things around the house. They never play with the kids. They do not show tender love and affection. They have become little more than spectators have in the family situation.

Being a father and a husband and thus a leader is not a

spectator's sport. Earning a living is not your only responsibility. Men need to be involved with their families. They need to help the kids with their homework; help their wives with the discipline; have fun with their families; play with them and work with them as well as pray with them. Only then can he become the moral and spiritual leader of the family.

General George S. Patton is my military hero. On his deathbed he said to his wife of 35 years, "You have put up with a lot from me, Bea. Any other woman would have left me a long time ago."

Bea replied, "I'm not any other woman."

Do not be just another woman. Be a woman of grace and grit. Look to your husband for spiritual leadership in the family and cooperate with him fully so that the home may be all God intended it to be.

It's Easy To Submit To Love

Second, home improvement Christian style requires a loving husband. So Paul declares, "Husbands love your wives and be not bitter against them." The Greek word translated "love" is "agapao." It is the word used for God's kind of love. It is not just something you feel. It is something you do. It means that you care more about the other person than you care about yourself and, as any woman knows, it's never hard to submit to that kind of love."

There are many reasons for the break-up of marriages, but the most common one is never mentioned in divorce complaints. It is a lack of agapao. Both marriage partners are waiting for the other to meet their needs.

The word "bitter" means "irritable" or "quarrelsome", "harsh" or "sharp." Bitterness and anger and resentment are destructive to any relationship, especially a marriage. Bob

Howard, a friend dying of cancer said to me, “To hold on to bitterness is like holding a match. If you hold it long enough you’ll eventually burn yourself “

A husband who fulfills his role as leader will care more about his wife than about himself and he will not be angry or harsh or sharp toward her. He will rather treat her with the courtesy, respect, kindness and tenderness of his best friend.

The devil suddenly appeared in church and everyone scrambled out except one man. The devil said to him, “Aren’t you afraid?”

He replied, “No!”

The devil said, “Don’t you know who I am?” The man replied, “Sure, you’re the devil and I married your sister 25 years ago.”

Dale Carnegie said, “If you want your wife to act like an angel don’t treat her like the devil.”

Zig Zeigler in his book; *“Raising Positive Kids in a Negative World”* shares a conversation he had with his son, Tom:

“Son,” Zig said, “If anybody should ask you what you like best about your dad, what would you say?” He pondered for just a moment and said, “I’d say the thing I like the best about my dad is that he loves my mom.” I naturally asked why he would say that and he responded, “Well, dad, I know as long as you love mom, you’re going to treat her right; and as long as you treat her right, we’ll always be a family, because she sure does love you. As long as you love each other, dad, and treat each other right, I’ll never have to make a choice of living with you or living with mom.”

“Of course, I had no way of knowing,” Zig reflects, “but that very day one of his closest friends had been given that choice. The need for parents to demonstrate their love for

each other and for their children is so important. If they truly do love each other, they will be thoughtful and considerate of each other. Not only will they benefit, but the children will benefit enormously.”

How does love act? What is the language of love? It expresses itself by being helpful and unselfish, considerate and caring, sensitive and sacrificial. It is kind and patient in word and deed. In our home we have some fine crystal that has to be treated gently. But we have also had an old iron skillet that you can treat any old way. I am the iron skillet and she is the fine crystal.

Husbands need not only to love their wives but also to tell them they are loved. George Elliott once said, “I like not only to be loved but to be told I am loved. The realm of silence is large enough beyond the grave.”

I Was Astonished How Much He’s Learned

The third part of home improvement Christian style is obedient children. Paul writes: “Children obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing to the Lord.”

- Notice the child’s duty - to obey
- Notice the scope of obedience - in all things
- Notice the reason - it is well pleasing to the Lord

Obedience, even when we do not like it, is necessary in all of life. If we are to survive and thrive then we must know how to obey the rules of safety. If we are to be healthy we must know and obey the rules of hygiene and nutrition. If we are to be successful athletes we must obey the rules of the game. If we are to mingle in society we must know and obey the rules of good etiquette. And if we are to drive, we must obey the rules of the road. Whether we like it or not, life is filled with certain rules and regulations.

And children are not wise enough to decide when they will

or will not obey. In time they will realize that. Mark Twain had a classic line. He said, "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished how much he'd learned in seven years." In time most young people come to the same recognition.

Moreover, it is the parent's responsibility to give guidance to their children. As someone said, "Life doesn't come with an instruction book. That's why we have parents."

To teach children obedience is a demanding task. Some parents simply do not give their kids the kind of attention or time that they should. And, above all, parents must set a good example. Parents have to quit smoking. They cannot take drugs. You cannot cross the street on the red light then expect your child not to.

Moreover, not just an example of what they should not do, but also examples of what they should do. John Wesley heard of an associate in financial stress and wrote him saying, "Dear Sammy, 'Trust in the Lord and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed.' Yours affectionately, John Wesley." He then placed several pound notes in the envelope and mailed the letter.

He received this reply: "Rev. and Dear Sir: I have often been struck with the beauty of this passage of scripture quoted in your letter, but I must confess I never saw such beautiful expository notes as those you enclosed." That is what children need - living expositions of the scripture in the home.

While it is a parent's responsibility to give guidance to their children, it is a child's place to obey. However, if a child will not listen and learn, the home is disrupted. If a child is old enough to be a Christian, he is old enough to obey. It is a Christian duty.

Jesus practiced this in His own life. It is significant, I think, that the only glimpse we have of the formative years of Christ tells us that following His experience in the temple in Jerusalem in which he said, “I must be about my father’s business,” he returned to Nazareth and was “subject to Mary and Joseph.”

It Begins With Labor

Finally, home improvement Christian style involves responsible parenting. Paul writes, “Father, provoke not your children to anger lest they be discouraged.”

That is a tough, demanding task. Author Barbara Johnson once said, “If it was easy to raise kids, it wouldn’t have started with something called labor.” It starts out hard and it does not get any easier. Especially when they get to be teenagers. Phil Lineberger asked, “Do you know what a sixteen year-old is like? You take the terrible two’s, multiply them by eight, and add an automobile”.

My wife and I raised three children, two boys and a girl. I believe those two boys were out to prove that everything that was ever said of a preacher’s kid was an understatement. In fact, after raising teenagers in today’s world, I have no fear of the tribulation. It will be a welcome relief for me.

We are not the only ones to feel that way. Clarence Darrow, the famous lawyer, once said, “The first half of our life is ruined by our parents and the second half by our children.” A mother of three notoriously unruly children was asked, “If you had it to do all over again, would you have children?” “Yes,” she replied, “But not the same ones.” I think I know how she felt.

I saw a bumper sticker the other day that I liked. It said, “I want to live long enough to be as much trouble to my

children as they were to me.”

But, if it's hard to be a parent, remember it's also hard to be a child. It is hard to grow up. We haven't forgotten that have we? So you shouldn't be so hard on your children that they become bitter and resentful; so discouraged that they feel that they can never please you, no matter what they do.

We remember, for instance, the tragic question of Mary Lamb, “Why is it that I never seem to be able to do anything to please my mother?” Moreover, we remember the poignant statement of John Newton, “I know my father loved me - but he did not seem to wish me to see it.

I grew up in a home very much like that. I received no encouragement from my father. He was a good man, a hard worker, honest and decent, and provided for the material needs of his family. Nevertheless, he never expressed love.

I never remember him touching me in love. I never remember him buying me anything on his own - not a ball, not a glove, not anything. He never attended a ballgame I played in. I was not even sure he was going to attend our wedding until he walked in. And, never once did he tell me he loved me until the night before he died.

Years after he died I was elected President of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. That, to me, was a great honor. When I called my mother to tell her about it she said, “You know, your dad always said, ‘One of these days that boy is going to be running that thing.’” I often wondered, why didn't he tell me that? Why didn't he ever express confidence in me?

It is too late for my dad and me but it is not too late for you and your children. So, you fathers love your children and express it. Do not be ashamed to put your arms around them, to compliment them, to express your love. They

desperately need it and want it. And you need to give it.

And, if the going gets rough in raising them, if they are rebellious, don't give up and quit. Remember God has rebellious children, too, and He doesn't quit being God. Parents should treat their children with the respect they would give their best friend. But you see people humiliating their children all the time. People forget that children are people. They are just real small and they have a hard time expressing themselves. And, they are having a difficult time growing up.

Parents, especially fathers, have to be both tough and tender. But they must be guard against being unreasonable and overbearing. As someone has said, parenting is the art of bringing children up without putting them down.

Martin Luther's father was so stern to him that Luther, all of his days, found it difficult to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven." The word "father" in his mind stood for nothing but severity. The duty of a parent is always discipline, but it also includes encouragement. Luther himself said, "Spare the rod and spoil the child. It is true. But beside the rod keep an apple to give him when he does well."

Above all, parents must take time to teach your children what is right. It is not the school's job to teach your children right from wrong. It is not the church's job alone. Given the attendance patterns of most families, children watch more TV in a week than they get at church in a year. We are no match for it. Who ought to teach children? The home ought to teach children. (Deut. 6:1-9) The scriptures do not say take your children to the priest once a week and they will teach them. It says the home is to do it. Remember this, if you do not teach your child what is right there is always someone who is willing to teach them what is wrong.

What we need is the courage and resolution of Joshua who said, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

What about you? Will you do your part? Make your home.

Chapter 7

ABC's of Salvation for Children

Luke 2:42-50

Several friends at the train met D. L. Moody, returning home from a revival meeting. They asked, "Did you have a good revival meeting?" "No, not very good," Mr. Moody replied. "Were there many saved?" one of them asked. — No, only three and a half," said Mr. Moody. "Do you mean three grown men and one little child?" another asked. "No, three children and one grown man," was Mr. Moody's response. "The man's life was half over."

It is good when a grown person is saved. It is better when a child is. When an adult comes to Christ, a soul is saved. When a child comes to Christ, a life is saved also.

A pastor, trying to teach this fact to the children of his church, used a board on which he mounted a row of candles to illustrate his point. There was a tall candle at one end, a short one on the other, and various heights in between. "These candles represent the grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, and children," he said. "As each gives his heart to Jesus, I will light the candles." He then asked which candle represented each member of the family. The children all thought the tall one was the grandfather, and the short one was the child. "No," said the pastor. "It is the reverse. The tall one is for the child."

Then one little boy said, "I know why; he has a chance to shine longest for Jesus." And so it is when one comes to God in his old age. It is true he is saved, but the prime years of his service to God have been wasted.

A child not only can make a meaningful response to God at an early age, but Jesus actually held them up as models for us when he said, "I say unto you, except you be converted and become as little children, you cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven."

We always want children to come to Christ with the maturity and understanding of adults. God wants adults to come to him with the humility and faith of a child.

One of the clearest evidences that a child can make a meaningful commitment to God at an early age is Jesus in the temple when he is 12 years of age. It was on this occasion that there first stirred within him that sense of mission that would one day sweep him out of the carpenter's shop and into places and experiences that were utterly beyond his or his parents expectations. It was at this time that he recognized that God was his father and that God had a claim on his life. It was at this time that he acknowledged that he must be about his father's affairs (Luke 2:41-49).

These are the first recorded words of Jesus. The gospels give us a detailed account of the birth of Jesus and then, apart from this one incident, they tell us nothing else about his life until as a grown man at the age of 30 he began preaching.

The occasion for this experience was the annual pilgrimage of Joseph and Mary to Jerusalem to observe the feast of the Passover. Jewish faith was built around three great feasts: the Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Ex. 23:14-17; 34:23; Deut. 16:16).

The Passover was a time of remembrance. It commemorated God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. The Feast of Tabernacles was their Thanksgiving celebration. It commemorated the harvest. It was a time of rejoicing over God's bounty. Pentecost was a time of

rededication. So remembering, rejoicing, and rededicating characterized their faith.

When possible these feasts were to be observed at the temple in Jerusalem. Not everyone could go to Jerusalem for every feast, but they did endeavor to attend at least one feast annually.

This year was special. It was the year Jesus turned 12 years of age. When a Jewish boy turned twelve he became a “son of the law” and was considered to have officially become a man. This meant, in part, that from then on he took personal responsibility for his own religious life. He had reached the age of accountability. He now took the obligation of living by the law of God upon himself. Up until then his father and mother were responsible for him religiously. But thereafter he began to practice fasting, to observe the prescribed times of prayers, to wear phylacteries, and to attend the religious feast like an adult man.

This practice is still followed by Jews today. Before a Jewish boy is 13 he has his Bar Mitzvah. The word “bar” means “son” and the word “mitzvah” means commandment. At that age a Jewish boy officially becomes a man and a “son of the law.”

This, then, was Jesus’ first trip to Jerusalem as a “son of the law” and perhaps his first one within memory. The little town of Jerusalem normally had a population of about 25,000. But several hundred thousand pilgrims from the outside world annually poured into the city to participate in these solemn feasts.

The temple was the center of attraction. It covered twenty acres and could accommodate over 200,000. The crowds, the city, the temple with its sacrifices must have been fascinating to this young village boy. When the family finished the celebration, they left Jerusalem and started back

to Nazareth, accidentally leaving Jesus behind.

It was not due to carelessness that his parents did not miss him at first. Worshippers usually traveled in caravans for both safety and fellowship. Brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, cousins and friends all traveled together. The women walked at the front, the men at the rear and the children ran among them playing. The three groups didn't meet together until they stopped to camp for the night.

No doubt Joseph thought that Jesus was with Mary and Mary thought he was with Joseph. It was not until they camped in the evening that they missed him. Failing to find him among their relatives and neighbors they anxiously returned to Jerusalem to search for him.

During the Passover, it was customary for the rabbis to meet in public in the temple to discuss in the presence of all who would listen religious and theological questions. It was there that they found Jesus the next day. He was both "hearing them and asking them questions." Jesus was listening to and learning from them like an avid student.

Mary's reaction was that of any normal mother. She scolded her son sharply for neglecting to stay with the group and causing them so much worry. She said, "Son, why did you do this to us? We have been worried to death about you." Sound familiar? Then came Jesus' response, his first recorded words: "Don't you know that I must be about my father's business?" (Luke 2:49).

Clearly, this experience marks a turning point in Jesus' life. It is significant enough that out of all his childhood experiences it is the only one recorded. It tells us a child can become aware of God; they can sense his claim on their life; they can hear his call; and they can make a meaningful response to him at an early age.

This, of course, is not a conversion experience. Jesus

did not need to be saved. He was and is the savior of the world. He came to seek and to save us. However, I see in this experience a pattern for children making a meaningful commitment to God.

It gives to us the ABC's of salvation for a child - or, for that fact, anyone else. They are:

- *A is for Awareness; awareness that God is.*
- *B is for Belief; belief that God has a claim on our life and he is calling us.*
- *C is for Commitment; commitment to be about our father's business.*

A Is For Awareness

The first step in salvation is awareness. We have no way of knowing when Jesus first became aware that God is or of his special relationship him. It could not have been as a babe in the manger or as a child in his mother's arms since he was normal in his development. However, we do know this; he here comes to a new and fresh awareness of God. In fact, it was so real and so obvious to him that he is surprised his parents do not know it.

His awareness may have been gradual, like the dawning of the day. After all, he had grown up in a devout religious home. He had faithfully attended the local synagogue in Nazareth where he was taught the law of God. Naturally, there would be some growing awareness on his part of spiritual things (Luke 2:40).

On the other hand, it may have been sudden, like turning on a light switch in a dark room and seeing things you could not see before. He was in the temple. He was listening to and asking questions of the rabbis. The scriptures say, faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.

Regardless of the case, there does come a time in the

life of every child when he becomes aware of God. And, when that time comes, the child is approaching the age of accountability. He must then take responsibility for his own religious life. It may be at the age of 12 as it was with Jesus. It may be earlier or later. There is no set chronological age. It depends on the maturity and education of each child.

One of the first evidences of a child's growing awareness of his need for God is asking questions - and that's what Jesus was doing here. And when that time comes, a child may need help to understand and respond to God correctly. He may not recognize the voice of God when God first speaks to him.

Samuel was born to godly parents, dedicated to God as an infant, and raised in the temple by the aged priest, Eli, where he served as sort of an altar boy. When he was 12 years old the voice of God first came to him. But he did not know it was the Lord speaking. He thought it was Eli. Three times God spoke to Samuel and three times he thought it was Eli calling him. The scriptures add this commentary, "Samuel did not yet know the Lord, neither was the word of the Lord yet revealed unto him" (1 Sam. 3:7). He needed the help of Eli to recognize that it was God speaking and to make a meaningful response to him. So Eli instructed Samuel if he heard the voice again to say, "Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth thee." We may have to give our children the same kind of assistance.

Our children often inquire about the Lord only to have the subject changed or to be told, "There is plenty of time." A small girl asked, "Mother, what is God like?" She replied, "Ask your father." "Tell me, father," said the daughter, "what is God like?" "Ask your mother," mumbled the father from behind the newspaper.

The years passed. The child soon left an empty place in

the family. Among the keepsakes her parents discovered in a notebook, written by a childish hand, "If I live as long as my mother and father, maybe I will know what God is like."

Our children and grandchildren are our only earthly possession we can take to heaven with us. We dare not neglect their queries when they begin to be aware of God.

While we cannot make a decision to follow God for our children, we can help them in it. We should begin early to teach our children about God, because they begin early to sin. Many parents take a "hands off" attitude toward the religious training of their children. They say that they want to let their children decide such matters for themselves. However, we cannot afford to take this attitude. The world is unwilling to assume such a position of neutrality concerning our children and we cannot afford to take it either.

Awareness that God is, is the first step to God.

B Is For Belief

The second step in salvation is belief. Jesus is not just aware that God is but he believes God has a claim on his life and that God is calling him. He believes he must from this time on be about God's work.

His belief is not some shallow, superficial emotion. It grows out of his understanding of the scriptures. In fact, the rabbis were "astonished at his understanding" of spiritual matters.

Belief should always grow out of knowledge and understanding. What must a person understand and believe to be saved?

- A child must understand what sin is. Sin is not just breaking the law of God. It is breaking the heart of God (Rom. 3:23).

- A child must understand what sin does. It alienates and separates us from God and leads to both spiritual and physical death (Isa 59:2)
- A child must understand what the remedy for sin is. Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins and to give us the gift of salvation (Rom. 5:6-8).
- A child must understand what to do. He must pray and confess his sins and ask Jesus to be his Savior if he is to be saved (Rom. 10:9-13). The scriptures teach, "He that cometh to God must believe that he is (i.e., that he exists) and that he is the rewarder (i.e., that we are accountable) of those who diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6). Belief is a key. It is the second step to salvation.

The scriptures say, "He that cometh to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." (Heb 11:6) Do you understand and believe? This is necessary for salvation.

C Is For Commitment

The final step in salvation is commitment. It is significant that these first recorded words of Jesus express a firm conviction and an open commitment to God. The Bible says Mary kept all these sayings in her heart. But Jesus did not. He openly and publicly acknowledged that he must be about his father's business.

He realizes God has a claim on his life and that God has issued him a call. Now he must do something about it. He must act. So he makes his commitment.

That is what we must do also. Belief is an act of the mind. Commitment is an act of the will. We must become aware that God is. We must accept our accountability to him. Then we must commit ourselves to him and his

purposes.

Christianity is not a religion or a ritual. It is a relationship. It is committing our life to God as father. Jesus taught us to pray, "Our father which art in heaven. But, we cannot rightly pray, "Our father", until we can first say, "My father."

To have God as our father is a personal, decisive act. It demands individual acceptance. No one can believe for another. We must each believe for ourselves.

Four things must characterize our commitment:

1. It must be a personal commitment. Note the use of the personal pronouns "I" and "my." Everything takes on a new meaning when we put "my" in front of it. It is one thing to say, "There is 'a' house." It is another to say, "There is 'my' house." It is one thing to say, "There is 'a' baby." It is something else to say, "There is 'my' baby." It is one thing to say, "There is 'a' girl." It is something else to say, "There is 'my' girl."

"On April 11, 1993, Bernhard Langer won his second Master's Tournament. During the post-match television interview he was asked, "It must be a real thrill to win your second Master's." He responded, 'Yes, it is special to win anytime, but especially to win the greatest tournament in golf. On Easter Sunday, the day my Lord arose.'

He didn't say, "the day 'the' Lord arose," or 'the day 'our' Lord arose," but "the day 'my' Lord arose." The use of that personal pronoun "my" makes all the difference in the world. It is the difference between success and failure, victory and defeat, life and death.

2. It must be a preeminent commitment. It takes

precedence above all others. Jesus loved and honored his parents as long as he lived, but now there was a higher calling. His heavenly father had first claim on his life. And he told us if we love father, mother, brother, sister more than him we cannot be his disciple (Luke 14:26).

3. It must be a progressive commitment. Jesus went back to Nazareth and was subject to his parents. Then we are told that he “increased in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man” (vs. 52). He knew and understood enough to commit to God’s will. But he did not know everything. He had to grow yet. Just so, we do not have to know it all to commit to Christ either. As J. B. Gambrell once said, “Conversion is the end of the Christian life, but it’s the front end.

When I was saved, I didn’t know all there was to know about salvation. I don’t understand all about electricity either, but I’m not going to sit around in the dark until I understand it all. I’m going to flip the switch. Just so, we don’t wait to come to Christ until we understand everything. We come to Christ but we keep growing as long as we live.

4. It must be a public commitment. Jesus declared openly and publicly his allegiance to God and so must we. If we want him to stand up for us in heaven, we must stand up for him on earth. If we want him to claim us before God we must claim him before men (Matt. 10:32-33). He is not interested in secret disciples.

Can a child make such a commitment? Without a doubt! Some of God’s greatest servants have been little children

who heard his call young in life. Robert Paul, the great preacher, was converted at the age of 12.

Matthew Henry, who wrote a set of commentaries in the 1700s, which are still being used today, was converted when he was 11 years old. Vance Havner, that grand old man of evangelism, was saved at 10 and licensed to preach at the age of 12. When he preached his first sermon some skeptic said, "It won't last." However, he preached faithfully until he was forced to enter a nursing home at the age of 85. In 73 years he conducted more than 1,100 campaigns, delivered more than 14,000 sermons, and wrote 38 books. It lasted.

Isaac Watts, who wrote some of our greatest hymns, including "Joy to the World," "At the Cross," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and "We Are Marching to Zion," was converted when he was nine years of age.

Jonathan Edwards, who led America in the great awakening and was used by God to shake this continent to its senses, was converted at the age of seven.

For three decades Baker James Cauthen's name was a household word among Southern Baptists. He was first a pastor and a seminary professor, then a missionary to China and finally head of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. He made his profession of faith and was baptized at the age of six, but he insists that God first spoke to him when he was four years old. In addition, from the time he was eight years old, there was in his heart a conviction of God's call to duty. Do not ever discount the voice of God to a little child.

In my last church I had 13 men on staff. I once polled them to find out when they became Christians. The average age for these dedicated workers was ten and a half years.

The wonderful news of the Bible is that the babe of

Bethlehem and the boy of Jerusalem became the savior of the world. The commitment he made that day would one day sweep him out of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth into a three-year public ministry and eventually to the old rugged cross where he would die for the sins of the world.

Jesus made a commitment as a child and so can you. The time has come for some of you to say, I must be about my father's business. God has a plan and will for your life and the time has come for you to accept it, to affirm it, to commit yourself to it. You may be 12 or 24, 36, or 48, 60 or 72. It does not matter. The fact is he is calling and you need to decide today.

Chapter 8

Keep Yourself Pure

I Corinthians 6:12-20

In the midst of the President Clinton, Monica Lewinski scandal, Nobel laureate Elle Wiesel said, “Once upon a time we talked about politics in public and sex in private. Now it is the opposite.”

We are living in the most sex-oriented society that has ever existed. It literally oozes from every pore of our culture - education, entertainment, music, and politics. It is so much so that words that were once found only on the walls of public bathrooms are now common language in the movies, on television, and in every day speech.

The only society that has ever existed that has been as obsessed by sex was the first century world. It was into that world that Christianity came with a call to sexual purity. It has been said that the only completely new ethic Christianity brought to the world was that of chastity. The apostle Paul addresses this very subject in his first letter to the Corinthian church.

He had received word that fornication (sex outside the seal and shield of marriage) was not only tolerated in the church of Corinth but being actually condoned. (Chapter 5: 1) Such practices, he warns, have a way of spreading throughout the entire congregation. He therefore recommends that the congregation withdraw fellowship from those who were practicing this and other sins of immorality.

Then he warns that those guilty of fornication

(premarital sex) and adultery (extramarital sex) and homosexuality (perverted sex) as well as drunkenness, thievery, and idolatry will have no part in the kingdom of God.

Then he issues a clear call to purity of life in every area (I Corinthians 6:12-20).

Behavior always grows out of belief so Paul states for us the general philosophy of life that prevailed in Corinth. It was “meats for the belly and the belly for meats” (verse 13).

They said “God has given us certain appetites and He has provided a means for satisfying each of those appetites. He gave us stomachs for food and food for our stomachs. So eating is a natural and legitimate activity.” Following that same line of logic, they said he also gave us wine for our thirst and sex for our desires. To satisfy either is therefore normal and legitimate. Therefore, in essence all things are allowable.

Paul’s response to this philosophy is pointed. “The body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body” (verse 13). Moreover, he warns, “God will destroy both it and them.” With that he lifts our physical bodies and our sexual appetites to a higher plane and calls on us to live by a higher standard. In so doing he sets out three reasons why they and we should live lives of chastity. He could have based his arguments on physical grounds, i.e. the danger of pregnancy or disease; or emotional issues, i.e. the guilt and shame it can produce; or even social reasons, i.e. that abstinence prior to marriage is the basis of a good, lasting marriage and that every child has a right to a home with a mother and a father who care for one another. Nevertheless, he did not. Instead he pitched his appeal to the highest level - the spiritual - and gave these reasons

why we should live pure lives:

Because of God's plan for our body

(verse 14)

Because of God's presence in our body

(verses 15-19)

Because of God's purchase of our body

(verse 19b-20)

The Cornerstone of our Faith

First, we should live pure lives because of God's plan for our body. The apostle Paul begins by declaring, "God hath both raised up the Lord, and will also raise up us by His own power" (verse 14). The resurrection, both Jesus' and ours are the cornerstone of the Christian faith.

Jesus made some startling claims about whom he was and what he came to do. He claimed to be the Son of God, the Messiah, and he claimed to have come to save the world. However, how can we know that those claims were true? He is neither the first nor the last to have made such boasts.

What then makes Jesus unique, different, and more believable than all the others who have made such brash claims? It is His resurrection from the dead. That's the only sign He promised to give us (Matthew 12:39) and by it He is declared to be the Son of God (Romans 1:4). It is the one clear evidence that He is who He said He was and that He can do what He said He could do.

It is upon the resurrection that Christianity rises and falls. Without it Christianity would be nothing but an empty shell (I Corinthians 15:1-18).

But how can we be sure of the resurrection? What irrefutable evidence is there for the resurrection of Jesus and thus our own? There is much in every way. For one thing we have the testimony of fulfilled prophecy. All of

this happened “according to the scriptures. God pretold of it in the prophets.” Then we have the testimony of eyewitnesses. How do you establish anything historically? It is by the number, agreement, and reliability of the witnesses. If a murder takes place, the first thing the police want to know is, “Did anyone see it?” If there was an eyewitness, the prosecution is able to build a good case. If there are several eyewitnesses, he can build an airtight case.

In the course of the investigation the police will want to know if the witnesses agree on what they saw. So they will be questioned separately and their accounts compared. In addition, they will want to know about the character of the witnesses. Are they reliable? Trustworthy?

Based on such evidence people are sentenced for crimes every day and based on the same kind of evidence historical facts are established.

This is the same kind of evidence we have for the resurrection (I Corinthians 15:3-8). There was not just one, but hundreds of eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. They were common, ordinary people and their accounts agree. To be sure, they did not know a potato chip from a computer chip, they had never flown in a jet airplane and they had never talked on a cell phone, but they did know when a person was dead. In addition, they knew that dead men do not come to life again.

The resurrection of Jesus was common knowledge in the first century. When the apostle Paul, presented his personal defense before Festus, the Roman governor of Judea (60-62 AD) he testified that he was being tried because of his belief in the resurrection.

When he spoke of the resurrection Festus said he must be crazy. Paul responded, “I am not mad, most noble Festus: but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. For the

king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26), i.e. the resurrection did not take place in some out of the way, secluded place. It was a well-known and well-documented fact of history in its day.

Finally there is the evidence of changed lives. The disciples who first proclaimed the resurrection were changed by their belief in it. At the end of his earthly ministry none of the twelve expected the resurrection to take place. On the night before His crucifixion, Judas betrayed Him for 30 pieces of silver, Simon Peter, when cornered, denied him, and the other ten disciples had scampered from the Garden of Gethsemane like scared rabbits into the darkness. But, once they knew of the resurrection something happened to them. They now had boldness and a courage they had never had before. Because of their belief in his resurrection they were willing to endure public ridicule, beatings, imprisonment, and even death (Acts 4:29).

People do not ordinarily die for a lie and under the most intense interrogation, not one of them ever cracked or recanted. They were so convinced of his resurrection that they were willing to either live for him or die for him - whichever was required (Acts 4:19-20). And beyond this evidence is the entire Christian movement that has flowed from that event.

The single most important movement in the history of the world is Christianity. Wherever the true gospel of Jesus Christ has been preached and practiced peoples lives have been made better. Schools have been founded, children’s homes established, hospitals erected, and democracy fostered.

Someone has well said, if you want to judge Christianity

“don’t buy a book, buy a ticket.” Go to countries where the gospel has not gone and there you will find poverty, ignorance, and oppression. The fact is, if Christianity is not true then a lie has done more good in the world than the truth has.

However, the Christian message is not only that God raised up Jesus from the dead, he will also raise us up. We believe not only in His resurrection but also in our own. We do not just believe in the immortality of the soul. We believe in the resurrection of the body. We shall all stand before him in bodily form one day.

This fact alone should challenge us to great purity of life. John wrote, “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God.

“Therefore the world knoweth us not because it knew Him not. Beloved, now we are the sons of God and it doth not yet appear what we shall be but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifies himself even as He is pure” (I John 2:1-3).

It is as simple as this: if you were going into the presence of the President of the United States or the Queen of England, you would put on a clean shirt, a freshly pressed suit, and shine your shoes. You would want to look your best.

One day you shall stand bodily before the King of Kings and that fact alone should motivate you to keep your body pure.

A People For His Temple

Second, we should keep ourselves pure because of His presence in our body. Paul writes again, “What, know ye

not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which you have of God, and you are not your own (vs. 19)?”

The word “temple” brings to mind the Jewish house of worship in Jerusalem. Originally the Jewish nation had only one place of worship; it was the temple in Jerusalem. It was not until the exile, when the Jews were separated from their homeland that synagogues, local houses of worship were emerged.

Originally the house of worship had been a tabernacle, a tent. During King Solomon’s reign the magnificent temple was built in Jerusalem. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. To the Jewish people it was the very dwelling place of God.

There are actually two words for temple in the New Testament. One is “hieron”. It denotes the whole temple structure. It is the one referred to when the scriptures tell us of Jesus going into the temple and finding those who sold oxen, sheep and dove. (Mark 11: 15) It consisted of a series of courtyards - one for gentiles, one for women, one for Jewish men and another for the priest.

The other word for temple is “naos”. It was used for the inner sanctuary, the holy place, where only the priest could enter. And a part of it was the holy of holies where only the High Priest could enter once a year on a great day of atonement with a blood sacrifice for his own sin and the sins of the people. The holy of holy was considered the very dwelling place of God. It was the place where God had promised to meet His people and to dwell with them (Exodus 25:22, 11 Kings 19:15). That is the word that Paul uses here to describe our bodies.

Paul is now declaring revolutionary new truth. The temple of God in Jerusalem is no longer the structure in

which God dwells. He dwells in people. When we are saved, God's Spirit comes to live inside us, to take up residence in us and our body becomes His dwelling place. In the Old Testament God had a temple for His people. Now He has a people for His temple. He no longer lives in a structure of stone and wood. He lives in us, in flesh and blood.

Thomas Carlyle expressed this beautifully when he wrote:

There is one temple in the universe-the human body. We touch heaven when we touch the human body.

So Paul makes the one final argument - of all sins, fornication is the one sin that affects a man's body and insults it. Because we have become a temple of God, our very bodies are sacred, And more, Christ died to save not a bit of man, but a whole man, to save the man in body and soul. He gave His life to give man a redeemed soul and a pure body.

In the Old Testament God is pictured as "above" us. In the gospels He is pictured as "with" us. Now, He is described as "in" us.

Isaiah saw the Lord "high and lifted up" (Isaiah 6:1). That's God above us. The angel announcing the virgin birth said, "You shall call His name Emmanuel which is being interpreted 'God with us.'" (Matthew 1:23). That's God beside us. Now Paul speaks of our bodies as the temple of God. That's God in us. God above us! God beside us! God in us! That is the progressive message of the scriptures.

This fact alone should be a tremendous encouragement to us in Christian living. If Michael Jordan lived in me what basketball I could play! If Troy Aikman lived in me what passes I could throw! If Mark McGwire lived in me what home runs I could hit! If they lived in me and through me, I

could do what they do.

Michael Jordan cannot live in me and neither can Troy Aikman or Mark McGwire. But Jesus Christ can and does. Moreover, because he lives in me I can live, as he wants me to live. However, more than that, his presence in me is tremendous incentive to purity of life. If he lives in me and I commit immorality then I am involving his Spirit in that act. I make him a part of my immorality. I would never want to do that and neither would any serious believer.

This too is a tremendous incentive to purity.

You are Bought With A Price

Third, we ought to live pure lives because of God's purchase of our body. Finally, Paul writes, "You are not your own. You have been bought with a price. Therefore glorify God with your body and your spirit which are God's" (vs. 19b-20).

The phrase "you are bought with a price" comes from a slave economy and refers to the price a person paid to purchase a slave. In the New Testament world slavery was woven into the very fabric of society. Men and women were bought and sold like cattle, like any other piece of property. Daily, at the city slave market, people were auctioned to the highest bidder. Once you purchased a slave they were your property. They had no rights of their own. They belonged to you. You could do with them as you would.

It is out of that context that Paul declares; "You have been bought with a price." When Jesus died on the cross, He paid the price for our redemption. We now belong to him. We are not our own. We are not free to do what we want to do. We are free to do what he wants us to do.

Several years ago a young lady wrote Ann Landers that her boyfriend was pressuring her to have premarital sex

saying he was afraid they might not be sexually compatible. He felt they should find out before marrying.

She wrote to Ann, "Please tell me how to say no to a sex salesman with whom I happen to be in love."

Ms Landers responded, "Here is your answer: 'My body belongs to me and I do not owe you any experimental privileges or an undressed rehearsal.'"

I have no argument with her saying, "My body belongs to me." But let me go you one better. Why not say, "My body belongs to Him (the Lord) and I cannot give it to you without His permission."

Later in the book of I Corinthians Paul says that in marriage a husband's body belongs to his wife and his wife's body belongs to him. They should therefore not cheat one another out of normal sexual relations (I Corinthians 7:3-5).

Do you see the pattern? The counselor says it's "my" body! Marriage says it's "our" body! Christ says it's "his" body!

What an incentive for pure living! With this understanding let me make three practical applications:

1. First, keep yourself sexually pure. The Bible teaching concerning sex is clear. It is chastity before marriage and fidelity in marriage. Anything beyond that is sin. Sex is exclusively for marriage. (Hebrews 13:4)

Another young woman wrote to Ann Landers saying, "My boyfriend says he thinks we should get married or something. What should I say?"

Ann replied, "You tell him you should get married or nothing."

These two principles form the foundation for a solid marriage. As a lady wrote:

"I met him.

I liked him.

I loved him.

I let him.

I lost him."

A man reading that responded:

"I saw her.

I liked her.

I loved her.

I wanted her.

I asked her.

She said no.

I married her. After sixty years, I still have her."

It happens that way most times. If you want a lasting relationship, let it begin with Christian commitment. The surest way to have a strong and happy marriage is chastity before marriage and fidelity in marriage just as the Bible teaches.

Remember whatever shows up in the Bible, as the law of God for the behavior of man is not something that God just happened to dream up. Nor is it something that was laid on the line to take away our fun. The law of God rightly construed is the expression of the nature of God and so the nature of reality. We can obey if we wish, and we can disobey if we wish; but as H.H. Farmer once said, "If you go against the grain of the universe, you get splinters."

Be careful about fantasizing. There's an old saying: "If we play with matches, we're going to get burned." I would paraphrase that to say, "If you constantly entertain sexual fantasies, if we

regularly feed our minds with thoughts of promiscuity from the things we see and read, then we will eventually be tempted to act out those fantasies.” Fantasies do not become a substitute for action. They become the mothers of action. That is why we need to carefully regulate our thoughts and dreams.

Stay away from pornography. Pornography is the fairy tale material of our day. It does not depict women as they are. It presents them as men wish they were. It depicts a totally unrealistic view of life for normal people.

2. Keep your body drug free. That includes the drugs of alcohol and tobacco as well as illegal drugs. The making of alcohol is the oldest known chemical reaction to man. The scriptures are filled with warnings about its danger. Moreover, if the Lord had intended you to smoke He would have turned your nose upside down and made a smoke stack out of it. Ask any competent physician and he will tell you that smoking endangers your health and shortens your life. Ask any responsible person who smokes if they would advise you to begin and their answer will be an emphatic “no!”
3. Finally, keep you body physically fit. The Bible says, “Bodily exercise profits little (I Timothy 4:3) but it does not say, “it profits nothing.” So, eat right. Avoid too much junk food. Get enough rest. Exercise regularly. The body is a marvelous creation of God and should be cared for to achieve its maximum potential. We throw away our lives foolishly if we burn the candle at both ends. When

Robert Murray McCheyne, only 30 years old, lay dying, he said to a friend at his bedside, “God gave me a message to deliver and a horse to ride. Alas, I killed the horse, and now I cannot deliver the message.”

The horse was, of course, his body. Take care of your body, it is a means through which you can serve Him.

Will you today pledge yourself to purity of life? You can do it, you know. The apostle Paul says, “All things are lawful unto me but all things are not expedient,” i.e. not good for me. Therefore, I will not be brought under the power of anything. Paul says that though he is free to do anything, he will let nothing master him. A great fact of the Christian faith is, not that it makes a man free to sin but it makes a man free not to sin. It is so easy to let sins, habits, master us; but the Christian strength enables us to master them.

I have a banker friend who early in his life resolved never to take a drink of alcohol. Though he later was in a very public job and often cast into social occasions where almost everyone else was drinking he had remained true to his vow.

You can make and keep vows to God - vows of chastity and fidelity, vows of abstinence from alcohol, tobacco and drugs, and vows to healthy living.

It comes down to this; the person who is passionately following the Master will be better able to master his or her passions. Moreover, if you have already failed, there is still hope for you. God, through Christ is willing to forgive you if you will confess and repent of your sins.

We sometimes sing,

*“There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Emmanuel’s veins
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.”*

Chapter 9

Getting Your Goodness Back

1 John 1:8-10

Tennessee Williams, the playwright who often dipped his pen in the sewers of life and flung its filth into the entertainment world, joined a church shortly before his death. He explained his actions, saying, “I wanted my goodness back.”

Only God knows how many people share that desire. We start our lives with such innocence, purity, and gradually there comes on us what Percy Bysshe Shelley called “the contagion of the world’s slow stain.” Gradually we drift into sin and each passing experience leaves its scars and stains on our soul.

In that ancient comedy, “A Royal Family,” there is a cardinal who expresses the desires . . . that we could be born old and grow younger and cleaner and ever simpler and more innocent, until at last, with the white soul of little children, we lay down to eternal sleep.

We, of course, cannot be born old and regress to the purity of childhood. Nevertheless, we can be born again. We can get our goodness back. God, through Christ, has provided a way of forgiveness and cleansing for our sins.

The apostle John describes the way of forgiveness for us when he writes, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1 John 1:8-10).

You will note the word “if” used three times in these three verses. That is because forgiveness and cleansing are conditional. If I were to sum up the conditions of forgiveness and cleansing in one word, it would be the word “honesty.”

We must be honest with ourselves (v. 8).

We must be honest with our sins (v. 9).

We must be honest with our Savior (v. 10).

Being Honest With Yourself

First, we must be honest with ourselves. Winston Churchill was once talking to a young actress. He asked her, “Young lady, would you be willing to marry a man for a million dollars?” She said, “I sure would.” He said, “Would you be willing to marry a man for \$500?” She said, “No, what do you think I am?”

He replied, “Young lady, we’ve already established that. We’re just trying to determine the degree.”

The Bible wastes no time establishing the fact that we are sinners. The paint on the entrance to the Garden of Eden was hardly dry when Adam and Eve sinned against God and made their exit. With their rebellion the whole human race was infected with sin. So, the apostle Paul declares, “Wherefore as by one man sin entered the world, and death by sin; so death hath passed unto all men, for that all have sinned” (Rom. 5:12).

The difference among men is not that some are sinners and others are not. The difference is not in fact but in degree.

Billy Sunday, the famous evangelist, once in preparation for a citywide mission, wrote the mayor of the city requesting a list of people who were in need of special prayer. The mayor, very obligingly, sent him the city directory.

We all need some things. Prayer is one. Forgiveness is

another. Fred Smith, a nationally known speaker to salesmen and businessman, said, “In life the question is, what is the tendency of man: good or bad; do they tend to be good with a high potential for bad or do they tend to be bad with a high potential for good? Until we get the answer to this fundamental question, we can never understand ourselves or our friends or the universal need for the gospel.

“In my executive work I have uncovered no need to teach supervisors how to fight with their employees. Never have I had to train a man to ‘goof off.’ Left alone an organization always tends to deteriorate. Because of this, we are constantly building up and motivating the organization by challenging the individuals in it for constructive ends. Experience convinces me that people tend to be bad, although they have a tremendous potential for good. I feel safe in trusting my experience, because it squares with the teachings of the Bible.”

Therefore, the place to begin is with ourselves. We must recognize and acknowledge the fact that we are sinners. It is not enough to see the sin around us; we must see the sin within us. We must be honest with ourselves.

None of us are innocent and none of us can escape sin. Jerome, who translated Latin Vulgate, was a monastic. He lived for years and years as a monastic — alone and separated — so he could be pure. However, he said, after years of that he still saw visions of dancing maidens in his mind. No amount of isolation can keep us from temptation or contemplation.

And if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Would a man actually deceive himself? Yes! Emphatically so. In fact, the easiest of all deceptions is self-deception. Denise Brown, the sister of Nicole Simpson, said concerning her sister’s death, “O.J. Simpson

honestly thinks he didn't do it. He believes his own lies."

That is easy to do. Anyone of us can get to the place where we believe our own lies. In addition, as the Stevedore philosopher, Eric Hoffer, said, "We lie loudest when we lie to ourselves."

By the way, if we think we have no sin, we need only to ask the people who have known us for a while.

Rattlesnake or Feather Duster

Second, we must be honest with our sin. John says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

In verse 8 John uses the word "sin" (singular) and in verse nine he uses the word "sins" (plural). In verse 8 he is talking about the principle of sin. In verse 9 he is talking about the practice of sin. In verse 8 he is talking about the root. In verse 9 he is talking about the fruit. In verse 8 he is talking about the disease. In verse 9 he is talking about the symptom. In verse 8 he is talking about the poison in the bloodstream. In verse 9 he is talking about the sores that break out on our body.

We all have the principle of sin deep within us and it soon breaks out into sins. We have a rebellious spirit that leads to acts of disobedience.

"Man's greatest need," it has been well said, "is to know what is his greatest need." What is our greatest need? It is for the forgiveness of sin. That is why Jesus came.

He came to save us, not from poverty or from ignorance or from the ghetto, but from our sins. Sin must be dealt with first. We must deal with the seeds of sin in our hearts. If neglected the seeds soon become weeds. Let us deal with the seeds and we shall have no trouble with the weeds.

One of our problems is that we do not have a healthy hatred of sin today because we have no proper sense of the holiness of God. The love of God has been preached, but not his law. Men are not conscious of their need because they do not regard sin as the awful thing that cost God his son and the son his life. They do not desire the Physician because they do not think they are sick.

People used to blush when they were ashamed. Now they are ashamed if they blush. Modesty has disappeared and a brazen generation with no fear of God before its eyes mocks at sin. We are so fond of being called tolerant and broadminded that we wink at sin when we ought to weep.

Sin is moral leprosy. To put up with leprosy is to die of leprosy. Sin is spiritual cancer. A man, who tries only to live with cancer, dies with it. The cancer patients treated with painkillers alone will die. If we do not deal with spiritual malignancy, then indeed it deals with us.

How are we to deal with our sins? Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "No man can tame a tiger into a kitten by stroking it." Coddling sin and tolerating sin is not the answer. We dare not excuse ourselves or justify ourselves. We cannot even blame it on another. There is but one way to deal with sin. We must first own it and then disown it. Solomon tells us what to do. He said, "He that covereth his sin shall not prosper but whosoever confesseth and forsaketh his sin shall find mercy" (Prov. 28:13). To have forgiveness of our sin we must admit it and then quit it. We must own it and then disown it.

The word "confess" is made up of two words meaning, "to agree with." It means, "to say the same thing as." When we confess, we call a sin by its right name. We agree with God's analysis. We call it what it is. Unless we recognize the principle of sin within us and the practice of sin by us,

there can be no forgiveness and cleansing of us.

We are masters at re-naming sin, at calling it something other than what it is so it doesn't sound nearly so serious. We call adultery an affair. We call homosexuality an alternate lifestyle. We call pornography an art form. We call drunkenness a disease as though alcoholism was like rheumatism, something you cannot do anything about.

But changing sin's name does not change its character. In addition, as Billy Sunday said, "We would get along better if we treated sin more like a rattlesnake than like a feather duster."

It is not confession that cleanses us. It is the blood of Christ (1 John 1:7). Nevertheless, it is confession that opens the door for his entrance into our lives (Romans 5:6-9).

God's Indictment

Third, we must be honest with the Savior (vs. 10). The one person, beyond ourselves, with whom we must be honest, is God. If we refuse to admit the principle of sin in us and the practice of sin by us, then we make God into a liar. How so? Because he has accused us of sin already in two places: in scripture and in our conscience.

God indicts us of sin in the scriptures. They declare, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Is. 53:6).

Again, "For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not" (Ecc. 7:20).

Again, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

More than that, he accuses us of sin in our own conscience. Conscience is God's voice to our soul. It is his way of speaking to the deepest recesses of our heart. Victor

Hugo, in *Toilers of the Sea*, said, "I can no more keep my mind from returning to some past evil than I can keep the waves from returning to the shore."

As the waves relentlessly come back to the shore day after day after day, so our minds return to sins and we remember the wrongs we have done. In the deepest recesses of my heart, God says I am a sinner. If I say otherwise, I am calling God a liar. God cannot lie.

Sin is the common denominator of us all. The best man in the Old Testament, Job, cried, saying, "I have sinned; what shall I do unto thee, O thou preserver of men?" (Job 7:20). Vice is against society. Crime is against law and order. Sin is against God. That is why in Psalm 51:4 David said, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight." We only sin against God. We violate law. We scorn the law. We disobey all of the prerogatives and mandates of men. But sin is against God and God alone.

You must tell God the truth about yourself. Only you and God know the truth about who you are. Everything else is just an opinion. It is not enough to confess to the preacher. It is not enough to confess to the priest. It is not enough to confess to the psychiatrist. We must confess to him. Sin is against God. Others may be hurt by what we do, but it is God against whom we sin. Thus it is of him we must seek forgiveness. He alone has the power to forgive and to cleanse.

I suppose the hardest three words for any person to say, and to say them as they ought to be said are the words, "I have sinned." In the entire Bible, only eight people ever said that. However, when we do, something wonderful happens. God forgives our sins and cleanses us of all unrighteousness. The word "forgive" means "to take away." It means, "to remove." The word "cleanse" means "to wash,

to wipe away.” God promises to do both with our sins when we confess them to him.

There is, in the Bible, a wonderful example of the right kind of confession. It is the story of a young man who grew tired of living under his father’s control and desired his freedom. He came to his father one day to say, “Give me my part of the family inheritance and I’ll get out of your house and out of your hair once and for all.”

Therefore, the father reluctantly granted his wish and the boy went away into a far country. The far country is not hard to find. You can enter it right where you are; you do not have to go to Las Vegas. It is a state of the mind, of the heart, and of the affections. It is rebellion against the word and will of God.

There he wasted his substance in riotous — wild, loud living. With his money gone he found himself destitute. He sought a job tending a man’s swine. That was the lowest job a Jewish person could have. The boy had gone down, down, down from his father’s house to the pigpen of life.

In his miserable condition the Bible says, “He came to himself.” He realized how foolish he had been. He realized how good things had been in the father’s house. Even now he was convinced his father’s servants lived better than he did.

So he determined, I will arise and go to my father and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.”

Then he put feet to his resolve. He arose and came to his father. When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion on him, and ran and fell on his neck, and kissed him. This, by the way, is the only place in the Bible where God is ever pictured as being in a hurry.

The boy began his rehearsed speech, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.” But the father told the servants to put the best robe on the son, and a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet, and to kill the fatted calf and to prepare to celebrate, “For this my son was dead, and is alive again; was lost and is found.”

Do not miss the sequence:

First, he came to himself. He said, “I perish with hunger.”

Second, he came to the father. He said, “I will arise and go to my father . . . and he arose and went.”

Third, he came clean. He said, “Father, I have sinned in thy sight and I am not worthy to be called thy son.” He did not say, “I was unwise, or I made an error in judgment.” He said, “I have sinned.”

He came to himself; he came to the father; he came clean. That is the only way. It is not enough to wish. It is not enough to desire. It is not enough to feel. It is not enough to long. We must do something about it. We must act.

He arose and went. That is what we need to do today. In addition, when we do, God will meet us more than half way. He will forgive and cleanse your sins: and you can get your goodness back. Confession is like lancing a boil. Anguish and hurt and guilt gush out and with it a sense of relief follows as the pain is allowed to vent.

“How can I be sure”, you ask, “If I confess my sins that God will forgive and cleanse me? Do you realize how bad I have been? Do you realize how deep into sin I have gone? Do you realize how scarred my soul is?”

The ground of our assurance is the moral character of God. He is “faithful and just.” Forgiveness does not depend on your feelings but on his faithfulness. It does not depend upon your goodness but his justness. God will do what he says. He will keep his promise.

There is a story about an aged saint, nearly 100 years old, who lay on her deathbed. Friends called on her as often as possible so they might imbibe some of the fragrance that was diffused through the beauty of this gracious woman with an unshakable faith.

On one occasion, a skeptical friend said to her, “Aunt Molly, suppose when you die you discover your soul is not saved and you are not in heaven?”

With a twinkle in her eye and a radiant light in her face she replied, “If when I die I discover I am not in heaven, I will lose my soul, but Jesus will lose his reputation.”

God has staked his reputation on Jesus. Through the death of his dear son our sins can be taken away. Thus, as John Killinger said, “Jesus was God’s answer to a bad reputation.” Come to him in honesty. Be honest with yourself, with your sin, and with God, and forgiveness and cleansing can be yours.

Chapter 10

The Deadly Danger of Drifting

Hebrews 2:1

What do you suppose is the greatest danger in Christian life? It is not that you will become disillusioned with Christ and walk away from him. It is not that you will be drawn into some great sin and fall away from him. It is not that you will be deceived by some cult leader and be led away from him. It is that you will drift away from him, quietly, almost imperceptibly, until you have lost your fellowship with him.

That's the thrust of my text: "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip" (Heb. 2:1).

Three words should be noted in this warning. The first is the word "therefore." It refers to what has been said in the previous chapter. What does the writer say there? He says that Jesus Christ is the full and final revelation of God. He tells us that God, who at various times in the past has spoken to us in numerous ways through the prophets, has in more recent days spoken to us through his son, Jesus Christ, whom he describes as "the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person" (Heb. 1:3).

The word "express" in the original language means "exact." If you were to ask me, "What is God like?" I would say, "He is like Jesus Christ." If you asked, "How much like Jesus Christ?" I would answer, "He is exactly like Jesus Christ." Or, to put it in the vernacular of a west Texan, "Jesus is the spittin' image of God."

The essence of Christianity is this: Jesus Christ is God. He is not just sent from God. He is not just a part of God. He is not just a representative of God. He was and is God. If you are looking for God I have got good news for you. Your search is over. You can find him in Jesus Christ. To know Jesus is to know God.

The writer says, “Therefore we ought to pay a more earnest heed to these things . . .” The word “heed” means more than just pay attention. It means to fasten yourself to. It means to grab hold and not turn loose. It suggests the idea of anchoring to this great truth.

The final word is the word “slip.” It is a nautical term that means, “to drift, to flow by, to slip past.” It pictures a ship that has broken loose from its moorings and is slowly, almost imperceptibly, being carried out to sea by the currents. By carelessness or thoughtlessness it is allowed to drift past the harbor by the wind or tide. It has lost its anchor and is now at the mercy of the currents. With that, the writer pinpoints the chief danger of the Christian life — which we shall drift away from our Lord. Few people deliberately turn their backs on Christ. But there are many who, day by day, just drift away from him.

I suppose there are enough people adrift in the city where you live to fill every church twice every Sunday. They were once involved, dedicated, committed, and then something happened. Perhaps a change of jobs, an illness, a child born, a death in the family, a disappointment, a financial reversal, or they bought a boat or a lake house. Something happened and they began to drift. They were once deacons, once taught Sunday school, once sang in the choir, once tithed, and even witnessed for Christ, and then they began to drift . . . quietly drift away from him.

The writer of Hebrews elsewhere speaks of Jesus as the

anchor to our souls (Heb. 6:13). He is our sure and steadfast hope for the storms of life. Therefore, we ought to more earnestly anchor our lives to him, i.e., to the things we have been taught lest the ship of life drift away from the harbor of truth and be wrecked.

I have been asking myself, “Why do people drift away from the Lord?” I offer these suggestions. They drift

Because of Preoccupation with Life

Because of Troubles and Trials

Because of Success and Prosperity

Because of Disappointment in Others

Because of Secret Sins

All Mixed Up

First, people drift because of preoccupation with life. The cares of this world absorb them. Jesus told a parable of a sower who went forth to sow. As he scattered his seed in broadcast method, some fell by the wayside; some fell among the rocks, some among the thorns, and some on fertile soil. The wayside was a hard and beaten pathway where people walked across the fields. The hardness of the earth prevented the seeds from penetrating and birds came and ate them. The rocky soil was a thin layer of topsoil on top of bedrock of limestone. Because there was no depth to the soil, the plants that took root soon withered and died. The thorny ground was along the fencerows where thorns and weeds had been allowed to grow. The seeds sprouted, the tender plants grew, but the thorns wrapped themselves around them and choked the life out of the them. The good soil, of course, was plowed ground that received the seed and brought forth plentifully.

Jesus told this parable not to teach us a lesson in agriculture, but in human nature. As there are different kinds

of soil that respond to seeds differently, so there are different kinds of responses people make to the gospel. Some people are like the wayside, their hearts are hardened and the gospel cannot penetrate. Others are like the stony ground, shallow, emotional, no depth to their commitment. Some are like the fertile soil. They readily receive the gospel and respond to it. And some are like the thorny ground. They receive the gospel but it is eventually choked out. Jesus identified the thorns as “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches.”

What are the cares of this world? They are ordinary things like raising a family, building a practice, starting a business, paying the mortgage, and getting an education. They are the little things of life. Chrystosom’s declaration is true; “Men are nailed to life by things.” In addition, Jesus is here warning us that these things can choke the gospel seed from our lives if we are not careful.

Life is a constant struggle to keep our priorities straight. Bill Curry broke into pro football playing for the Green Bay Packers. When the Packers drafted him it was the fulfillment of a life-long dream and he said he was anxious to meet Vince Lombardi, the great coach.

At their first session, Coach Lombardi gave his famous speech, in which he said, “There are three priorities here and in this order: God, your family, and the Green Bay Packers.”

Bill said he then took us out on the practice field and got them all mixed up.

It is easy to get your priorities mixed up in today’s world. Let me remind you — success is just another form of failure if we forget what our priorities should be.

It has been my experience that the best things in life do not crowd. Bible study never crowds out the newspaper. Prayer

never crowds out television. Moreover, visitation never crowds out recreation. To keep the finer things of life in their place takes discipline, determination, and dedication. Our Lord, in the context of anxiety about the cares of life, said, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.”

When secondary causes receive primary attention, you know you are in trouble. Be careful of the cares of this world. They can set you adrift from the Lord.

Danger or Opportunity

Second, some people drift from the Lord because of troubles and trials. The Chinese language does not have an alphabet. Rather, it is written in figures and in symbols. I am told that the Chinese character for “crisis” has a double meaning. It can mean either a time of danger or a time of opportunity. Every crisis is that. Crises never leave us where they find us. They make us bitter or better. They make us or they break us.

Crises can come in many forms — a family conflict, a financial reversal, a health problem, or a career setback — that can cause us to become angry and cynical toward God. They can shake our faith and set us adrift from the Lord.

Richard Halverson said, “Difficulties made some men and ruin others.” J. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, once said, “It matters not how great your problems and difficulties in life might be, but where you place those difficulties. If you set the difficulties outside the circle of you and the Lord, they will always press you closer to him; but if you allow the difficulties to come between you and the Lord, they will always push you further away from him.”

Trouble and suffering are mysteries that are beyond us.

We will never understand them completely. Recently I was speaking on the life of Joseph and made the statement, “God moves in mysterious way his wonders to perform.”

Afterwards, Mrs. Marvin York told me that recently she and her house cleaner were talking about spiritual things and the house cleaner said, “You know, God moves in mischievous ways his wonders to perform.”

Mysterious or mischievous? It is not always easy to tell which.

Remember when John the Baptist sent word to Jesus asking, “Are you the Christ or should we look for another?” This is the very man that stood on the banks of the Jordan River and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God.” Now he is saying, “Should we look for another?” Jesus responded and said go back and tell John that everything I am doing is right on schedule. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, etc. Then he gave him beatitude; it is the beatitude of the unoffended: “Blessed are those who are not offended in me,” i.e., “Blessed is the person who doesn’t get upset by the way I run my business.” We are always asking “why?” of the Lord. We need to learn to accept and to trust. When we cannot trace the hand of God we can trust the heart of God. Put that in your program, my friend. It will carry you over many a dark road in life.

In our troubled lives our Lord says, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

The fatal mistake for a believer is to try to bear life’s load with a single “yoke.” God never intended for you to carry your burdens alone. Our Lord urges us to yoke

together, to harness up with him and let him help us with life's load.

A Mania for Gold

Third, some people drift because of success and prosperity. Perhaps the one thing worse than trouble in life is the lack of it. When are we most likely to forget the Lord, to begin to drift? Isn't it in times of health and prosperity?

In the made-for-television mini-series, "Queens," Alex Haley tells the story of an ancestor of James Jackson, an Irish immigrant who settled in Florence, Alabama. He became a wealthy plantation and slave owner. Mr. Jackson was sympathetic to slaves, but never fought for their freedom. In a moving scene he said, "I fought against England when they tried to enslave us (the Irish). Then I came here and got rich and forgot what I believed."

It happens to lots of people. Keith Miller said in *The Becomers*, "There is little doubt in my mind that wealth is the most dangerous possession that a Christian can have if he wants to grow closer to the Lord."

George Truett said, "If a man can stand prosperity, he can stand anything." Wise are those who learn that the bottom line does not always have to be the top priority.

If we are not careful we can become like the man who had a mania for gold. Good fortune came his way and he struck it rich. Moreover, he loved gold so much that he had everything in his house done in gold. Gold wallpaper, gold carpet, gold drapes, and he even had gold sheets put on the bed and bought him some gold pajamas. Then he got sick. And you guessed it, he got yellow jaundice. So his wife called the doctor. She said, "You've got to do something for him. He is upstairs." The doctor went upstairs and

came back down and his wife asked, "How is he?" The doctor said, "I don't know. I couldn't find him." You can get so engrossed in the things of this world that you lose yourself and begin to drift away.

Jesus spoke of "the deceitfulness of riches." That is because nothing gives us a false sense of security, of independence and self-sufficiency like wealth.

I have a pastor friend who was visiting in Yugoslavia. He made contact with the pastor of a local church and they became fast friends. He learned that the pastor and congregation had long desired to build a new place of worship, but city officials would not allow them to do so in the city. They must build it on the outskirts of the town, away from the people. When finally they had saved enough money to build their building, the city officials still refused to allow them to do so. They said that the church did not have sufficient funds.

As my friend was preparing to leave Yugoslavia, he said to the Yugoslavian pastor, "I will pray for you and for your church." The Yugoslavian pastor replied, "And I and my people will pray for you and your church. It may very well be that your prosperity is a greater burden to you than our poverty is to us."

It was the wealthy church of Laodicea that became lukewarm. They said of themselves, "We are rich, increased with goods, and have need of nothing." However, the Lord's assessment of them was quite different. He said of them, "You are blind, naked, wretched, and poor." It was of this church that Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20). Wealth can blind us, impoverish us, shut Christ out, and deafen us to his voice. It can set us adrift from the Lord.

Get a Good Grip on Your Faith

Fourth, some people drift because of disappointment in others. They look at the lives of people in the church, they are hurt, mistreated, or see someone else being mistreated by members of the church and become so disappointed they walk away from the Lord.

Some Christians are so rigid with their straight lines and unbending attitudes that they would square the sun and flatten the rainbow. There are others so mean if they were in the arena with the lions; I would pull for the lions. It was people like this who prompted Jay Leno to quip, “Have you noticed that most people who claim to have been born again are people you wish had never been born the first time?”

Moreover, they often couch their meanness in such sweet terms. They say things like, “What I’m going to say to you I say in Christian love.” When you hear that, you had better duck or put on a bulletproof vest. A zinger is about to come. As Tom Miller, former head of public relations for the Annuity Board, said, “Just remember, sweet meanness is meanness just the same.”

So before you get too involved in church life you had best get a good grip on your faith. Do not put your eyes on people in the church. Do not put your eyes on ministers. They will disappoint you and let you down.

As someone has said:

Keep your eyes on the church and you will get depressed.

Keep your eyes on yourself and you will be distressed.

Keep your eye on Jesus and you will be impressed.

Set your sights on the Lord for he is the only steadfast anchor for life.

At Home With Sin

Fifth, some people drift away from the Lord because of secret sins. Lowell Thomas, the newscaster, told that early in his life his father moved his family to Cripple Creek, Colorado, during the gold rush days. That western town, like many mining communities, was wild and wicked. Thomas made a telling comment when he said, “In this wide open atmosphere, I soon felt right at home with sin.”

That can easily happen to us. Before their big homecoming game a group of college boys captured the opposing teams mascot, a goat, and they made intricate plans to smuggle the animal into their dormitory room. “But what about the smell?” someone asked. “The goat will just have to get used to it,” the other replied. College boys may be content to live in a dirty place, but a holy God will not do so. It is against his very nature.

The psalmist said, “If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me” (Ps. 66:18). The word “regard” means, “to see.” It suggests the idea of looking into your heart, seeing sin there, and being content for it to stay. If I look into my heart and see sin and I am content for it to remain there, the Lord will not hear me. It cuts me off from the source of my power. It limits the effectiveness of my prayer life.

The preacher may not know about your sin. Your parents may not know. Your partner may not know. However, the only two people who can do anything about it do know — you and God. That is enough.

The Bible says, “He that covereth his sin shall not prosper, but whosoever confesseth and forsaketh his sin shall find mercy.” There is just one way to deal with sin. To own it then disown it; to admit it and then quit it. We must acknowledge it and then abandon it.

It is possible to drift away from God. It is possible for a man to slip into a back-slidden condition before he knows it. It happened to Samson. He was set aside by God for a special task and endowed by God with special strength to do it. But he was selfish, arrogant, and immoral. Because of his sin he lost his strength and his opportunity. God's spirit departed from him and the Bible says that when the enemy of God's people came after him, he flexed his muscles and prepared to fight them, as he had often done before, but his strength was gone. Then the writer adds this sad commentary, "Samson knew not, that the hand of God had departed from him" (Judges 16:20). What a tragedy, to have drifted away from service and devotion and commitment to Christ and to drift so slowly and gradually that you did not even realize it.

Do I speak today to some drifting Christian? Anchor your life to Christ. He is the only one you can trust in this storm-tossed world.

Bill Kynes asked the question, "Whom do we trust?" Then he answered:

*We thought we could trust the military,
but then came Vietnam;
We thought we could trust the politicians,
but then came Watergate;
We thought we could trust the engineers,
but then came the Challenger disaster;
We thought we could trust our broker,
but then came Black Monday;
We thought we could trust the preachers,
but then came PTL and Jimmy Swaggert.
So who can I trust?*

You can trust Christ. He is our sure and steadfast anchor in this unstable world.

In his book, *Six Hours One Friday*, Max Lucado tells of a time when he and some friends owned a houseboat they kept on the Miami River. As a hurricane approached, they tried to determine the best way to save their boat. They tied the boat up with ropes. They tied it to trees, moorings, and everything within sight. The boat looked like something caught in a spider web.

When Max and his friends finished tying up the boat, a stranger who knew about boats and hurricanes walked up. He felt sorry for the men and gave them some advice. He said, "Tie her to land and you will regret it. Those trees are gonna get eaten by the hurricane. Your only hope is anchor deep. Place four anchors in four different locations, leave the rope slack, and pray for the best."

Many times we try to do everything ourselves. Let's take the stranger's advice. Let's recognize that our only hope is to anchor deep in the strength of Jesus Christ. (Adapted from Max Lucado, *Six Hours One Friday*, Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1989.)

Gerald Mann wrote, "I visited the catacombs beneath the ancient Roman Coliseum where the early Christians died. I was surprised to find that along with prominent symbols of the cross and the fish was the symbol of the anchor. When the storms of death blew, they had something that held them into the wind. For them grace meant peace."

It does for us too.

