



A convincing case
for becoming a
follower of Jesus Christ



I Like Being a Christian



Paul W. Powell



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DEDICATION

To Gerrie Milburn
friend, counselor, and helper

Introduction

What's in a name? More than we can express with mere words. The name of Herod represents cruelty. The name of Alexander the Great stands for conquest; the name of Demosthenes, for eloquence; the name of Beethoven, for music; the name of Milton, for poetry; the name of Judas, for treachery; the name of Madalyn Murray O'Hair, for atheism. But what about the name "Christian"? What does it stand for?

Ask the question, "What is a Christian?" to a random sampling of people, and you will find widespread confusion and disagreement. The purpose of this book is to give a clear, practical, and biblical answer to that all-important question.

To be a Christian means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. It is much more than merely belonging to a church, submitting to certain rituals, observing long-standing religious ceremonies, subscribing to an ancient creed, or living up to a certain moral code. A Christian is one who recognizes Jesus as the Messiah and who trusts in, relies on, and follows him as the Lord of one's life.

The name "Christian" was originally intended as a means of distinguishing the disciples of Jesus from many

other religions in Damascus. It was also intended as a jibe or a slur by the pagans of that city. The name has become a badge of honor worn gladly by millions of people the world over. It is my prayer that this book will give you a better understanding of what a Christian is—and that you will follow Jesus with greater devotion. If you cannot now call yourself a Christian, I hope you will receive Christ and become a Christian as you read this book.

I am deeply indebted to Gloria Ortega, my faithful and longtime secretary, for typing the manuscript and to Gerrie Milburn, my dear friend, for helping whip it into shape.

Paul W. Powell

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1

What's in a Name?

If you were asked to give a clear, concise definition of a Christian, how would you answer? Your response is dreadfully important. If you don't know what a Christian is, how do you know for sure that you are one? If you don't know what a Christian is, how can you tell someone else how to become one?

It is obvious that many people don't know what a Christian is. I often ask people, "Are you a Christian?" When I do I receive answers like these, "Yes, I believe in God." Or "I think I am, but tell me, what do you mean by Christian?"

Help with an answer to the question is in the Bible account of the time when the disciples were first called Christians. It happened in Antioch, then the capital of Syria and the third largest city in the Roman Empire with a population that exceeded half a million. Only Rome and Alexandria were larger. It was a commercial city where the Empire and Asia converged. At Antioch, Greek culture blended with the Syrian desert. Moreover, it was a cosmopolitan city where Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians rubbed shoulders with one another.

It was destined to become the center of world missions.

The church there was established when the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem drove the disciples out into the rest of the Roman world. Many believers in Jesus Christ came to Antioch and began preaching the gospel among both Jews and Gentiles. There was a mighty response to their preaching and the church in Antioch was born.

Luke, after writing about the birth and development of that great church which would one day be in the forefront of world missions, added almost as a postscript, "And the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch" (Acts 11:26).

The word *Christian* is a hybrid. It is a compound of the Greek word "Christos" and the Latin suffix "ian." The word *Christos* means "Messiah" or "anointed one" of God. It is not a name but rather a title. It describes the promised Savior who was spoken of in the Old Testament and anticipated by the Jews. The Latin suffix "ian" means "a patron of," "a follower of." In that pagan city for the first time the disciples were called Christians, followers of Christ the Messiah.

They did not pick the name Christian for themselves. They had many names they used for one another. They called themselves disciples, believers, brothers, saints, and "followers of The Way." They were called disciples for their knowledge; believers for their faith; brothers for their love; and saints for their holiness. But they had never called themselves Christians.

The name was not given to them by the Jews. The Christians believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ. The Jews never would have acknowledged that by calling Jesus' followers Christians. It was rather from the pagans of Antioch that they received the name Christian. Why was that? The name Christian was first applied to the followers of

Jesus to distinguish those who lived and worshiped differently. As the people of Antioch listened to those Christians talk, heard them sing, and viewed them in action, it became apparent that their whole lives were centered in Jesus Christ. They conversed about Jesus; they sang about Jesus; they served Jesus; they sought to obey Jesus, they even worshiped Jesus, so they were called the followers of Jesus.

These disciples were so different from the Jews and adherents of all other religions that a different name was necessary to distinguish them from others. Because they worshiped Jesus, obeyed Jesus, served Jesus, and acknowledged Jesus the Christ, they were called Christians. That name and that experience help us to understand what a Christian is.

Most people would expect that the name Christian is found repeatedly in the Bible. But apart from this reference it is mentioned only two other times in all of Scripture. King Agrippa used it once when he replied to Paul, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (Acts 26:28).

It was employed again when the apostle Peter wrote, "Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God on this behalf" (1 Pet. 4:16). Apart from these three references, the name Christian is not found in the entirety of the Bible.

What does it mean to be a Christian? It means to be a follower of Christ. It means to be Christ's person. It means that we believe in him, follow him, serve him, and belong to him.

What is a Christian? A Christian is a person who follows Jesus to the extent that his whole life centers in the Savior. He worships Jesus as God; he walks with Jesus as Savior; and he works for Jesus as Master.

Worship Jesus As God

A Christian is one who worships Jesus the Christ as God. The basic confession of the New Testament is "Jesus Christ is Lord" (see Rom. 9:9-10). The word *lord* has many meanings. It can imply master, king, ruler, sir, or it can mean God. When the risen Christ appeared to Thomas, he fell on his knees and confessed, "My Lord and my God." From that time forward the word Lord was never used by the disciples except in reference to Jesus as God.

The essence of Christianity is: Jesus Christ is God. He is not merely sent from God, or only a part of God, or a representative of God. He was and is God.

This should not come as a surprise to us. The Lord had declared through his prophet, "Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (Matt. 1:23).

You may comment, "But I thought that God was the one who created the heavens and the earth. I thought that God sustains all things. I thought that God was invisible."

You are right. God did create the heavens and the earth—the universe. God does sustain life. God is invisible. But the God who did create and the God who does sustain and the God who is invisible has stepped out of eternity and into time. He was born in a manger at Bethlehem. He walked the dusty roads of Israel. And he died on the old rugged cross.

Jesus is God with skin on him. He is God spelling himself out in language that mankind can understand. I do not understand how God could step down from heaven to earth. I do not fathom how he could become a man. But I affirm that it is so, and the Christian will believe that and

confess that—and worship Jesus Christ.

The word confess means "to agree with" or "to say the same thing as." It involves more than the lips but also the heart and mind as well. Christians are people who are convinced in their hearts and confess with their lips that Jesus Christ is Lord. We acknowledge him, confess him, adore him, obey him, and worship him as God.

Walk with Jesus As Savior

A Christian is also one who walks with Jesus as Savior. Christianity is more than an emotion to feel or words to speak. It is a life we live. It is a way to walk. In fact, it is "The Way." That's why the early disciples were sometimes called "followers of the way."

E. Stanley Jones once was lost in the jungles of India and secured a native from the area to guide him back into civilization. For many hours the man cut through the brush. Being ignorant of the jungle, Dr. Jones asked, "Where is the path?"

The guide glanced at him and replied, "Sir, I am the path. Trust me. Believe in me. Follow me and I will lead you to safety."

Jesus declared, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "I am the way"—without him there is no going. "I am the truth"—without him there is no knowing. "I am the life"—without him there is no growing. Jesus didn't say, "I am a way." He said, "I am *the* way." He didn't say, "I am the best way." He said, "I am the only way." He didn't say, "I am a good way." He said, "I am the undeniably essential way."

We believe that Confucius was a wise teacher. We believe that Buddha was a good man. We believe that Muhammad was a skilled leader. But Jesus Christ is the one

and only Savior. We are not saved by accepting the teachings of Confucius. We are not saved by duplicating the life of Buddha. We are not saved by following the leadership of Muhammad. We are saved when we accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God and as our personal Lord and begin to follow him. That's what it means to be a Christian.

Work for Jesus As Master

A Christian is a person who also works for Jesus as Master. Worship! Walk! Work! It requires all three to understand what it means to be a Christian. The person who does not put all three of these into his life does not fully understand what it means to follow Jesus. To worship him as God is essential and to walk after him as Savior is necessary. But we must also work for him as Master.

If we are real followers of Christ, we must place the seal of service and sacrifice on our faith. It is not enough to call Jesus Lord. We must seek to do his will in our lives (Matt. 7:21).

Jesus reminds us that it is not enough to believe in God. While that is good, even the demons believe (James 2:19). In fact, they are so convinced of God's reality that they tremble at the very thought of him. Our faith must be sufficient, causing us to work for him, serve him, and obey him. Lip service alone is not enough. What we say with our lips, we must seal with our service.

And this service is not for the purpose of earning merit with God. It is service that grows out of gratitude. In the late nineteenth century, when the "potato famine" sent many Irish people to America looking for opportunity, a lad with no money slipped on board an immigrant ship as a stowaway. In mid-sea the ship hit an iceberg and began to

sink, but there was time enough for everyone safely to enter the lifeboats. Because he was a stowaway, the lad was late in realizing what was happening. He came running down the deck precisely as the captain was climbing into the last seat of the last lifeboat.

In the highest tradition of the sea, the captain stepped back and put the boy in his place. As the lifeboat was pushed off, he yelled to the lad, "Never forget what has been done for you!" As the lifeboat pulled away, the boy could see the captain standing on the deck and that vision never left him. He became an exceedingly successful man in the new world. When people asked him about the secret of his motivation, he always told them about the captain. He said, "Whenever I got discouraged and felt down on myself, I would recall the vision of what had been done for me, and it gave me new courage 'to keep on keeping on,' to be worthy of such a price."

We Christians can never forget what was done for us on Calvary. We work, we labor—but not in order to earn our salvation. It has already been purchased. We work not in order to merit the favor of God. We already have his "amazing grace." We work that we might be worthy of the price which was paid for us. We labor because we can never forget what was done for us at Calvary.

Let me ask you a question, "If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" If your neighbors, if your close friends, if your business associates were called to the stand to testify, could they confess, "Yes, I know he/she is a Christian. I have heard her talk. I have listened to him sing. I have watched his life. I know that this person is a follower of the Christ."

If you were dropped into a pagan city like those early

Christians were, would anyone ever guess you are a Christian? If you were picked up and placed in a city like Dar es Salaam in Africa, is there anything about your speech, your singing, or your behavior that would remind people of Jesus Christ? Your being a follower of Christ ought to come out—by how we talk, worship, treat people, and serve; by the values we possess, people ought to know we are different—that we are followers of Jesus Christ.

The time is come for Christians to go public and let the world see Jesus in us. Now, we need to live up to our name.

What is a Christian? A Christian is a follower of Jesus who confesses him as Lord, trusts him as Savior, and serves him as Master.

Now, let me ask you personally, "Are you a Christian?"

2

You Can Go Home Again

During the imprisonment of fifty-two American hostages in Iran, it became popular to wear or display yellow ribbons as expressions of protest against the injustices of the Ayatollah Khomeini, and then finally as demonstrations of our joy in welcoming the released hostages back home.

The use of the yellow ribbon grows out of a beautiful and perhaps true story. A group of college students were en route from New York to Florida for a weekend. As their bus passed through New Jersey a man dressed in a plain, ill-fitting suit sat down in front of them. He never moved his dusky face that masked his age. He chewed the inside of his lip a lot, frozen into a personal cocoon of silence. As they traveled together the young people introduced themselves to him and began to learn his story.

He had been in a New York jail for the past four years, and now he was going home. For the past three and one-half years he had had no contact with his wife or children. At the beginning of his imprisonment he had written his wife, telling her only that he was going to be away for a long time; and that if she couldn't stand it, she could merely forget him and marry someone else. He would understand. Now, for all he knew she might have done that.

One of the young people replied, "And are you going home now not knowing?"

"That's right," he came back. Then he told them that the week before, when he was sure that his parole was coming through, he wrote her again. There was a big oak tree on their place near the highway, and he wrote her that if she'd take him back, she should put a yellow handkerchief on the tree. Then he would get off and come home. If she didn't want him, she should forget it—put no handkerchief on the tree, and he'd pass on through.

By this time the bus was twenty miles from his home, and all six of the young people were caught up in the anticipation. The young people took over the window seats on the right side of the bus, waiting for the view of that oak tree. The bus acquired a dark, hushed mood, full of the silence of absence and lost years. The man stopped looking, tightening his face into the ex-con's mask, as if fortifying himself against still another disappointment.

The bus drew nearer his home—ten miles and then five. Then, suddenly, all the young people were up out of their seats, screaming, shouting, and crying, doing small dances of exultation. All except the man.

He sat there stunned, looking at the oak tree. It was covered with yellow handkerchiefs—twenty of them, thirty of them, maybe hundreds, a tree that stood like a banner of welcome blowing in the wind. As the young people shouted, the old con rose from his seat, sidled to the front of the bus. He was going home again!

Thomas Wolfe, the monumental author, wrote *You Can't Go Home Again*. But the good news of the Bible is: You can go home again! We were created for fellowship with God. But sin broke that fellowship and separated us

from our Heavenly Father. In spite of our rebellion, God still loves us and through the death of his Son Jesus Christ on the cross, he made provision for our forgiveness and our return. The deep significance of Jesus' suffering for our sins was that he might bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18).

The fact that we can go home again is dramatized for us in the story of the prodigal (wasteful) son (Luke 15:11-24). Jesus told of a man who had two sons. The younger of them was rebellious and independent. He grew tired of the restrictions of his father and his constant efforts to run his life. So, one day he announced to his father that if he could have his part of the family estate he would get out of the house and out of his father's hair.

The father, who represents God, let the boy go. Though it broke his heart he knew that a young man cannot be forced to live under his parent's control. The father really had no choice and let the son go.

In only a few days the boy packed up his belongings and left. What happened to him then? For awhile he had a ball—a real blast. But it was not long until he had "wasted" his inheritance in "riotous" living. Those two words *wasted* and *riotous* speak volumes to us about the results of his rebellion. The word *riotous* literally means "loud" or "wild." It suggests a life of wild parties, loud music, and bright lights. Sound familiar?

The word *wasted* means "to blow away." It was often used to describe the winnowing process used on grain. Once the grain was harvested from the fields it was placed on a stone or wooden threshing floor. Animals were then led 'round and 'round over the grain, and the pressure of their hooves trampled the grain and pressed the kernels from the husks.

Then on a windy day, the farmer, using a wooden paddle much like a shovel, would toss the grain up into the air. The wind would blow the lighter husks away, and the heavier grain would fall back onto the floor. By repeating this process hundreds of times the husks were soon all blown away, and nothing but pure grain was left on the floor. This was called "winnowing" because the wind was used to blow away the husks.

That's what this young man did with his family inheritance. He literally "blew" it all on wild living.

Some people would remark, "Well, after all, he was just a boy. And boys must sow their wild oats." I don't know where that idea came from, but it is vastly overused by the devil today. Boys do not have to sow their wild oats. But if they choose to do so, then they can expect to reap what they've sown. Whoever knew a boy who sowed wild oats and didn't reap wild oats?

And someone may comment, "Well, even if the boy goes away and sows his wild oats, he'll come back again." Well, he may come back again, but he comes back worse than when he went away. He returns with the scars of his sin, along with the guilt and the memory of wasted years. As long as he lives he is worse off, not better, for sowing his wild oats.

Dismiss forever from your mind the idea that a boy or a girl must sow his/her wild oats. He doesn't. But if he does, it is by his own choice, and he will have to pay the price. After the prodigal son wasted all his money, there arose a severe famine in the land, and he fell into abject poverty. As a last resort he took a job which would be equivalent to cleaning cesspools today. By this time he not only had lost his life savings, but he had lost his friends and his self-respect.

He never intended for it to come to that. No one ever does. He had expected excitement, fulfillment, thrills, and bounding joy. He never expected want, loneliness, and disgrace. His "do-your-own-thing" philosophy had about done him in.

When the Lord is your Shepherd you do not want. But when you forsake the Lord, you always come to want.

At that point the prodigal son became fed up with his freedom from his father, and he decided to go home again. The three steps he made are those which every person must make if they are to come home to God. They are the steps of recognition, repentance, and return. The Christian is a person who, like this boy, has come home to the Heavenly Father.

Anesthetized by Satan

The prodigal son's journey home began when he "came to himself." The Greek term used here is a medical image for recovering from a coma or waking up out of a swoon. It was as though this young man had been in a coma, anesthetized by Satan until he had ruined his life. He had drugged himself with the intoxication of independence and had become a slave to his own weaknesses. Then suddenly, like a patient who had awakened from a coma, he recognized his mistake, and he "came to himself."

No person ever comes to God until he first comes to himself. Having come to himself he began to talk with himself. Have you ever done that? I'm confident you have. One of the many unique truths about man is his ability to talk with himself. Man is the only creature who clothes himself. He is the only creature who buries his dead. He is the only creature who truly wars. He is the only creature

who commits suicide, except for the lemming. He is the only creature who both weeps and laughs because he is the only one who knows the difference between how things are and how they ought to be.

Yes, he is the only creature who talks to himself. No doubt you have said to yourself at times, "I don't like the way I am. I don't like the things I'm doing. I need to change." That's exactly what this young man did, and that's what we must do. He admitted that the servants in his father's house had a better life than he had. He recognized that he had messed up his life and needed to go back home.

The path home for you begins with this same kind of recognition. You must realize that you too are away from your Heavenly Father. You must realize that you have erred because of your own sinful and rebellious nature. And you must be aware that life with God is far better than that of the "far country."

The Hardest Three Words to Say

The next step in the prodigal son's journey home was his resolve to go back to his father's house and admit his mistake. He would confess his sin, his unworthiness to be a part of the family, and ask his father to take him back.

There are three parts to this resolution. He first resolved to return. He determined, "I will arise and go to my father."

That was and always is the right choice for us. No person ever makes a mistake in coming back to the God who loves him. His second resolution was to confess his sin. He reasoned, "I will 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.'"

Those three words, "I have sinned," if spoken in the right manner, are the hardest three words that any person can speak. They are an admission of failure, and we will do almost anything to avoid admitting that we are failures. We will rationalize, minimize, and blame others for our mistakes long before we will confess, "I was wrong, I made a mistake, I have sinned."

But the road back home is paved with honest confession. The Bible declares, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Prov. 28:13).

Finally, he resolved to ask his father: "Make me a hired servant." What a change in attitude that reveals! He left home saying, "Give me." He returned home saying, "Make me." This change in attitude which leads to a change in action is what the Bible calls repentance.

Repentance is a change of mind about ourselves and about God which leads to a change in our lives. You can't go home again unless you first repent.

Do It Now!

The final step back home is to return. So the prodigal son "arose, and came to his father." He first came to want. Then he came to himself. Then he came to his father. It is never enough to have regrets over a misspent life. It is never enough to resolve about what you are going to do. Eventually you have to act.

No doubt one of the considerations which made it difficult for the prodigal son to go home again was not knowing how his father would respond. He kept wondering, *Will he accept me? Will he forgive me? Will he take me back*

again? In preparation for what he expected to be a dreadful meeting, he rehearsed again and again what he would say when he met his father.

To his absolute dismay, when his father saw him coming up the road, the old man ran to him, threw his arms around him, kissed him, and cried, "Welcome home, Son."

Doubtlessly the father had stood on the front porch days upon end, looking down the road and hoping his boy would return. When he saw him, he didn't stand there with arms folded and lips tight, waiting to say, "I told you so." He ran to welcome his son home. This, by the way, is the only place in the Bible where God is pictured as ever being in a hurry.

The boy tried several times to make his confession but his father kept interrupting him. There was no recrimination, no penance to do, no future promises to make. The Father knew the son's heart and so it was just, "Welcome home, Son."

Someone asked Abraham Lincoln toward the end of the Civil War, "How are you going to treat the rebellious Southerners when the war is over?" He replied, "I will treat them as though they have never been away." That's what the father did.

The father instructed his servants to find the best robe in the house and put it on the boy. And they were to put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. Then they were to prepare a sumptuous feast and plan a huge celebration, "For," as the father exclaimed, "this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

This statement of the father reveals that being away from God is not a matter of hide-and-seek. It is a matter of life-and-death. People away from God are physically alive,

but they are spiritually dead. To return to God is to come both to abundant life and eternal life.

Returning to God is to begin life afresh and anew. This is the desire of many people. Louise Fletcher Tarkington expressed the heartfelt wish of many when she wrote:

I wish there were some wonderful place,
Called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all of our mistakes and all of our heartaches,
And all of our selfish sins,
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door,
And never put on again."

There is a place of beginning again. It is at the Father's house.

What is a Christian? A Christian is one who, like the prodigal son, has been away from the Heavenly Father because of one's rebellious nature. He has realized his mistake, repented of his sins, and returned to have fellowship with the Heavenly Father. A Christian is a child of God and enjoys all the benefits and privileges his Father has to offer.

Perhaps the eyes of a modern prodigal son or daughter have fallen on these pages. You can go home again also. God will welcome you, so come home to the Heavenly Father now!

3

Set Apart

A leading news magazine carried an article entitled, "Why Churches Are Worried." It listed three reasons: waning attendance, dwindling contributions, and sagging morale.

The writer pointed out that church attendance peaked in the mid-fifties and has been steadily declining ever since. When people don't attend church, they don't give either. So, many churches have been feeling a financial pinch. Many of them have been forced to cut back on local programs, curtail missionary activity, and reduce benevolent ministries.

Every year hundreds of parochial schools are being forced to close due to a financial crisis. And the sagging morale of the ministry causes thousands of ministers, priests, and rabbis to leave the clergy every year and seek secular employment. After all, no one wants to spend his life polishing brass on a sinking ship. The writer closed the article by writing that if something doesn't change, the church is in for a "long, cold winter."

A later article in the same magazine listed the twenty-nine most powerful and influential institutions in America—institutions like government, education, labor unions, and

industry. The church ranked twenty-sixth on the list—fourth from the bottom.

When I read accounts like those, I feel like the priest who bought a raffle ticket and won a set of "His" and "Hers" towels! He wrote his monsignor and asked him what he should do with them. The monsignor replied, "Son, keep them. The way things are going you may need them before long."

While these may be the matters which are worrying most churches, they are not the concerns which worry me most. Waning attendance does not overly concern me. It does not necessarily follow that an army is making progress simply because it is adding soldiers to its ranks. An army can grow larger without growing stronger. There is a difference between muscle and fat. And it is possible for a church to be full of empty people.

Nor am I overly concerned about dwindling offerings. God's work has always been associated with poverty. There will never be a time when the church will have all the money it needs to do all that needs to be done. God will see to that so we will have to walk by faith and not by sight.

Nor does the sagging morale of ministers and their exodus from the ministry overly concern me. Many of these men are only discovering that they were never called by God in the first place. And there have always been men like Demas, who forsook his calling because he loved the world more than he loved the Word (2 Tim. 4:10).

What concerns me most is not that our pews are half-empty or that our plates are half-full, but that Christian people are half-hearted in their commitment to Christ. It is the low level of dedication which troubles me most. This lack of dedication is not only our worst problem, it is our

only real problem. Our churches do not have an attendance problem; they have a dedication problem. Our churches do not have financial problems; they have dedication problems. Our churches do not have morale problems; they have dedication problems. When we are sufficiently dedicated—attendance, offerings, and morale will care for themselves.

Obviously, the apostle Paul shared this same concern. That's why he closed his letter to the Roman church with an appeal that we put our whole selves at the disposal of God as a "living sacrifice," and that we not conform our lives to the life-style of the world around us, but that we be ever growing to be more like Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:1-2).

These words constitute the greatest appeal for dedication and wholehearted commitment to Christ to be found anywhere in the Bible. In them are contained the essential ingredients of Christian dedication. Real dedication involves three elements: presentation, separation, and transformation. To be a Christian worthy of the name means that we strive for all three of these.

Dedication Involves Presentation

The apostle Paul began his appeal by urging us to give ourselves to Jesus Christ. His appeal was that we "present" our bodies as a living sacrifice to him. This entire appeal is couched in Old Testament language and images. The word "present" means "to put at one's disposal." It is the technical term which was used to describe the work of the Levitical priest as he offered a sacrifice unto God.

The word "bodies" means our "whole selves." It involves our ears, eyes, hands, lips, feet—our entire beings. The words "living sacrifice" refer to a sacrifice which is alive as opposed to one which is dead.

From his childhood Paul had been taught the importance of making sacrifices to God. He had been instructed that, at the appointed time and in an acceptable manner, he was to carry an animal to the priest. The priest in turn would offer that animal as a sacrifice on the altar of the Temple as a symbol of the worshiper's dedication to God. But when Paul became a Christian, he ceased to make animal sacrifices, except for identification with the Jewish people he wanted to win to Christ (Acts 21:26). The reason he ceased to make animal sacrifices was: He realized that Christ was the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world. He knew that the sinless Son of God had been offered "once and for all" as a sacrifice, not upon the altar of the Temple, but upon the cross of Calvary. And so effective had been the sacrifice of Jesus that never again would mankind have to offer up the blood of bulls and goats as an atonement for their sins (Heb. 9:23-28).

But while Paul ceased to make animal sacrifices unto God, he in no place ever suggested that God had abolished the principle of sacrifice in true worship. God has not abrogated the principle of sacrifice; he has only changed the form. God is no longer interested in a dead animal. What he wants is a living person.

Christians compose the body of Christ on earth today. In the days of his flesh, Jesus had eyes to see the world's hurt. He had ears to hear the anguished cry of humanity. He had feet to carry him to the places of need. He had hands with which he could reach out and touch the sick and the sorrowing, and he had lips with which to speak the message of God. And it was with these parts of his body that he did the work of God while he was on earth. But since the resurrection, he has no body on earth except his church. At

conversion the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us and we become his body on earth. If he has eyes to see and ears to hear, they are attached to our heads. If he has legs to walk and hands which touch, they are attached to our torsos. If he has lips to speak, they are our lips. When we give our entire being to him and his service, that is dedication.

So, dedication begins with a presentation. It means that we present ourselves as a living sacrifice unto him. We give him our eyes, our lips, our hands, our feet; we place our entire being at his disposal.

This is the essence of dedication in any area. You must become a living sacrifice for whatever you believe in. Men cannot succeed unless they bleed. They cannot win the prize unless they pay the price. In art, music, literature, or science, this is true. Call the roll of every successful person who has ever lived, and you will see that they have had their Garden of Gethsemane and Calvary before they have had their Easter Sunday.

Thomas Edison was dedicated to science. Consequently, he blessed the world with hundreds of inventions, including the electric light. But in order to do that, he had to become a living sacrifice. He was so dedicated to science that for twenty years of his life he slept only four or five hours each night. He cancelled almost every vacation and holiday so he could spend his time experimenting. Behind the electric light was a man who was willing to die to himself in order that others might live in the light and the glory of the new world.

Communists are the best examples of dedication I know of in our world today. I once read the testimony of a converted Communist. He testified that when he was a member of the Communist Party, his leaders and comrades

expected him to give 50 percent of his income to the cause of Communism. This he did gladly. Once he became a Christian it was a long time before anybody ever ventured to suggest that as a Christian he ought to give 10 percent of his income to God. "When they finally did," he continued, "they did it in such an apologetic way that I knew they never really expected me to do it in the first place."

As a Communist he was expected to devote all of his free time to the cause of Communism. His vacations, holidays, weekends, afternoons off, and other spare time belonged to the party. He would pass out leaflets and work in Communist front organizations. When he became a Christian and the pastor asked for volunteers to do special tasks, he was always quick to respond. When he did so, people remarked, "My, how dedicated you are!" It is to our shame that the Communists have outcommitted us. This kind of sacrifice is at the heart of dedication to any worthwhile cause.

If you want to be dedicated, you must liken your life to a blank check, make it out to Jesus Christ, endorse, and allow him to fill it out for any amount he wants. Hand him your life and say, "Here, Lord, you can have all that you want of me." That's what it means to be a living sacrifice and to be truly dedicated.

Dedication Involves Separation

Paul then urges us to become non-conformists. He writes, "But be not conformed to this world." The word "world" refers to this age as opposed to the age that is to come. It has reference to the spirit of our times, referring to those who live as if there were no God. Most people today claim that they believe in God. But while they confess faith in God with their lips, they continue to live as though God

doesn't exist. They never take him into account except in a time of crisis. Then, when the crisis is over, so is their religious spasm. They go back to life as usual.

If we are to be dedicated, we must not live according to the customs and life-styles of such people. We must not pattern our lives after those who live as if there were no God. We must live a separated life.

I like the translation of J. B. Phillips: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould." The world has a mold much like a gelatin mold. You know how that works. You dissolve it in hot water, pour it into a mold, then place it in the refrigerator until it gels. Once it has gelled, it can be dumped into a saucer and the stuff will have assumed the same shape as the mold. Just so, the world has a mold about how we ought to think, the values we ought to hold, the pleasures we ought to enjoy, how we ought to dress, and how we ought to talk—and for every other area of our lives. The world is continually trying to press us into its mold so Christians will seem no different from non-Christians. And the tragedy of our day is that we have too many gelatin Christians.

There are two devices commonly used to measure temperature. One is a thermometer; the other is a thermostat. A thermometer is usually placed outside the house to measure the temperature. When the sun blazes down on it, the mercury soars to the top and the thermometer indicates that it is hot outside. In fact, it will show you exactly how hot it is. When the winter winds blow on it, the mercury bounces around the bottom of the thermometer, telling you that it's cold outside. The thermometer never does anything to affect the temperature. It never makes it hot or cold outside. It simply reflects the temperature around it.

But let's look at a thermostat. Thermostats are found in most modern homes and appliances. They are there to regulate the temperature. Suppose a chef is going to bake a cake and the recipe says to bake it at 350 degrees. He sets the dial on the oven, and it begins to heat up until the temperature inside reaches 350 degrees. Then the thermostat automatically cuts the heat down so the oven doesn't become too hot. When the oven begins to cool off, the thermostat again turns the heat up so the oven doesn't get too cold. The thermostat enables the oven to maintain an even temperature at all times so the cake will be baked at the correct temperature.

The important thing about a thermostat is. While it is very small in comparison to the size of the house or the appliance it is in, it bears an influence over those things all out of proportion to its size. It actually controls the temperature of the whole house or the appliance.

The thermometer only reflects the temperature around it; the thermostat affects the temperature around it.

Paul emphasizes in these verses, "If you want to be dedicated to God, you must be a thermostat and not a thermometer."

We must not pattern our lives according to those who live as if there were no God. We must not let their life-styles become ours. We must be willing to bow our necks, grit our teeth, clench our fists, and affirm, "By the grace of God, I will not conform to this world." That's what is involved in dedication.

Dedication Involves Transformation

Having cautioned us not to conform, Paul then writes, "But be ye transformed by the renewing of your

mind. . . .” The word “transformed” means “to change your outward expression to be consistent with your inward nature.” It is the Greek word *metamorphoōmai* from which we derive our word “metamorphosis.” The word metamorphosis describes the change which takes place from a larva to a cocoon to a butterfly. It is used here to describe the process by which we become more Christ-like in our daily lives. The word “transformed” is translated “transfigured” elsewhere (Matt. 17:2). In the Transfiguration experience Jesus led Peter, James, and John up on a mountain and was literally transformed before their eyes. As he knelt to pray, he began to glow with the brightness of heaven itself. As Jesus’ outward appearance changed before the eyes of his disciples, they realized that he was the Son of God. Usually Jesus, the Son of God, wore a homespun garment and looked like an ordinary Galilean peasant. But as he prayed on the mountain that day, his Deity shown through. To be transformed means to take on the likeness and the image of Jesus Christ. It means that the Christ who is within us begins to show himself through us. It implies that the nature of Christ which was planted in us at conversion begins to reveal itself in our day-to-day lives.

How does this transfiguration occur? Paul wrote, “By the renewing of your mind.” The outward change is due to, and is dependent upon, a renovation of our mental processes. The transformation comes about as a result of what we think. It is a practical working out of the Scriptural and psychological principle, “As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23:7).

This means that a devotional life is not optional to the Christian life. It is standard equipment. We must daily, habitually, consistently put our hearts and minds upon the

things of God and renovate the mental processes. Unless we do, we cannot and will not be made into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Conversion is instantaneous. It occurs the moment we put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Transformation is gradual. It occurs as we focus our mental processes upon Jesus Christ and the truths of the spirit.

Someone has expressed it like this, “It took God just one day to get Israel out of Egypt, but it took God forty years to get Egypt out of Israel.” It took God only a short while to part the waters of the Red Sea and lead the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage. However, it took God, Moses, the Law, Aaron, and forty years of miracles to get the sinful practices of Egypt out of the hearts of the Israelites. In the same manner, it takes God only a moment to get you out of sin. However, it takes a lifetime to get sin out of you. Dedication means that we are involved in the process of being transformed, that there is a growing conformity in us to the likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the wonderful ideas about dedication is that, as we give ourselves to the Lord, we come to know that his will is “good” and “acceptable” and “well pleasing.” His will is really satisfying. It is perfect. It lacks nothing necessary for completeness. Only as we live dedicated lives will we come to know by our own experience how infinitely marvelous God’s will really is.

You may ask, “Why should I make such a sacrifice for Christ?” Paul’s answer would be, “Because of the mercies of God.” If you ever wonder why you should make such a sacrifice, look back across the centuries through the eyes of faith to the hill called Golgotha. See the Son of God being crucified there on the cross for your sins. See him die in

agony for you. Then remember that since Christ died for you, you ought to live for him. That's what it means to be dedicated.

"Chinese" Gordon was one of the most powerful missionaries of all times. The Chinese government often sought to reward him for his loyalty and sacrificial service to the nation. But he persistently declined all titles, money, and suggested honors. Finally, he accepted a gold medal because he could not very well refuse it. After his death, the medal could not be found. It was later learned that he had melted it down and used the money to feed hungry children. In his diary Gordon wrote, "The last and only thing that I have in this world that I value I have given over to the Lord Jesus Christ."

This is dedication at its best. This is what God wants from every one of us. This is an indispensable ingredient of what it means to be a Christian.

4

Real or Synthetic?

"Wimpy" Harper pioneered Southern Baptist missionary work in East Africa. In his biography, *Wimpy Harper of East Africa*, he tells how that work was started. He and two other missionary companions were in Dar es Salaam, Tanganyika, trying to open up mission work. They had made several efforts to visit with the British governor but had failed each time. Then one day they received an invitation from the governor to visit his home for dinner. They were overjoyed. After a pleasant meal, the governor shoved his chair back from the table, folded his hands across his waist, and implored, "Men, what I really want to know is: Are you real missionaries or are you synthetic ones?"

That's the question the world wants to ask us. "You people who claim to be Christians, are you real? Or are you synthetic? Are you genuine? Or are you phonies?" Sometimes we even ask ourselves that question. We look into our own hearts and at our own conduct and we wonder, *Am I really a Christian?*

The answer to these questions needs to be and can be settled once and for all. In fact, the Book of 1 John was written to deal specifically with this issue. John in his own

words explained why he wrote the book. "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may believe on the name of the Son of God" (1 John 5:13). The word "know" means to have an absolute and settled knowledge, an intimate perception. There is no "I hope so" or "I think so" or "I guess so" in it. It suggests that you may have an absolute and settled knowledge that you are one of God's children.

Keep this in mind as you read 1 John, and you will see scattered throughout it the evidences, the birthmarks, of a real Christian.

There are four of them I want you to think about.

Like Father, Like Son

The first birthmark of a Christian is holiness. John writes:

This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as he is the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his son cleanseth us from all sin (1 John 1:5-7).

If you are trying to identify a child, it helps to know what his father or mother are like. Ordinarily there will be a resemblance. And if you are trying to identify a Christian, it helps you to know what the Heavenly Father is like. So, John begins by telling us what God is like. God is light and in him there is no darkness.

The word "light" has reference to God's righteousness or holiness. It means that he is without sin. There is no darkness, no evil, no wrong whatsoever in God. Now, John tells us that we must live holy lives if we are to have fellowship with God. And that's what it means to be a Christian, that we have a relationship with God as our Father, as our friend, as our constant companion. It means that we walk with him and we talk with him.

Christianity is more than intellectual belief or accepting certain historical facts. It is more than observing religious ceremonies or living up to a particular moral standard. It is even more than becoming a member of an institution or an organization. It is knowing God so intimately that we have fellowship with him.

Since God is light, we must walk in the light to walk with him. If we claim to walk with God and continue to walk in sin, then we are not telling the truth.

The word "walk" refers to the whole manner of our lives. If it is the manner of one's life to live in sin, to habitually do wrong, to keep on living sinful lives, then we really do not walk with God because our sin separates us from him. If one habitually lives in sin, he does not have fellowship with God and is not a Christian.

So, the real test of a person's Christianity is not his talk but his walk. It is not what we say but how we live. It is the manner of one's entire life. If we know the Heavenly Father, our lives will be characterized by holiness and righteousness, and we will attempt to live as God wants us to live. There are cases of backsliding, but the genuine Christian will be miserable and grief-stricken outside of full fellowship with God.

John keeps hammering at that theme throughout his

entire book. He notes in another place, "Whosoever is born of God does not practice sin." The Bible never suggests that Christians are perfect. John clearly writes, "If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:10). The Bible never claims that to be a Christian one must live a sinless life. It does teach that if a person is born of God he will not *practice* sin. Sin will not be the habit of his life; he will not habitually go on doing the same old things. Christ has come into his heart and has given him victory over and deliverance from sin. He has now changed direction in his life and is walking in righteousness.

None of us can walk in perfect righteousness; we all slip occasionally, but if we have truly been born of God, when we do slip, we will get up and begin walking after him again.

What distinguishes the Christian from the non-Christian is: The Christian will walk after Jesus Christ day by day. That is the goal of his life, the supreme desire of his heart, and what characterizes his daily conduct.

John speaks later in his First Epistle of some people who had joined the Christian group and for awhile their lives seemed changed. But it wasn't long until they reverted to their old ways of life. Concerning these people he observed, "They went out from us because they were not of us, for if they had been of us no doubt they would have continued with us. They went out from us that it might be made manifest that they were never of us" (2:19).

Most people have at least one religious spasm in their lifetime. In a revival meeting, in a Vacation Bible School, in a church camp, they made some response, joined a church, and were even baptized. For a short period of time they seemed faithful to Christ and his church. But it wasn't long

until they were back into their old way of life once more.

John stressed that the fact they departed from the Christian community was an indication that they actually were never of God in the first place.

The Bible puts a tremendous emphasis upon continuing. The Christian life is a continuing walk with Jesus Christ. That's why the Bible states, "He that endures to the end shall be saved." This does not mean that endurance saves us; it does mean that at salvation something so radical happens in our lives that we will hang on and remain faithful to Jesus Christ. We will keep enduring in the Christian faith because Christ is in us.

Stop Your Lying!

The second birthmark of a Christian is obedience. John notes:

And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked (1 John 2:3-6).

Once again John states what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is a person who knows God. There is a difference in knowing God and knowing about God.

The late President Lyndon B. Johnson attended college at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, where I once pastored. He came back to our city on several occasions while I pastored there. Once when he came back

for a banquet, we sat next to each other at the head table and visited together. So, there is a sense in which you could say that I knew Lyndon Johnson. I had read about him in the newspapers and in books. I had watched him on television, and I had even met him personally on an occasion or two. But I only knew about him. I didn't know him as a close, personal friend.

Most people only *know about* God. They have read about him in books. They have heard about him from friends. And they have even talked *at* him in the crisis times of their lives. They know *about* him but they do not know him. To be a Christian means to know God personally as a friend.

One of the tests of whether we genuinely know God is that of obedience. John writes that if a person claims to know God and doesn't keep his commandments, he is a liar and the truth is not in him. So the key question is: "Do I obey him? Do I keep his commandments?"

In 1970 I traveled to East Africa to participate in an evangelistic crusade. While there I met one of the native pastors, Onesimus Juma. I had anticipated meeting Onesimus for a long time. I had often heard about him from Charles Tope, a former missionary to Uganda.

Onesimus had come to Charles years before, telling him that he felt a burden for the Taso tribe of his country. There was no missionary work in that region at the time, and Onesimus felt that God was calling him to work there. So, Charles promised Onesimus a small salary and sent him into Taso country to begin evangelistic work. Charles did not hear from Onesimus for about six months. Then one day he received a letter from him asking, "Will you come and visit the church I have established and help me baptize the new converts?"

So Charles journeyed deep into the bush country until he came to a little mud church with a thatch roof. The building overflowed with people and many stood outside looking in through the windows.

After the song service it came time for Charles to preach. As he was about to stand up, Onesimus leaned over and said to him, "Brother, do not preach too long because we have to baptize these people." Charles asked him, "How many of them do we have to baptize?" Onesimus replied, "All of them."

After the service Charles questioned them to find out if they really knew Christ as their Savior. He discovered that all 250 of them understood what it meant to be a Christian and had made a genuine commitment of their lives to Christ. "Then," he said, "I baptized people that afternoon until I almost wished there were no more to be baptized."

That's Onesimus Juma. One day he and I were walking down a bush-country trail together. The elephant grass was higher than my head on both sides of the trail. As I walked behind Onesimus, I said to him, "Onesimus, when I get back to the States, I'm going to see our friend Charles Tope. May I tell him that God is blessing you?" And he replied to me, "Yes, you tell him God is blessing me and I am obeying Him."

At first I thought that was a strange response. I would have expected him to reply, "Tell Brother Tope I'm still in the church." Or "Tell him I'm still out visiting." Or "Tell him I'm still preaching." But he said, "Tell him I am obeying God."

Then this verse came to me, "If a man say I know God and keepeth not his commandments, he is a liar." That day the African pastor taught me a lesson. The best way to identify myself as a real disciple of Christ is to obey the Lord Jesus.

Jesus warned, "Not everyone that saith unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven." When we hear that, we want to ask, "Lord, who then can be saved?" His answer is, "He that doeth the will of my father which is in heaven." Jesus asked on another occasion, "Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things I command you?" He doesn't want us to call him Lord if we aren't going to obey him as Lord. To say "Lord" on one hand and to disobey on the other is contradictory. The Lordship of Christ means that he rules in our lives. So, the birthmark of a Christian is obedience. There is no substitute for it.

Saul was the king of Israel. He was fighting against the Amalekites when God gave him battle orders. He was commanded to destroy the land utterly and to kill all the animals. Saul decided, instead of slaughtering all of the cattle, that he would save the choice ones to use as sacrifices to God. Nobody could fault making a sacrifice to God. Surely that would be commendable. But God had told him to destroy the animals. In order to sacrifice he had to disobey. As he brought the animals back to camp he was intercepted by Samuel the prophet who said to him, "Saul, Saul, don't you know that it is better to obey than to sacrifice?"

It is better to obey than to sing in the choir. It is better to obey than to sign a tithing pledge card. It is better to obey than to have perfect attendance in Sunday School. It is obedience that marks the genuine Christian from the synthetic.

Looking Through Eyes of Love

The third mark of a Christian is love. John writes:
Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God;

and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love (1 John 4:7-8).

Again John writes:

If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also" (1 John 4:20-21).

First, John had written, "God is light." Now he teaches, "God is love." Remember, if you want to identify a child, it helps to know what his father is like, and our Heavenly Father is love.

To be a Christian implies that one love God with all of one's heart and mind and soul. Jesus told us that this is the first and the great commandment (Matt. 22:37-38). The second, which is like unto that, is that one should love one's neighbor as oneself.

Sometimes it is harder to love your neighbor than it is to love God. You can't see God. In a sense you don't have to deal with him every day. But you do deal with your neighbors, and at times it is hard to love them. However, if a man claims he loves God and hates his brother, don't believe him. He doesn't love God. How can he love God whom he has never seen and not love another person who is made in the image of the invisible God?

Jesus emphasized, "By this shall all men know ye are my disciples, that ye love one another." Show me a person without love, and I will show you one without Christ. You can't have Jesus without having love, or at least the capacity

to love. It may not be fully developed love, but the potential is there. The seed is planted in us at conversion, and in time it will grow and bear fruit.

Years ago I knew a lady who was personable, talented, and intelligent, but she was not especially attractive. She had a large crook in her nose that detracted from her appearance. She might have been attractive otherwise. After she had finished college she decided to have plastic surgery on her nose. It would be both expensive and painful and her parents objected. Her mother assured her, "You are already beautiful to us." She replied, "Yes, Mom, but you look at me through eyes of love."

The way you look at a person largely determines what you see. That mother, looking through eyes of love, didn't notice the crooked nose.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we looked at the whole world through eyes of love? We wouldn't see crooked noses or warts or scars or weaknesses. We would just love people for who they are. That's what it means to be a Christian. That's a part of what Christ does for us. He gives us eyes of love. If his kind of love is not in your heart, then I doubt if Christ is in your heart either.

It has been a long, hard process for me, but gradually God has changed my whole outlook on life. He will do the same for you.

Homogenized? Pasteurized? Baptized?

The last mark of a Christian is faith. John says:

Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and everyone that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him (1 John 5:1).

Up until now John has talked about walking with God, knowing God, and loving God. Now he speaks about believing in Christ. He writes:

And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life (1 John 5:11-12).

The word "believe" means to "adhere to, to trust in, to rely upon." It is more than an intellectual process. It encompasses all of life. It is the same as commitment.

It is not enough to be born in America. That doesn't make you a Christian. It is not enough to be reared in the church. That doesn't make you a Christian. You must trust in, rely on, and adhere to Jesus Christ to be a Christian. You must accept him as the Lord and Savior of your life.

Have you done that yet? Some of you have been homogenized—you have mixed and mingled with Christians until you blend with them perfectly. Some of you have been pasteurized—you have walked down the aisle and taken the pastor's hand. Some of you have been baptized—you have been sprinkled, squirted on, immersed, and "dry cleaned." Now, you need to be evangelized—you need to make a full commitment of yourself to Jesus Christ.

Then these are the birthmarks of a believer: holiness, obedience, love, and faith. Nobody needs to guess about his relationship to the Savior. You can check your life by The Book, the Bible. Christians are real—not synthetic.

5 Saved and Secure

All of us need two things. We need to be saved and we need to be sure of it. Salvation is a matter of life and death. It is the only alternative to perishing (John 3:16). Assurance of salvation is almost as essential. Yet many Christians live their lives in the fog of doubt and the haze of uncertainty.

Even people who are faithful in Bible reading, earnest in prayer, and regular in worship often have no assurance of their salvation.

This uncertainty about salvation can be caused by many factors. Sometimes it arises because people are not really saved. They joined a church and were baptized when they were children, and now that they are older, they realize they did not truly trust Christ for salvation. Perhaps they were just doing these things because someone else did them.

Some people have doubts about their salvation because they are not living for Christ as they should. They are not walking in fellowship with and obedience to the Lord, and they are not active in his service.

Some people are unsure of their salvation because they misunderstand conversion. If they did not have as dramatic a conversion experience as the apostle Paul, or as those they

have read about or heard about, then they question whether they have been saved at all. They do not realize that such dramatic experiences are the exception instead of the rule. They are only the ones we remember and talk about. If you were raised in a Christian home and taken to church all of your life, your conversion will seldom be a dramatic experience.

Still others question their salvation because they think they must remember the exact time and place they were saved. There are even some preachers who will tell you that if you do not remember the day and place you were saved, then you are not saved. I believe that is not so. Occasionally I read about a person who does not know how old he is. They may have come from some foreign country or the backwoods where accurate records of such events were not kept. Apart from records that have been kept or people who were there when it happened, none of us would know when we were born or how old we are. Although we were present when it happened and we were a vital part of the experience, we do not remember the event. But we do not have to remember when and where we were born in order to know that we are alive now. And that's what is important. In the same way you do not have to know exactly when you were born again to realize that you are alive in Christ today.

The Lord wants us not only to be saved but also to be sure of our salvation. Assurance, like salvation, is one of God's priceless gifts to us. Paul writes, "Examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith" (2 Cor. 13:5). Peter tells us, "Give diligence to make your calling and election sure" (2 Pet. 1:10). According to these two apostles every believer ought to know that he possesses salvation.

But let us go a step further. Assurance is not only

possible, but it is necessary. Without assurance there can be no peace and no joy in our Christian experience. Without assurance there can be no usefulness in God's service. We will like the zest and vitality in our work for Christ that makes it effective. Without assurance there can be no growth in the Christian life. You cannot build a building if you are forever digging up the foundation to see if it is solid. You can never grow a garden if you are forever pulling up the plants to see if the roots are healthy. And you must have a settled conviction about your relationship to the Lord if you are to grow into a strong and healthy Christian.

God wants us to move from doubt to assurance about our salvation. So don't waste years in uncertainty—move forward to enjoy the greater blessings of God. Assurance is not necessary for salvation, but it is necessary for a victorious life.

Assurance characterizes the testimony of all of God's great and useful servants. Listen to the apostle Paul's statement of certainty, "For I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (2 Tim. 1:12). There are five powerful words of assurance in this verse. The word "know" means "to have a positive and settled knowledge." It does not mean to think so, to hope so, or to guess so. It means to know so beyond any doubt. The word "persuaded" means to "be in a fixed and immovable position, to be totally convinced." It means to be so set that you cannot be budged. It is like driving a nail through a board and then bending it over on the other side. It is there to stay. The word "able" means to "have power." The Greek word is *dunamai*. From it we receive our word "dynamite." It suggests that God has the power to do what we trust him to do. The

word "keep" is a military word. It means to guard, to defend, to secure. The word "committed" is a banking term. It means to "make a deposit, to entrust to another for safe keeping."

When Paul wrote these words he was an old man at the end of his life. He was a veteran of many battles for the Lord. He was standing on the outer rim of life and looking beyond death into eternity. As he did he must have thought, *Thank God, I don't have to face death, the grave, and eternity with fear and anxiety. I am absolutely sure of this, I stand on it and I will not be budged from the fact that God has the power to guard and keep safe that which I have entrusted unto him until the end of time.*

Every Christian has the right to speak of his relationship to God with that kind of certainty. Christian assurance is built on three foundations: the Word of God, the work of Christ, and the witness of the Spirit. The Word of God we believe by faith. The work of Christ we know by fruit. The witness of the Spirit we know by inward assurance. So, our assurance is based on the character of God, the power of Christ, and the confirmation of the Holy Spirit. With all of this, you ought to be able to testify, "I am both saved and sure." Can you say that?

Look at these three foundational stones upon which to build a life of assurance.

The Word of God

If you were to ask me, "Are you a Christian? Are you saved? If you were to die tonight, would you go to heaven?" I would not say, "I hope so." Or "I think so." Or "Maybe so." I would answer, "Yes! I know so."

"But," you ask, "how can you be sure?" My assurance

is based on the Word of God. God tells us in Scripture what we must do in order to be saved and I have done that. Now if God's Word is true, if God can be trusted, if God is reliable, I am saved. I am saved because God said so. My confirmation then is based on the character of God. I am sure I am saved because I am sure God will do what he promised to do.

Look at how this works. Paul wrote, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13). Examine that verse carefully. It says, "Whosoever [that means me] shall call [that means pray] on the name of the Lord [that means Jesus] shall be saved [that means certainty]." That's simple enough, isn't it?

The Bible does not say, "Whosoever shall join the church shall be saved." Nor does it say, "Whosoever shall be baptized shall be saved." And it does not say, "Whosoever shall be confirmed shall be saved." It doesn't say, "Whosoever shall live up to the Ten Commandments shall be saved." Or, "Whosoever shall keep the Golden Rule shall be saved." Nor does it say, "Whosoever shall speak in tongues shall be saved." What it does say is: "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

There was a time when I did that. As a young teenage boy, in honesty and sincerity, I called upon the name of the Lord and asked him to be my Savior. Now, if God can be trusted, I have been saved.

Some people will retort, "That's too easy." They feel that there must be more to salvation than just believing and asking. Admittedly, it is easy to call upon the name of the Lord. The hardest part is coming to the place where you are willing to do that. And that's not easy at all. Before a person will ever call upon the name of the Lord for salvation, he

must first admit that he is a sinner and needs to be saved. He must recognize that he has broken the laws of God, transgressed the will of the Heavenly Father, and lived in disobedience. That's hard to do.

Then you must admit that you cannot save yourself by being good or by being religious. Some people are willing to admit that they are sinners. But they are not willing to admit that they are helpless to do anything about their sin. They feel that by "being good" or by being religious they can earn their way to heaven. People who believe that never call upon the Lord for salvation. Why should they? They are depending on their own goodness which they believe is sufficient. You have to admit your own helplessness before you will ever call on the Lord, and you must repent of your sins. You must turn from your sins and that's not easy either.

Finally, you must admit that Jesus is the one and only Savior. *Jesus is the one and only Savior* (Acts 4:12, John 14:6). There is none other name given unto heaven whereby men must be saved. Until a person recognizes this fact, he will never call on the name of the Lord for salvation.

Once you have overcome these obstacles, salvation is as easy as calling upon the name of the Lord. If you will honestly and sincerely pray something like this, "Father, I acknowledge my sin. I am sorry for my sin. I am willing to turn from my sin. I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I will follow him, serve him, and obey him the rest of my life. Amen," you can be saved. You may think, "Isn't it rather presumptuous to be so certain?" Let me ask you this. "Is it presumptuous to believe God?" Assurance is not arrogant presumption but an humble knowledge of present acceptance by God. This confidence is based on the character of God. It is not self-confidence. It is confidence in

the reliability and trustworthiness of the Heavenly Father. The wrong is not in believing God. The wrong is in not believing him.

Some people feel that they need more assurance than the Word of God. However, there is no greater confirmation than this. John wrote, "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater" (1 John 5:9). Daily we accept the witness of men. We believe marriage licenses, birth certificates, and college transcripts. What are they? They are nothing more than the written witness of men. If we can believe the written witness of men, surely we can believe the written witness of God in his Word. John goes on to say:

For this is the witness of God which he had testified of his son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar, because he believeth the record that God gave up his son (1 John 5:9-10).

My assurance then is based upon the truthfulness of God. Failure to believe is to make God a liar. Trust in God and his Word and your fear will flee. Your conscience will be calm and your heart will be at rest.

The Work of Christ

Our assurance is also based upon the work of Christ—not only the work of Christ on the cross, but his work in our lives at the present. The moment we believe in Christ, he comes to live inside of us. That presence will soon manifest itself in our character and our conduct. Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians, "My little children . . . I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). The word "formed" means "to give an outward expression to an inner

nature." It describes a change in character and conduct corresponding to an inward spiritual condition.

We often remark concerning an athlete, "He was in good form today." We mean that his outward play or performance was equal to his inward ability. He played up to his potential. The coach received from him that which was within him. These Christians in Galatia had received the Lord Jesus in their hearts, but there was little of his beauty in their lives. Paul asserted that he would continue to go through pain comparable to that of a woman giving birth to a child until they lived up to their potential. We are all to let Christ, who is in us, show his life through us. This is one of the sure signs that we are saved.

One fact you will notice when you become a Christian is a change in your nature. You will be a different kind of person from what you were before conversion. There will be a new interest in spiritual matters. You will have a new love for God, a new interest in prayer. You will have a new hunger and thirst for righteousness, a new awareness of right and wrong, and a new desire for a changed life. There will be a new love for your brothers and sisters, and a new desire to share Christ with others, and a new faithfulness to his church.

A friend told me that he became a Christian and walked with the Lord for many years. Then through a series of problems he drifted away from the Lord and found himself in the nightclub scene. He testified, "As I sat in a club one night, the thought came to me, 'I'm out of place here.'" He was out of place and that was because he had the nature of Christ within him.

Another friend, who had been raised in a cold and unemotional family, said, "Before I became a Christian I had

no compassion for people. Now I find myself caring like I have never cared before." These are evidences that Christ's life is being formed in both of these men.

After conversion there will be periods of barrenness in our lives; none of us will ever be perfect. It takes time to grow to Christian maturity. However, if there is no growth there is probably no life. But if there is growth, be it ever so slight, it is an indication that the life of Christ is in you.

The Bible talks about the fruit of the spirit. These are love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance (Gal. 5:22-23). If Christ is being formed in you, these fruits will begin to grow in your life. Look at your life: Is there a change in it? Are you a different person? Do you have new desires? New longings? Is Christ being formed in you? Is he showing himself in your life? If the beauty of Christ is being shown through you, even to the slightest extent, it is an evidence that Christ is in you and one of the grounds of your assurance. Should it be that your life is no different from the unconverted, then perhaps you have never been converted.

The Witness of the Spirit

At conversion you become the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. And this Heavenly Guest always confirms his presence. So, first, we have faith—faith in the Word of God. Second, we have fruits—the fruits that come from the presence of Christ within us. Then we have feelings—the feelings that come from the witness of the Spirit of God.

John wrote, "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself" (1 John 5:10). Paul wrote, "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16).

If two people are in agreement, they know it. They sense it. I talked with a young man whose family was torn apart by tension. He said, "When I'm with my dad everything is OK. When I'm with my mother alone everything is OK. But when the two of them are together, I feel a tremendous tension." The Spirit of unity or of discord are almost impossible to hide.

In exactly the same manner when the Spirit of God is within us there is an inner confirmation. His Spirit says to one's spirit, "We are one." We know that we are the children of God. Behind this truth is the Roman law of adoption. When a family adopted a child, the adoption always was transacted in the presence of witnesses. That way, if the parents died and the adoption was ever called into question, the witness could testify that it had in fact taken place. He was there when it occurred. The Holy Spirit is our witness. He keeps saying to your heart, "You are a child of God. You have been adopted into his family. I was there when it happened."

These then are the bases of our assurance. Our assurance is not based upon human opinion but upon the Word of God. It is not based upon human effort but upon the work of Christ. It is not based upon human emotion but upon the witness of the Spirit.

When that brilliant Christian and scientist, Sir Michael Faraday, was dying, several journalists questioned him as to his speculations concerning the soul and death. "Speculations," observed the dying man in astonishment, "I know nothing about speculations; I am resting on certainties. 'I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed unto him against that day'" (see 2 Tim. 1:12).

You too can have the faith of John, Paul, and Farraday. You can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are a member of God's family. You can and should be both saved and sure. Every Christian has a right to this.

6

Beware of Overconfidence

Self-confidence is a desirable quality in the life of any person. It is not only desirable, it is almost a necessity in today's world. Thus books, articles, and courses abound on how to help develop poise, a positive mental attitude, and self-confidence. While self-confidence is an asset, overconfidence is a liability. While self-confidence can be a stepping stone to success, overconfidence can be a stumbling block to failure.

Two articles from *Reader's Digest* (December, 1964) illustrate this. The first was entitled, "How Hoffa Got Hoffa." It was about Jimmy Hoffa, former head of the Teamster's Union of the United States, who mysteriously disappeared in 1972 and has not been heard from since. For years it had been almost common knowledge that Hoffa was connected with the underworld, that he had misused union pension funds, and that he had bribed jurors. But all the Justice Department resources, including the F.B.I., could not get a conviction on Hoffa. During all of those legal skirmishes, Hoffa abounded in self-confidence. In fact, he once boasted, "I may have my faults but being wrong ain't one of 'em."

That was Hoffa's central mistake. From it flowed others

which finally resulted in two sentences totaling thirteen years in a federal prison.

Strange as it may seem, nobody really "got" Hoffa. The McClellan Committee didn't get him, nor his enemies inside the Teamster's Union, nor even former U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. It took Hoffa to get Hoffa.

When Hoffa came to trial in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on charges of conspiracy to fix a federal jury, he made the biggest mistake a defendant can make. He pleaded his own case. Despite the fact that at his elbow in the courtroom was an army of twenty-nine of some of the most capable legal minds in the world, Hoffa was his own defense counsel.

Hoffa deployed the twenty-nine lawyers in four lines of defense. At the defense table sat Hoffa and nine trial lawyers, three acting for Hoffa and six for his five co-defendants. At a second table sat five or six lawyers scribbling suggestions for the trial lawyers, making notes on possible reversible errors, and checking transcripts of testimony.

Meanwhile, back at Hoffa's hotel, another group poured over testimony of the previous day's proceedings, preparing questions for the examination of witnesses, drawing up affidavits, motions, and other pleadings. In a nearby law library still other lawyers checked precedents and hunted up points of law.

But in spite of all the legal candle power that blazed about Hoffa, it soon became evident that he was his own chief counsel. Thus, Hoffa got Hoffa. He stumbled over self-confidence.

The second article was entitled "What Really Happened To Khrushchev?" It dealt with the question of how the cruel, wily, and ruthless old man of Russia, who had

skirted so many terrible dangers, outlived the Stalinist purges and subsequent threats to his power, so suddenly lost control of the government of Russia. How was it possible that the Central Committee so suddenly consigned him to what he himself once called the "dust heap of history"?

The answer lies in part in the fact that Khrushchev undoubtedly thought he had an unshakeable grip on power. All the other top men in Russia were his men and some were his closest friends. What did he have to worry about? But Khrushchev was too sure of himself and their loyalty, and they turned against him.

Like Hoffa he too stumbled because of overconfidence. It caused him to let his guard down once too often.

The peril of overconfidence confronts every one of us. In that powerful book, *The Silence of Dean Mitland*, when, after long efforts to hide his sin, the dean made his final confession: "I fell because I deemed myself above temptation."

The apostle Paul deals with the peril of overconfidence when he writes, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). Paul had been dealing with the questionable practice of Christians eating meat which had been previously offered to idols in pagan worship ceremonies. At the back of this verse there lies the overconfidence of some of the Corinthian Christians. Their point of view was, "We have become Christians and we are therefore one with Jesus Christ. We are in Christ and Christ is in us; therefore we are quite safe; we can attend pagan feasts, eat their meat that was once offered to idols, and not be harmed by it. There is no possible danger in this for us."

So, Paul cautions these people and us against overcon-

fidence. He insists on the need for vigilance in our Christian lives. Again and again a fortress has been stormed because its defenders thought that it could not be. Christians repeatedly have fallen into sin because they were so sure they never would.

We are never beyond the danger of spiritual overconfidence. Anytime we overestimate our own strengths and underestimate the tempting power of Satan, we can stumble. So, this warning is for us as well as for the Corinthians.

There are at least three signs of spiritual overconfidence we should watch for.

Failure to Stay in Church

Anytime we begin to neglect regular church attendance we are in danger of becoming spiritually overconfident. I have heard people remark, "I don't need to attend church to be a Christian." Sometimes they mean by this that they do not need the church at all. At other times they mean that they don't need to attend church with any regularity. People who talk like that are overconfident. They don't know their own weakness, Satan's power, or the strength that comes from genuine worship.

The Scriptures warn us not to "forsake the assembling of ourselves together" (Heb. 10:25). Faith in God is highly personal and individualistic, but one avenue for the deepening and strengthening of that faith is meeting and worshiping with other Christians on a regular basis.

There are three events that ought to occur when we go to church. First, we ought to worship. In a materialistic society every person needs at least one day out of seven to be especially reminded of the spiritual and the eternal. It is so easy in our hectic lives to forget what is vitally important

in life. Worship brings us right back into perspective. Worship glorifies God and accentuates the spiritual and the eternal. Everybody needs it.

"But," someone protests, "I don't need to be in church in order to worship God." That's right. But listen to what a little girl asked her father when the family was going on a Sunday outing and he said that he could pray at the lake as well as at the church, "We could, Daddy, but we won't, will we?"

The second event that should happen when we attend church is: We should learn. In church we have an opportunity to learn the will of God and the Word of God from gifted, dedicated, and prepared leaders. Precious few people know so much about the Bible that they couldn't profit from sitting under the ministry of a God-called pastor and a God-appointed Sunday School teacher.

The third event that should happen when we go to church is: We should make Christian friends. Fellowship is vital to a good, healthy emotional and spiritual life. In church, you can meet the kind of friends who will encourage you to the best kind of living.

There is something about being with other believers that is conducive to prayer, to worship, and to spiritual meditation. Try to build a fire with one log or with one piece of coal. You can't do it! It takes two or more logs, two or more pieces of coal to nourish the blaze and fuel the fire. It is the same in our spiritual lives. Without the closeness to other Christians that comes by worshiping, fellowshiping, and serving Christ together, the fire of Christian devotion will be quenched.

In January of 1966 a ground rescue party reached Captain Thomas D. Smith of Dallas and three other survi-

vors of a crashed C-47 transport plane in Southern Greece. Smith and his companions had spent nearly forty-eight hours huddled in the fuselage of a plane atop 7,680-foot Mt. Helmos as blizzard winds howled outside. They were near freezing when rescued. Captain Smith related how they had managed to survive. "The impact of the crash threw me out into the snow. There was a terrible blizzard. Within minutes, my hands were covered with half an inch of ice. I found nine parachutes and made sleeping bags from them. But my fingers were soon frozen stiff. They were like a rock. There was another officer, so he and I cuddled each other like a mother and child until our hands and feet were warm."

By sharing with each other the warmth of their bodies, these brave flyers lived through the freezing ordeal. Singly, each would have died. Together they survived. We live in a cold and impersonal world, and our faith and dedication will be frozen if we do not fellowship with other Christians. Others need our warmth; we need theirs. Each without the other is doomed.

When wolves attack a herd of cattle, they try to cut a little calf out of the herd. If the calf stays in the herd, it gains protection from those who are around it, but if it ever breaks out of the herd, it becomes an easy prey for the wolves.

Planes on bombing missions fly in formation. The formation gives strength and protection to them. A plane always has another above it or below it or beside it. When the planes are attacked by enemy fighters, if they stay in formation they help protect one another. But if a plane ever breaks out of formation, it becomes an easy target for the enemy fighters.

So it is in our Christian warfare. There is strength in the group. In being a part of the church, we draw strength and

help from others. If we ever feel we do not need that, we are overconfident. We are in danger of tripping up.

Running with the Dogs

When we begin to associate with the wrong crowd, we are also in danger of becoming overconfident. The single most important influence on the actions and conduct of most people is association with their peers. Peer pressure is one of the most powerful forces in all the world.

If you begin to associate with the wrong crowd that goes to the wrong places and does the wrong things, it will be almost impossible for you to live right. If you think people who are not serving God can be your constant companions and your closest associates and yet not affect you, then you think more highly of yourself than you ought.

This kind of thinking and behaving has been the downfall of many a good person. There are some people it is easy to be good around, and there are some people it is easy to be bad around. If you have a desire to live for God, you had better choose as your closest companions those who make it easiest for you to be good. As Sam Jones put it, "You can't run with dogs without getting fleas on you."

I have a friend who claimed he quit playing golf for that very reason. He had once been an avid golfer, but when he and his friends were through playing a round of golf, the friends always wanted to have a beer. He couldn't say no, so he gave up the game to get away from the crowd that was a bad influence on him. If you find it hard to say no to the pressures of your friends who are doing wrong, then you had better find a different group of friends also. The apostle Paul warns us that evil companions are able to drag us down and lead us into sin (1 Cor. 15:33).

If you think you can have the wrong kind of friends and live the right kind of life, you are in danger of spiritual overconfidence.

Flirting with Temptation

Another evidence of spiritual overconfidence comes when you put yourself into a position to be tempted. Christians who flirt with sin and temptation face a real danger. Many affairs begin with an innocent flirtation. Nothing wrong is intended. No one ever planned anything wrong to happen. But it did. If you overmatch yourself with temptation, you can expect to be burned.

Robert Murray McChesney advised, "Avoid the occasion for sin as much as the sin itself." The Bible warns, "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thess. 5:22). Someone has said, "Women flee from temptation while men crawl away with the fond hope it will overtake them." Flee temptation and when you do, don't leave a forwarding address.

Many of us are like the young boy who was commanded by his father not to go swimming. When the father caught him in the water the boy argued, "I didn't mean to do it." "Then, why do you have your swim suit with you?" the dad asked. "I brought it along in case I was tempted" was the reply. So, we also make provision for the flesh. The Bible warns us not to do that. We are not to flirt with temptation. We must not overmatch ourselves. It is far easier to head the devil off at the pass than it is to fight our way out of his attacks once he has encircled our wagons.

When someone asked Donald O'Connor's advice on how to quit smoking, he answered, "Carry wet matches." We are to cooperate with God by removing the means of

igniting the fleshly flame that fires up within us. If we don't do that we are in danger of overconfidence. In the Upper Room, when Jesus told his disciples that one of them would betray him, each apostle asked, "Lord, is it I?" (Mark 14:9). I would not have done that. I would have asked, "Lord, is it Bill? Is it Joe? Is it Mary?" But each of those disciples queried, "Lord, is it I?" They asked that because they knew they were capable of betraying the Lord. They didn't trust themselves. Don't you, either. Don't think that you are beyond betraying him. Don't think that you could never get involved with another person in an extra-marital affair. We are all capable of the most hideous of evil.

The thrust of the Scripture is clear. Don't trust yourself—trust God. Don't put your confidence in your own ability or your own strength. Put your confidence and ability in Christ.

Paul expressed the positive Christian attitude when he affirmed, "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13). As we look to him, learn from him, and lean on him, we are able to live for him. That's a part of what it means to be a Christian.

7

Don't Flirt with Temptation!

I once talked with a missionary whose life had been so dramatic and adventuresome that I thought someone ought to write a biography of it. When I suggested this to him he reminded me of an old saint who had refused to let the story of his life be written while he was still alive. The old saint admitted, "Since I have not finished the race yet, there is always a chance that I'll trip up on the last lap."

Biographies can be written too soon, because as long as we live there is always a danger that we will stumble into sin. None of us is ever beyond temptation. None of us is ever beyond yielding to it.

Sure enough within a year my friend had divorced his wife, been dismissed from his missionary appointment, and virtually forfeited his entire ministry.

The Scriptures give us a vivid warning about the constant danger of temptation and sin that we all face. The Bible cautions us that even privileges, blessings, and successes are no guarantee against future failures. Israel is a classic example (1 Cor. 10:1-12). No other people in history have ever been as privileged and blessed as the Jews. God chose them by a sovereign act of grace as his own people, "his peculiar treasure." He delivered them from the Egypt-

tian bondage with mighty miracles. He baptized them under the leadership of Moses. He led them to the Promised Land with a cloud by day and a fire by night. He graciously and lavishly provided for them at every turn. As a result, they became so proud and presumptuous that they thought they could never fall. So they became careless and overconfident and fell into grievous sin. They were guilty of lust, idolatry, fornication, unbelief, and complaining against God. God was so displeased with them that they lost his blessings and their lives.

The Corinthians in Paul's day were facing the same dangers. They thought that idolatry and unbelief could never touch them. Yet at that very moment they were in the gravest danger. Paul summarized his warning to them and to us when he sternly warned, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). Temptation can strike most devastatingly when we least expect it.

No person has ever entered into heaven who has not been severely tempted, except it be a little child too innocent to know sin. Temptation is the common denominator of us all. So long as we live, we are beset by it. Sometimes it comes as a gentle breeze. At other times, it comes as a howling gale. But it does come to us all. Nothing can stop us from being tempted.

Having warned us of the danger which confronts every person, Paul quickly strikes a note of encouragement. He tells us there are no new temptations. What we face are the common experiences of people. God knows the limits of our ability to resist Satan and will not allow us to be tempted beyond that, and with every temptation, God always provides a way out (1 Cor. 10:13).

There is first a warning, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." Then there follows this gracious word from God to encourage us and inspire us. Even though temptation is real and we are never beyond it, we don't have to yield to it. We are not at the mercy of our passions and the pressures of our environment. We are not victims of our circumstances or our character. We can endure temptation.

Through the ages, people have gone to this gracious Word from God and found the inspiration, encouragement, and love they have needed to live victoriously. Some of you need it today. You are standing on the fringes of Christianity, wanting to enter in but hesitant because you are afraid you can't live up to your commitment, you can't "hold out." Take heart, God says you can endure. Resources are available. Others of you are excusing a life of sin by alibiing, "I am a victim of my surroundings and circumstances. I can't help myself." This Word promises you that you can endure also. And there are some of you who in recent days have been severely tempted. You know what it is to be pressured, discouraged, and ready to give in. To you is sent this encouragement: You can endure.

Others Have Made It

First, we are assured we can endure because of the commonality of temptation. There are no unique temptations. There are no new sins. What we face, others have faced before. Not only is the fact of temptation a common thread which runs through all people, but so is the content of temptation.

We can almost hear behind these words from Paul the complaints of the Corinthian Christians. When Paul was

with them, he had challenged them to the highest and the noblest kind of living. Now they were saying to him, "Paul, you don't realize how hard it is to live for Christ in Corinth. The Temple of Diana is here. Sin flows like an open sewer in our streets. There are more temptations and pressures in our city than anywhere else in the world. We can understand how a person could live for Christ in Antioch, that great missionary center. But Corinth is different. We face things here that no one else ever faced before. Besides, Paul, what do you know about temptation? You are a preacher. You are different from the rest of us. You are not driven by the same passions and appetites as we are."

Paul's reply was sharp. He advised them that they could never blame their sin on their natures, their pressures, or their circumstances. What they faced, others had faced and endured. So, they could endure temptation also.

We are all more alike than we realize. There are fewer differences in us than we want to admit. Jesus was tempted in all points just as we are. Look at his temptation experience and you will see the common thread which runs through all human experience (Matt. 4:1-11). After his baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days. At the end of that time, Satan came tempting him, saying, "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread." Satan's first appeal was to the natural appetites of Jesus—his flesh.

Jesus responded with, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."

Satan then encouraged Jesus to presume on God by casting himself from the top of the Temple and trusting God to protect him. What a foolish, senseless, presumptuous act

that would have been. Jesus came back with, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."

Finally, Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would but fall down and worship him. Jesus answered, "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."

The three assaults of Satan were aimed at lust, pride, and greed. All temptations appeal either to our appetites, our arrogance, or our ambitions. Those are always Satan's approaches. He has not changed. The point is that Jesus and others have faced the same temptations which confront us. If they endured, we can endure also. Don't despair. Don't feel sorry for yourself, thinking you are the only one who has ever had it hard. Look around you and you will find the footprints of the Savior, as well as those of the saints, in the sands of time. They have walked the same road of temptation you are traveling. If they endured, you can endure too.

A friend tells how he was once driving Lightfoot, the famed bishop of Durham, in a horse-drawn carriage along a narrow mountain road in Norway. The road became so narrow there were only inches between the wheels of the carriage and the cliff on one side and the precipice on the other. The friend suggested in the end that Lightfoot would be safer if he climbed out and walked. The bishop surveyed the situation and then suggested, "Other carriages must have taken this road. Drive on."

In the Rockies there is a mountain pass so narrow that it looks as though a car could not squeeze through it. It is called the "Narrows." On it someone has placed a sign that reads, "You can make it; thousands have before you."

That's the encouragement of Scripture. Your experi-

ence is common to others. They have made it and you can make it too.

No Better Guarantee

Second, you can endure because of the faithfulness of God. Paul also says, "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able." This doesn't mean God won't let you trip. It does mean that he limits temptation so you need not stumble.

There are three great truths about God in this verse. First, God knows us. He knows our name. Repeatedly in the Bible, God calls people by name. When He called Samuel in the middle of the night, he called him by name. When Jesus found Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree, he called him by name. When God appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, he called him by name.

He also knows our nature. Jesus stated, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). When Samuel was preparing to anoint the eldest son of Jesse as the king of Israel, God said, "Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

And he knows our needs. Jesus said that the heavenly Father knows the things we have need of even before we ask him (Matt. 6:8). He has numbered the very hairs on our head.

But he not only knows our name, our nature, and our needs, he knows our strengths. In fact, he knows us better than we know ourselves. On the night of his betrayal, Peter boasted of his loyalty to Jesus. He blurted out, "Others may

deny you, but I will be true even unto death." Then Jesus told Peter, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." It happened even as Jesus predicted it would. Jesus knew Peter better than Peter knew himself. He knows us in the same way. He even knows how much temptation we can stand. You have probably noticed, while driving down a country road, a sign on a bridge which read, "Load limit," and then the amount of weight that bridge could safely bear. The engineers who worked that road knew the structural strength of that bridge. They knew how much weight it could safely bear without collapsing. In the same manner, God knows our spiritual, emotional, and physical load limit.

The second truth is: God is in control. He will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability to endure. God does not actually lead us into temptation. The Scriptures say, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man" (James 1:13). Satan is our adversary and our tempter (1 Cor. 7:5, 2 Cor. 2:11, Matt. 4:11, Luke 22:31), but God allows Satan to tempt us. Satan has brutal power, but his power is limited. He has much freedom, but it is not unlimited freedom. God will allow him to go only so far. God, who knows our strength, will always stop Satan short of putting more on us than we can stand.

Third, God is faithful. The word "faithful" means to be steady, dependable, and trustworthy. You may ask, "How can I be sure that I will never be tempted beyond what I can stand?" We know it by faith. The ground of our confidence is the character of God. He will do what he promises. God has promised that we will not be tempted beyond our ability to withstand. That's the only security we need.

Someone once asked one of General Robert E. Lee's aides about a certain matter to which General Lee had promised to attend. "What guarantee do I have that this will be done? How do I know he will do it?" asked the man. "Sir," replied the aide, "You have General Lee's word—there is no greater guarantee."

W. B. Glass, the longtime missionary to China, was fearfully ill. In the darkness of the night, he cried out again and again, "Cling to the promises, cling to the promises." That's what we must do. We not only can trust the promise of God to forgive us and to cleanse us, but also to limit temptation. Because of God's faithfulness we can endure.

Look for the Exit

Finally, we can endure temptation because God always provides a way of escape for us. Paul writes, "God . . . will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." The word "escape" means "an exit." It means a way out of a defile or a mountain pass. It suggests an army that has been surrounded and apparently about to be defeated. Suddenly a hidden passage is discovered and the army escapes. In the same way, God promises that with every temptation there will always be a way of escape. If sin is near, so is God. He will never allow us to be surrounded in such a way that there is no other alternative but to surrender.

If you will look for it and pray for it, God will always provide an exit. John Calvin wrote, "The Lord helps us in two ways: First, He limits our temptations. Second, He supplies us with strength. Therefore, if we fail, we can blame only ourselves." So we can never complain, "My temptation is more than I can bear." He has promised that it will not be. The word "able" is the Greek word *dinamai*. From it we get

our English word *dynamite*. It means "to have power." With every temptation, God gives us the power to stand up to it and overcome it.

The Christian life is a supernatural life. It is no "operation bootstrap." It is not a matter of believing in Jesus and then "doing the best you can." It is a matter of availing yourself of the power of God that is within you.

Paul speaks of this superabundant power twice in the book of Philippians. First, he writes, "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it unto the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

Again Paul exults, "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). Previously Paul was encouraging us to carry out salvation to its full potential. Now he tells us that God not only gives us the desire but also the ability to accomplish his glorious purpose in our lives. We are not on our own. We are not left to our own resources. God is working in us, enabling us to bear up under temptation.

Many of you have the power of God within you, but you have not availed yourself of it. You are like a house that has been wired for electricity, but you have never switched on the current. You are putting up a firecracker resistance when you have dynamite potential.

God expects us to do our part. He warns us to "abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thess. 5:22) and to "flee fornication" (1 Cor. 10:14). And he warns us to "resist the devil" (James 4:7). We must do these. If we have a job which leads us away from God, we ought to quit it. If we have friends who are dragging us down, we need to drop them. If we have a hobby that hurts us spiritually, we need to change it. We are to do our part and then trust God to his.

Remember that your temptation is not unique. Remember that God knows you and will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able to withstand. Remember that God always provides a way of escape with every temptation.

There is a tradition among some Indians that the spirit of one who was scalped entered into the one who scalped him. By this the warrior became more courageous and stronger with each new victim, and each victim added to the strength of the next battle. In the same manner, every time we win a victory over temptation we are stronger for the next. We sing and believe:

Yield not to temptation,
For yielding is sin;
Each victory will help you,
Some other to win:
Fight manfully onward,
Dark passions subdue;
Look ever to Jesus,
He'll carry you through.

Seek God's help. "He is able to keep you from falling, and present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24). You can endure—more than that, you can win the victory! To have this confidence is a part of what it means to be a Christian.

Rid Yourself of the Albatross

Comedian Danny Thomas once said, "My mother, God bless her, taught me when I was little never to carry yesterday on my back. It didn't matter what happened—yesterday was dead. I remember her saying: 'There is nothing you can do about it now; if you get in the habit of carrying yesterday around on your back, you will be bent double by the time you are twenty-one.'"

This is precisely what happens to many people. They do wrong and then they carry the weight of their guilt on their backs until they are bent double by it. To carry yesterday's failures, resentments, worries, mistakes, and sins is too much for anybody. The person who tries to do that is soon crushed under the weight of an albatross.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote about guilt and sin in his immortal "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

Those who carry an albatross will eventually be bent so low from the weight of it that they can't look the world, God, or themselves in the eye.

Examples of people carrying yesterday on their backs are found almost everywhere. Albert Speer was a part of Adolf Hitler's intimate circle of friends and was partially responsible for the war crimes and atrocities of World War II.

While serving a twenty-year prison sentence, he wrote in his book, *Inside The Third Reich: Memoirs*, that he would never be rid of his sin and that he was convinced that "no apologies are possible." The poor, wretched man. He lives with yesterday on his back, and he is bent double from it.

Years ago a young school teacher became involved with one of his students. Nothing immoral happened but he was indiscreet, to say the least. When school officials learned of this, the teacher came to me for counseling. He had recently watched a television program about a teacher who was having an affair with one of his students. He confessed with intensity, "I sat there wondering if other people watching the program were thinking about us." The truth of the matter was that no one else knew about them at the time, but his guilty conscience made him think they did. He was living with guilt on his back and it was bending him double.

The need for and the value of getting yesterday off our backs cannot be overestimated. Guilt takes a tremendous toll upon people physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Bit by bit the medical profession is realizing the tremendous physical and emotional consequences of guilt. Guilt was not invented by the Bible or the church—it is a universal phenomenon written into human nature by God. When we transgress our highest ideals and God's Word, it affects our whole being.

Dr. Paul Tournier, in his book *The Meaning of Persons*, says, "It is not necessary for me to insist on the medical value of confession. A bad conscience can, over a period of years, so strangle a person's life that his physical and psychical powers of resistance are thereby impaired. It can be the root cause of certain psychosomatic afflictions. It is like a stopper, which can be pulled out by confession, so

that life begins and wants to flow again." That is why Dr. Sonderegger called the doctor the natural confessor of humanity and why Michelor wrote that a complete confession is always necessary in medicine. It is also why Dr. Dubois of Berne, who did not call himself a Christian, advised his fellow doctors, "always confess your patient."

But we did not need to wait until Dr. Tournier came along to recognize the physical effects of sin and the therapy of confession. David talked about it centuries ago. He wrote:

What happiness for those whose guilt has been forgiven! What joy when sins are covered over! What relief for those who have confessed their sins and God has cleared their record. There was a time when I wouldn't admit what a sinner I was. But my dishonesty made me miserable and filled my days with frustration. All day and all night your hand was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water on a sunny day until I finally admitted all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide. I said to myself, "I will confess them to the Lord." And he forgave me! All my guilt is gone (Ps. 32:1-5, TLB).

One of the wonderful blessings God has given us is to provide a way of getting yesterday off our backs. John writes, "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).

This is a marvelous promise of both forgiveness and cleansing. There is a difference in the two. The word "forgiveness" literally means "to send away." It suggests that the barriers which divide us have been removed and that the relationship has been restored. When we wrong some-

one or when they wrong us, there is immediately erected between us an invisible barrier. We do not feel comfortable in their presence, and they do not feel comfortable in ours. We would rather not face them at all.

It is the same with God as with men. That is why God reminds us, "Your sins have separated between you and me" (Isa. 59:2). When Adam sinned against God, he and Eve immediately hid from God. They were guilty and knew it. They were ashamed of their disobedience and did not want to face God. Their sin and the guilt it carried had erected an invisible wall between them and God. It always works like that. When we are forgiven, the wall is removed and our relationship is restored.

But the promise is for more than forgiveness. It is also a promise of cleansing. This means that not only are the barriers removed, but the sin and guilt are taken away altogether. Isaiah writes, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isa. 1:18).

This promise of God is conditional. There is an "if" attached to it. There are three conditional steps to forgiveness and cleansing suggested here: One, tell God; two, trust God; three, thank God. If you will make these three steps, forgiveness and cleansing can be yours.

The Easiest of Hunting Expeditions

The first step to cleansing is to confess your sin to God. The process to forgiveness is to first *own* and then to *disown* your sins. We must first acknowledge our sin. Then we must forsake it. The process begins with confession. The word "confess" means "to say the same thing as" or "to agree with." Confession is agreeing with God and His evaluation

of us. It is saying the same thing about ourselves that God has already said. What has God said about us? "You are sinners." So when I confess my sin I am merely agreeing with what God has already said about me.

God accuses us of sin in two places. First, he accuses us of sin in the pages of the Bible. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). "For there is not a just man upon the earth that doeth good and sinneth not" (Eccl. 7:20). "All we like sheep have gone astray" (Isa. 53:6). God not only condemns us of sin there, but he also condemns us of sin in our own consciences. Even if we did not have the Bible, God would convict us in our consciences of our wrongdoing. When we confess our sins, then we are but agreeing with what God has already said about us in both the Bible and in our consciences.

True confession must always, of course, involve not only an admission of sin but a sorrow for it and a turning away from it. In the confession of sin we must not rationalize or generalize. We must be specific in calling sin by name. If we refuse to admit that we are sinners, then we live in a world of illusions. If we rationalize about our sin, God will not forgive it. Therefore, we must call sin by its name and deal with it honestly.

Billy Sunday remarked that we would get along better if we would treat sin as a rattlesnake rather than as a creampuff. He also said that you can't get rid of sin by brushing it with a feather duster. The only way to deal with sin is to treat it as a serious offense to God.

We all have three choices in dealing with our sins. First, we can deny our sins and carry them on our backs. Second, we can rationalize and excuse our sins and blame them on others. Former President Eisenhower, in his book *At Ease*,

said, "A search for a scapegoat is the easiest of all hunting expeditions." So we can blame our sins on someone else, or we can do what God tells us to do—we can confess our sins.

If you decide to confess your sins, you need not worry about shocking or surprising God. You won't be letting him in on information he does not already have access to. So, be honest and sincere; then forgiveness and cleansing can be yours.

You Can't Unscramble an Egg

The second step to forgiveness is to trust God. If we confess our sins, what assurance do we have that God will forgive us? John says that our assurance is in the character of God. "He [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." When the Bible states that God is "faithful" and "just" it means that God is true to himself. He is trustworthy; He is reliable. He will keep his word. So, ultimately our confidence rests on the character of God. It is a fact that he will do everything he says he will do.

What does God promise to do with our sins? He has promised four divine actions. First, he has promised to remove our sins as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12). Don't miss the greatness of this promise. He does not promise to remove our sins as far as the north is from the south, but as far as the east is from the west. The reason for expressing the promise this way is: There is a limit to the northerly and the southerly directions. There is a North Pole and there is a South Pole. If you travel north far enough you will eventually reach the North Pole. Once you have reached the North Pole and go beyond it, you are then

traveling south. If you keep traveling south, you will eventually reach the South Pole. Once you've reached it and go beyond it, you are then traveling north again. So, there is a limit on how far you can travel to the north or to the south. But there is no limit to the east or to the west. You can begin traveling in an easterly direction and never come to the end of it. You can travel in a westerly direction ad infinitum.

Second, the Lord promises to remember our sins no more (Jer. 31:33). When we talk about the marvelous attributes of God, we seldom dwell on his ability to forget. God does have a good forgetter. I'm convinced that if you could ask God about some sin he has forgiven, he would scratch his head and say to you, "I'm sorry, but I don't remember that. I have completely forgotten about that."

Third, the Lord promises to cast our sins into the depths of the sea (Mic. 7:19). The deepest point in the ocean is the Marianna Trench, located in the Pacific Ocean. There the ocean is 36,198 feet deep. That's almost seven miles. It is equivalent to twenty-seven Empire State Buildings stacked on top of one another. The highest point on the earth is Mt. Everest in Nepal. It is 29,028 feet high. This means that the deepest point of the ocean goes further into the heart of the earth than the highest mountain reaches into the sky. That's an inkling of how far the Lord casts our sins from us when he forgives them.

Earl Wilson once wrote, "If tombstones told the truth, we would all want to be buried at sea." The truth of the matter is that our sins have already been buried there. So, if tombstones could talk, they would not have anything to say about those who have been forgiven.

Fourth, the Lord promises to erase our sins. Peter demanded in the name of Jesus: "Repent ye therefore and

be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). The word "blot" means "to erase." In ancient days, paper was so rare and expensive that it was used again and again. And the ink of that day had no acids in it, so it didn't bite into the paper. It just lay on the page and dried. To erase it and make the paper usable again, one needed only to take a damp sponge and wipe across the page. Thus every trace of the dried ink could be removed and the paper was as good as new again. The word "blotted" describes that process of erasing. That's what God promises to do with our sins.

How much more complete could the forgiveness of our sins be? If they are removed as far as the east is from the west, then they are out of reach. If they are in the depths of the sea, then they are out of sight. If they are remembered no more, then they are out of mind. If they are blotted out, they are out of existence. Out of reach, out of sight, out of mind, and out of existence—that's complete forgiveness.

Now we must take God at his word. We must learn to rely upon his character. This is our only hope. You can't unscramble an egg. You can't unbreak a glass. And you can't undo the past. There is no hope for us except the mercy and the forgiveness of God. The same Bible which defines sin also offers us forgiveness and cleansing. The promise of forgiveness is just as real as the pronouncement of guilt.

David said, "If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Ps. 130:3-4). The word "mark" is a bookkeeping term. It means to write out, as if to mark on a ledger. If God wrote down all of our sins and held us accountable for them, how could we ever face him? But he does not jot them down or hold them against us. He

forgives them and forgets them when we meet his conditions.

So then, my forgiveness does not depend upon my goodness but upon his goodness. It does not depend upon my faithfulness but upon his faithfulness. My forgiveness from beginning to end is dependent upon God, and it is as sure as his character.

Once Is Enough

The third step to forgiveness and cleansing is to thank God. Having told God about our sins and trusted his character for forgiveness, we ought then to fill our prayers with thanksgiving. We ought to thank him daily for his forgiveness and cleansing. Sometimes when people talk to me about their past, I say, "You sound as though you have confessed that sin before." And they often reply, "I have confessed it a thousand times." Then I answer, "That's 999 times too often. All we need do is to confess our sins sincerely one time, if we mean it. If we do, God performs a miracle of forgiveness and cleansing.

When God forgives, he forgets. But we don't. It's the fact that we don't forget our sins that causes us big trouble. Satan uses our memory of past sins to rob us of joy and usefulness in our Christian lives. If we cannot forget about our sins, then we continue to focus on them and not on God. The memory of sin ought to bring us back to the cross and make us focus on the fact that Jesus died for our sins there. As we zero in on the death of Jesus for our sins, we spontaneously offer up a chorus of thanksgiving to God for his forgiveness. Thus, our guilt should lead us to gratitude as we remember again God's grace and goodness.

Since God forgets our sins when he forgives them

(once we confess our sins), if they are ever brought up again, it is the devil—not God—who is responsible. Remember where the haunting memory of sin comes from and why it comes. As soon as Satan brings your past sins to mind, thank God for his grace and move on. As Corrie ten Boom put it, "Throw your sins in the middle of the sea and put up a sign 'No Fishing.'"

"But," you retort, "You don't know my sins. You don't realize all that I've done wrong. God couldn't possibly forgive me of my sins." Did you read God's promise carefully? He promises to cleanse us of "all" unrighteousness. There is only one unpardonable sin. That's good news. It means that all other sins are pardonable. And if you're a Christian, you can't and won't commit the unpardonable sin.

If you have a hard time accepting God's forgiveness, it is sometimes helpful to visualize your forgiveness. Here is how you can do that. First, write down your sins on a piece of paper. Then read those sins out loud to God. Then put the piece of paper in a matchbox and bury it in your flower bed. You may even want to erect a little cross over that homemade grave. Thereafter when the guilt and the memory of your sins come back, visit the grave, bow your head, and thank God that your sins are dead and gone forever. Write them down, read them out, and cover them up. That helps to make forgiveness easier to remember.

Although Jesus on the cross made complete provision for our forgiveness and cleansing, we must appropriate that provision into our own lives by faith. We must confess and repent of our sins. Years ago Dr. Jonas Salk discovered a vaccine for polio. It meant that this dreaded disease which had crippled and maimed bodies for years and years was no

longer the master of people. There was now a way to be delivered from it. All people had to do was to receive the vaccine. All across our country temporary clinics were set up and people went there to be immunized. The discovery of this vaccine came at a high cost and a tremendous sacrifice, but it was freely available to all who would take it.

However, medical authorities report that the level of immunization against communicable diseases is now at an all-time low. Only about 40 percent of the preschool children have been sufficiently immunized against polio. Can you see my point? The sacrifice has been made and the price has been paid for our deliverance from this dreaded disease, but if people do not take the vaccine into their bodies, they are still susceptible to the disease and still in danger. In exactly the same way the price for deliverance from our sins was paid for by Jesus in his sacrificial death. He is ready and willing to forgive us our sins, but we must appropriate that forgiveness into our lives. We must confess our own sins and trust him for ourselves, or else there can be no forgiveness and cleansing.

Christians are people who have done that initially and keep on doing that continually. To be forgiven and cleansed is a part of what it means to be a Christian.

NOTE

1. Paul Toumier, *The Meaning of Persons* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1957), p. 157.

9

Applied Christianity

At the close of World War I a soap manufacturer, walking down the street with his pastor, was bemoaning the "failure" of Christianity. "After nineteen centuries of preaching and teaching Christ, there is still so much evil in the world, I don't see how you can go on preaching the gospel."

"I don't see how you can go on manufacturing soap," retorted the pastor. "Look at that little urchin playing in the gutter. His neck and ears are filthy. There is still so much dirt in the world. Soap is such a failure."

"But," countered the soap manufacturer, "if people will just apply the soap, they'll be clean."

"Yes," concluded the pastor, "and if people will but apply Christ to their daily lives, they will be clean."

The preacher was exactly right. What the world and we Christians need is to apply Christ to our daily lives.

To those who claim that Christianity has failed, my answer is, "Christianity simply has not been given a fair shake in today's world." There is no cleansing in unused soap. There is no healing in untaken medicine. There is no nourishment in uneaten food. There is no warmth in unworn clothes. There is no refreshment in undrawn water. There is no enlightenment in unread books. And there is no

power in unapplied Christianity.

The reason we don't experience more of Christ's life-changing and sin-cleansing power in our world is that much so-called Christianity is only a form and not a force in people's lives. It consists of rituals, ceremonies, and creeds, but there is an obvious absence of power to transform people's lives.

It may well be that the severest handicap of Christianity is not the scarlet sinner who is often condemned from the pulpit but the sleek devotee of an unimpeachable orthodoxy and a dignified conventionalism, who is horrified when it is suggested that real Christianity is a dynamic power which changes a person's entire life.

It is this very fact which marks the difference between a religious person and a Christian. The religious person is one who treats Jesus Christ with respect but avoids personal involvement with him. He venerates the Bible but declines to examine and accept its witness to the world, and he regards the church as a hatching, matching, and dispatching society.

The Christian, on the other hand, seeks to bring Jesus Christ and his power to bear on his politics, his home, his business, and his social life. For the religious man, religion is an appendage rather than a support or something to be shared. For the Christian, Christ is central.

The apostle Paul, writing to Timothy, warned him of such people. He wrote concerning the last days that men would come along "having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof" (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

Form without force—that's our problem today. Religion must have form; no one would argue with that. Worship must have some order. The local church must have

some structure, some officers, and some policies. Some rituals and ceremonies are essential, and sooner or later beliefs have to be reduced to some kind of creed or statement.

None of this is necessarily bad in itself. But if that's all religion is—form, ritual, ceremony without power—then it is ineffectual. It is like having a Cadillac car with a lawnmower motor in it. It will be beautiful to look at and to sit in but useless for its intended purpose.

Christianity must also be a force. There is dynamic power in Christ to change our homes, our jobs, our habits, our neighborhoods, our social relationships, and indeed our whole lives—if we will allow him to.

In this respect Christianity stands in a class by itself among the religions of the world. Other religions have good teachings, elaborate creeds, and beautiful ceremonies. Christ alone offers power.

Other religions recognize Jesus as a great and a good teacher, but they do not believe he can energize the lives of people today. Unless Jesus Christ can empower our lives today, then Christianity brings nothing more into the world than good advice, of which there is already an abundance.

The Holy Spirit is the energizing force of Christianity (1 Cor. 12:4-6). Through his resurrection, Christ can enter into us and become a life-changing force in us. Again and again the Bible promises us power—power to become the sons of God (John 1:12); power to be saved (Rom. 1:16); power to witness (Acts 1:8); and indeed power to do all things (Phil. 4:13). Without his power, nothing else matters.

When I was in high school a friend of mine, Paul Smith, owned a stripped-down Model-A Ford. It had been wrecked before he bought it and the top and doors had been

removed. It had only a motor covering, windshield, running boards, and fenders. It had no body whatever.

We called it a "hoopy." I never knew why we called it that until I recently looked up its meaning. I suppose "hoopy" comes from the word *whoopee* which means to express exuberant delight. That's what we had in that old car—exuberant delight. Between my home town of Port Arthur and the nearby city of Orange is the highest bridge in the South. One day we attempted to drive that old car over the Port Arthur-Orange bridge to go swimming in Cow Bayou. The car did well until we neared the top of the bridge and then it simply ran out of power. We could tell it was about to stall and then it would roll back down the bridge. So, the group of us riding in it jumped out, pushing it with all our might to get it over the remaining twenty or thirty yards to the top of the bridge. Going down the bridge was no trouble at all.

We learned that the old car had everything a group of young people needed to have a good time in—everything except power! It took plenty of human push to get it over the hump of that bridge.

Much religion today is like that old car—it has everything except power. Yet power is what we need the most. D. L. Moody said, "You might as well try to see without eyes, hear without ears, or breathe without lungs, as to live the Christian life without the Holy Spirit."

Our Lord has promised us all the power necessary to do anything which needs to be done if we will allow him to live in us and work through us. It is only in applied Christianity that there is power for living. That power is what we desperately need today.

There are three areas in our lives in particular where we

must apply Christ to our lives. We must bring his power to bear on the moods of life, the relationships of life, and the responsibilities of life.

Smiling Faces and Broken Hearts

All around us today are unhappy people. They live in lovely homes, drive new cars, own expensive wardrobes, and are socially prominent. But, as Solomon said, "Even in laughter, the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is heaviness" (Prov. 14:13). Their worldly pleasures are empty and unsatisfying. They put smiles on their faces to mask the tears in their hearts.

I'm convinced that if we could look into the souls of most of the people who live on our block, or the people who walk by any given intersection in our hometown, we would see in most of them heartache, difficulty, frustration, and sorrow.

And, sad to say, being Christian doesn't seem to make much difference in the moods of their lives. They are sullen, grouchy, moody, critical, and generally hard to live with. No thoughtful person can question the fact that for the most part, the Christian life, as it is generally lived, is not an entirely happy life. An unknown observer once remarked, "You Christians seem to have a religion that makes you miserable. You are like a man with a headache. He does not want to get rid of his head, but it hurts him to keep it. You cannot expect outsiders to seek very earnestly for anything so uncomfortable."

I recently talked with a man about becoming a Christian and he finally commented, "Isn't the Christian life rather dull?" He must have gotten that impression from watching Christian people.

Why is this? Why aren't Christians happier, more peaceful, and less anxious than unbelievers? It is because of unapplied Christianity. Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). The Christian life is to be a life of peace, joy, hope, and confidence. All of these are the results of the presence of the living Christ within us.

A Christianity that does nothing for your moods will do nothing for your soul. If following Jesus does not make you a kinder, sweeter, more considerate, and more loving person, then you don't know him or you haven't allowed him to work in your life (Gal. 5:22-23).

To hand all we are and have over to God may not be easy, but it can be done. When it is done, the world has in it one less candidate for misery. Christ can give us power to rise above the difficulties, struggles, hardships, and the moods of life (2 Cor. 4:8-19). Apply Christ to your daily life and you will see that this is so.

"She Just Burns Me Up"

Another problem we face is getting along with other people. We need to apply Christianity to the relationships of life. I ran across a poem from an unknown sage which points out the difficulty of getting along with others.

It goes like this:

O, to dwell there above,
 With the saints that we love.
 That will be glory won't it?
 But to dwell here below,
 With the saints that we know,
 That's another story.

That's a piece of our problem, isn't it? How to dwell here below with the people we know

Here is a man who seems to get along well with everyone else, but his wife "just burns him up." So, he comes to me and wants me to change her so she'll be easier to live with.

Chances are that wife who just burns him up doesn't put that fire into him. She merely draws it out. There are probably many other people—a boss, a neighbor, or someone else—who also burn him up. But with his boss or his neighbor, instead of blowing up, he covers up. He learns to hide his feelings.

Most of us by the time we have reached maturity have developed a marvelous acting ability. We can perform flawlessly before other people. We can be burning up on the inside and act calm and happy on the outside. Some people put on "an Academy-Award winning performance" almost every day.

There is a vast difference between developing your acting ability and developing your character. When you really apply Christ and his teachings to your life, you discover that while many of the people who irk you can't be changed, you can be. If a person be in Christ he is a new creature. Old things are passed away and all things are become new.

The Bible suggests that if people "burn you up" you should reciprocate and "heap coals of fire on their head by being kind, gracious, and loving toward them. What a remarkable difference that would make not only in our world but in our own peace and happiness.

I've got good news for you. You don't have to stay the way you are. You can become a loving, understanding,

accepting, and forgiving person. Admit your weakness. Ask God to give you a loving, forgiving, and accepting heart. Christ has changed many a grouchy, sullen, pouting, ill-tempered, and critical person into a loving, kind, and sweet-spirited Christian, and he can change you. God can melt that hard, stubborn heart of yours. He can give you a love like unto his own (Matt. 5:44-48).

Monday-Morning Dynamite

A young fellow applied for a job, furnishing references from his minister and Sunday School teacher. "These are good," said the interviewer, "but we'd like a letter from someone who knows you on weekdays too!"

I'm not for rewriting the Bible, but I am for applying it to the responsibilities of life. A sermon or a Sunday School lesson are not to pacify us on Sunday but to energize us for Monday. In short, we need a weekday, and not just a weekend, religion. That's the difference between Christianity's being a form and a force.

If Christ doesn't make you be a better employer, a better worker, a better neighbor, a better parent, a better mate, and a better citizen in your community and your nation, then it is not being properly applied to your life.

The Orientals have a different way of saying things than we Occidentals. They say, for instance, "It is better to do a kindness near your home than to go far away to burn pleasant incense." Some people who are so busy going to Bible conferences, listening to tapes, and attending church meetings that they have no time to be a good parent, a good mate, a good neighbor, or a good citizen.

We are to love God with all of our being, but we are also to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We are to go

and do exactly like the good Samaritan who helped the down-and-out stranger. We are to bear one another's burdens. We are to honor, obey, and pray for those who are in places of authority.

The Great Invasion

In a day when people stand up so adamantly for their rights and fall down so miserably on their responsibilities, Christians are to be different. Following Christ should make us more loyal employees, more considerate bosses, more helpful neighbors, and more obedient citizens. Real Christianity should affect your production on the assembly line, your speed on the freeway, your vote on election day, and your diligence on "clean-up day" in your neighborhood.

Lord Melbom, after hearing an evangelistic sermon, remarked, "Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade the sphere of private life." Many people act as though they agree. But unless it does, it is not real Christianity. A Christian is a person who has received Jesus as his Lord, allowing him to invade his private life and to change the moods, the relationships, and the responsibilities of his life.

10 Doin' Nothin'

Two friends stood talking. One said, "I'm proud of myself, because I've done nothing today to be ashamed of." The other responded, "I'm ashamed of myself, for I've done nothing today I'm proud of." These men expressed two different views of Christianity. The first was very negative. You could sum up his faith in only three words—"thou shalt not." He believed that if he could go through a day without doing anything people consider really bad, like cursing, stealing, lying, or getting drunk, then he had reason to be proud of himself.

The second was more positive. He realized that there were some things a Christian should not and would not do. But he also knew that there is more to being a Christian than just not doing some things. He recognized that no person is good solely on the basis of what he does not do.

The Scriptures agree. James writes, "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (James 4.17). This verse gives us a new insight into what being a Christian means. Most people think of sin as something that a person does. James suggests to us that sin can be something a person fails to do. Most people think of

sin as the presence of evil. James suggests that it might be the absence of good. For if a person knows to do good and he doesn't do it, even though he doesn't do bad things, he is guilty of sin.

This truth is an underlying principle found throughout the Bible. Jesus once related the story of a wealthy man who planned to take a trip into a foreign country. Since banks were nonexistent and travel was dangerous, he decided to leave his wealth in the hands of his employees. He called them in one day and entrusted to them his possessions. To one man he left five talents, to another, two talents, and to another, one talent. A talent was a huge sum of money. He instructed these men to take his wealth and make a profit for him while he was gone.

The man then made his trip into a distant land. The servant who received five talents immediately invested the money. He made a wise investment, doubling the man's money. The man who received two talents did the same. But the man who received only one talent was afraid to take a chance. He reasoned, "If I invest this money, I may lose all of it. So I'll just play it safe. I'll hide the money until the boss returns."

In time the master returned. He immediately called his employees in and asked for an accounting of their business dealings while he was gone. The servant who had received five talents told his master what he had done. "Master, when you went away you gave me five talents. I invested your money, and I have doubled it. You gave me five talents when you went away. I now give you ten talents."

The master then commended this servant and gave him a promotion, saying, "Well done, thou good and faithful

servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: Enter thou into the joy of the Lord" (Matt. 25:21).

The master then called in the servant who had received two talents and asked for an accounting of his stewardship. This servant had also doubled his investment. Once again the master commended the servant and gave him a promotion.

Then the master came to the servant who had received the one talent and asked for a report. The servant told him about his fear of losing everything and his decision to play it safe. "Master, when you went away you entrusted to me one talent. I have kept it safely. I now return that same talent to you today."

What do you suppose was the response of the master? He called him a "wicked and slothful servant" (Matt. 25:26).

When we hear this master speak so severely of his servant, we want to ask, "Master, aren't you too harsh with him? After all, what was his great sin?" He didn't embezzle the money. He didn't spend it on sinful living. He would never have done that. He was not that kind of man. And when the master asked for an accounting from him, he told him the absolute truth. What then was his great sin? His sin was not in what he did, but what he failed to do. The talent represented a trust, a potential, an opportunity. In the light of all this, the man did nothing. Is it any wonder then that the master called him wicked and lazy? His was the sin of doing nothing.

The Peril of Privilege

James teaches us that the sin of doing nothing is related to our knowledge. He writes, "Therefore, to him that

knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin." To be sure, the Bible teaches that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). And the Scriptures say, "For there is not a just man upon the earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not" (Eccl. 7:20). And the Lord says, "All we like sheep have gone astray" (Isa. 53:6). All of us are sinners. That much is not up for debate.

But the Bible also teaches that beyond the initial fact of sin there is a relationship between sin in our lives and our knowledge of the will and the way of God. Knowledge always brings with it a corresponding responsibility. The more a person knows, the more responsible he is.

Occasionally you'll hear a person remark, "The preacher ought to be the best man in town." Then some well-meaning soul will come to the preacher's rescue by saying, "No, the preacher is just like everyone else." But I am persuaded that the preacher *should* be the best man in town. The reason? In all probability he knows more about the will, the way, and the Word of God than anybody else. And the more a person knows, the more responsible he is. You may not expect more out of him, but God does. The preacher ought to be the best man in town.

Teachers also have a deeper responsibility than their pupils. James warns people about being anxious for teaching positions in the church, saying they will receive "the greater condemnation" (James 3:1). In the early church, teaching positions were coveted as offices of great honor. James does not minimize the honor of teaching. He rather emphasizes the responsibility of it. He tells us that teachers will be judged more severely than pupils, because of the teachers' superior knowledge. We seldom mention this in our churches today, because we are so anxious to enlist

people to teach. However, to teach others is a huge responsibility.

The people of America stand under a greater judgment of God than any other people on earth. Most certainly, we shall be judged more severely than the people of Russia or China or Africa. The reason is that we have a greater access to the truth of God than those people. There is a peril in privilege.

God, speaking through his preacher Amos, said to Israel, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). Those words were spoken immediately after God had called the roll of the nations surrounding Israel and announced judgment on them for their sins. In most instances, God singled out just one of their sins. Usually it was a sin of their inhumanity to man. But when he came to his own people Israel, he was far more severe. He declared that he had known them more intimately than any other nation. They had Moses and the Law. They had the prophets. They had spiritual privilege. Therefore, God said he intended to punish them for "all" of their iniquities. God expected more of Israel because Israel knew more about God's will and his word.

The words of the apostle Peter support this truth. He wrote, "For it had been better for them never to have known the ways of righteousness than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them" (2 Pet. 2:21). These words of Peter have been subject to many interpretations. However, one point is clear. It would be better for a person never to have a knowledge of the truth than to have had it and not responding to it.

How do people commit the sin of doing nothing? If

God warns us about this sin so often, what are some of the ways we commit it?

The Sin of Silence

Prayer is a blessed privilege. We all agree on that. We often sing:

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!

But prayer is more than a privilege. It is also a responsibility. Jesus said, "Men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Luke 18:1). The word "ought" implies moral responsibility. Prayer is not only a privilege; it is also a duty. Prayer is not for the spiritually elite; prayer is for everyone. All people ought to pray.

Why did Jesus indicate prayer was a duty? It is because he knows what prayer can do. Prayer can empower a preacher. Prayer can revive a church. Prayer can heal the sick. Prayer can save a soul. Prayer can change a life. Because he knew the tremendous power of prayer, he said, "Men ought always to pray."

Do you know what our biggest problem is concerning prayer? It is not ignorance. It is not that we do not know how to pray. That's a cop-out. It is not a lack of needs. Nor is it "busyness." It is not that we have no time. Our biggest problem is neglect. James put his finger on our biggest prayer problem when he said, "Ye have not because ye ask not" (James 4:2).

Do you doubt that the failure to pray is a sin? Then hear the words of Samuel. Saul the king came to Samuel

the prophet, asking the man of God to remember him and his people in prayer. Samuel replied, "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you" (1 Sam. 12:33). To fail to pray for people is to commit the sin of doing nothing.

The Great Omission

The last words of our Lord before he ascended into heaven were for us to go into all the world and make disciples. The new disciples were to be baptized and then taught to obey all of Christ's teachings (Matt. 28:19-20). Through the years we have called these words "The Great Commission." But they have been misnamed. They should be called "The Great Omission." We have learned them by heart, but we have never taken them to heart. We have committed them to memory, but not to practice.

People sometimes justify their lack of witnessing by saying, "I don't know how." That too is a cop-out. If you don't know how, learn how. That's your responsibility.

There are many avenues of witness. One way is by sharing your testimony. You don't have to be a seminary graduate, know all of the books of the Bible, or be able to quote forty verses of Scripture in order to tell people what God has done for you. Is being a Christian a meaningful experience to you? If so, tell someone else what God has done for you. When you give your testimony, you are witnessing.

You can be an inviter. You can invite people to Christian events, such as worship services, revival meetings, and Bible studies. One of the most dedicated Christians I know was invited by a friend to attend a revival service to hear R. G. Lee preach his famous sermon, "Pay Day Some

Day." The man was converted in that service and has since grown to be a strong, dedicated witness himself.

You can witness by bringing your non-Christian friends together with your Christian friends in informal gatherings. You might even include your pastor. This gives your unbelieving friends an opportunity to know Christians and even a preacher firsthand. They sometimes discover that Christians can be normal, happy, fun-loving people while they serve the Lord. It can also help correct any false concepts they may have of ministers.

Many people already believe that there are three kinds of people—men, women, and preachers! They think preachers are a little strange. Informal social gatherings provide an opportunity to clear up such misunderstandings.

You can witness through Christian literature. A missionary friend of mine tells that as a teenage boy, while walking down the street in his hometown, someone handed him a New Testament. He had never read the Bible before. He went home, started at the beginning, and read until he came to Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus about the new birth. He fell down on his knees and prayed, "Lord, I don't understand what this new birth is, but whatever it is, I need it and want it." He was saved that night. He then went on to become an effective and dedicated missionary.

I'm not suggesting that you go out on the street corner and hand out Bibles. But if you have read a Christian book that has been especially helpful to you, you might pass it on to a non-Christian friend and suggest that she/he read it. This is also a means of witnessing.

You can witness by ministry. To be kind and helpful to people when they are sick, when they have lost a loved one, when they are going through a divorce, when they are

facing a financial crisis, or when they are having problems with their children is to help them see that being a Christian makes a difference in life. The love of Christ flowing through your life may strike a responsive chord in their heart and turn them to him.

We can witness by being a good example. I recently received a strange phone call from one of our deacons, Dennis Ortega. He confided, "Pastor, I've got a problem. A man that I work with asked me today if I would baptize him." Then the deacon filled me in on the whole story. His friend had been an alcoholic. He had not had a drink for seven years and during that time, through personal Bible reading, had become a Christian. He was convinced that as a Christian he ought to be baptized. That's when he came to Dennis for help. The man said to him, "Dennis, I've been watching you at work and I know that you are a Christian. I want you to baptize me."

Dennis was almost speechless. He answered the man, "You don't need me—you need a preacher." The man replied, "I don't know any preachers." Dennis said, "I'll introduce you to mine." We had lunch together and Jack and I became friends. Shortly after that Jack asked me to baptize him.

On a Wednesday night Jack and his wife walked down the aisle of our chapel, publicly professing their faith in Christ and asking for Christian baptism. A few days thereafter I baptized them in the lake. Jack especially wanted to be baptized in the lake. He said, "I've got so many sins I want to be baptized in the biggest body of water available. I would ask you to baptize me in the ocean if it weren't so far away."

Exactly two months from the day he walked down the aisle of our chapel, we held Jack's funeral service in that

same chapel. He had died of a heart attack, but he died a Christian. Thank God for a deacon like Dennis who lives his Christianity.

Jesus said, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Failing to do that is committing the sin of doing nothing.

Watch for Millstones

Jesus once took a little child, placed the child on his knee, and said, "Whoso shall offend [cause to stumble and fall] one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:6). Jesus was talking about the seriousness of our influence.

Tying a millstone around a person's neck and casting him into the sea was an ancient form of capital punishment. Nations have always had means of dealing with capital offenses. In our country, we now use the electric chair, the gas chamber, or lethal injection. In the Old West a man was lynched. Some countries use a firing squad. The Romans crucified people. The Jews stoned them to death. But the Phoenicians had a most unique way of capital punishment. They would tie one end of a rope around a man's neck, tie the other end of the rope to a huge stone, and then cast both the man and the stone over a cliff and into the sea. The weight of the stone would drag the body to the bottom of the sea and the man would drown. I can't think of a good way to die, but if I were making a list of my preferences, that would rank near the bottom.

This quotation from Jesus makes influence serious.

You'd better watch your step, others are, and God holds you responsible for it.

You can be a bad example in the church as well as out of it. You can sit in a church sanctuary Sunday after Sunday and still set a poor example.

I once received an emergency phone call from a member of our church who was critically ill. The doctor's diagnosis was a brain tumor. He wanted to talk about his relationship to the Lord. When I arrived he said, "Pastor, I've got to be sure about my relationship to the Lord. As you know I attend church often, but I seldom listen to what you have to say."

I replied, "Tell me something new. I've been watching you for years." And I had. He would sit in church with a bored, disinterested look on his face throughout the whole service. He would clip his fingernails, look out the window, count the people in the choir or the squares on the organ chamber. He would do anything but listen. He worked at not listening. He made a concentrated effort not to concentrate.

But he was listening that day. He was all ears as we talked about God and salvation. When we were through, he said, "I also need to talk to you about my family. I haven't set the right example for them." He had been faithful in church but always with that bored, disinterested attitude. When it came time to sing, he never picked up the hymnal. He never joined in the worship, and all the while his children sitting by his side were absorbing his spirit.

His boredom was a silent scream to them that church was unimportant. It said, "God doesn't matter. This is a real drag. When will it all end so we can get on with the things that really matter?"

The tragedy is that he was absent at the very moment when he took up the most space. He was setting a bad example even while he was in the church. You can commit the sin of doing nothing even when attending a worship service.

Don't Miss the Plane

Jesus said:

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth in him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:16-18).

Did you catch that? "He that believeth not is condemned already." Why? " . . . Because he hath not believed."

People are lost, not because of what they have done, but because of what they have not done. We are all sinners. There are no exceptions. The differences among us lie not in the fact of sin, but in what we do with our sins. People are lost because they do not come to the Savior.

If men went to hell for lying or cursing or drinking, it would be as unjust as sending a man to the electric chair for stealing a pencil. Men go to hell because they do not trust the Savior. Jesus died for sinners. He died for our salvation. If we will accept him and trust him, we can be saved. If we do not, then we miss everlasting life.

It is possible to miss a plane while sitting in the airport. Several years ago I was in Austin for a speaking engagement. I had an early flight out the next day, so I asked my friend Ralph Smith to take me to the airport. This would give us a chance to have a cup of coffee and fellowship awhile.

As we sat in the airport coffee shop talking, I looked out the window and saw a plane taking off. Suddenly it dawned on me, *There's my plane!* My flight number had been called, but I had been so preoccupied with talking to Ralph that I didn't pay any attention. Now my plane was taxiing off. I rushed out to the gate, but it was too late—the plane left without me.

Ordinarily even that would not have been so serious, but on that particular day the fog was so thick in Austin that my missed plane was the only one in or out of the airport all day.

After a long delay, the airline put me on a bus to Dallas 200 miles away so I could make a connecting flight home to Tyler. The weather in Dallas was as bad as it was in Austin and I was stranded again. After further delays, I finally rented a car and arrived home late that night.

What started out to be a simple two-hour trip home became a fourteen-hour marathon. I missed my flight and almost didn't make it home, simply because I was so preoccupied. I wasn't doing anything bad. I just didn't answer my flight call and the plane left without me.

Many people miss the way to heaven in the same manner. They want to take the trip. They believe in the means of transportation. They may even go to the terminal. But they never answer the boarding call, and they miss their last opportunity. They miss salvation because they do

nothing. You don't have to do anything to be lost. You are already lost. You are condemned already. And you can miss heaven by doing nothing.

Let's Quit It

Sam Jones, the famous evangelist, used to have in his evangelistic campaigns what he called a "Quitting Service." He would issue the invitation for people to come forward and confess the sins they were quitting. A man would come down the aisle to say, "Preacher, I am a drinking man and I'm going to quit." A woman would come down the aisle to say, "Preacher, I've been a gossip and I'm going to quit." Another would say, "I've been unfaithful to my mate and I'm going to quit it." Presently a lady came down the aisle to make a decision. The pastor asked her what sin she wanted to quit. She answered, "Brother, I ain't been doing nothing and I'm going to quit it."

That's the way it is with many people. They haven't been doing anything and they ought to quit it. It's not so much that they have been bad. It's rather that they have been good for nothing. They haven't been praying and they need to quit it. They haven't been witnessing and they need to quit it. They haven't been setting a good example and they need to quit it. They haven't trusted Christ as their Savior and they need to trust him today.

Doing the good you know you should do is a part of what it means to be a Christian. So let's do it. God's Word is clear. "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (James 4:17).

11 Yes, Lord, Others

Lyman Beecher, perhaps the greatest of all the famous Beechers was once asked, "Mr. Beecher, you know a great many things. What do you count the greatest thing that a human being can be or do?"

Without hesitation the famous pulpiteer replied, "The greatest thing in life is, not that one shall be a scientist, important as that is; nor that one shall be a statesman, as vastly as important as that is; nor even that one shall be a theologian, as immeasurably important as that is; but the greatest thing of all "is for one human being to bring another to Christ Jesus as Savior."

That is true because all people without Christ are lost. People may be educated but without Christ they are lost. People may be wealthy but without Christ they are lost. People may be cultured but without Christ they are lost. People may be moral but without Christ they are lost. People may be religious, but without Christ they are lost. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No person comes to God except by him (John 14:6). There is no other name under heaven whereby people must be saved except the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12).

The burning passion of every Christian's life therefore

should be to point men and women to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Other matters are important, but this is absolutely necessary. It is important that the hungry be fed, that the naked be clothed, that children have an education, that sanitary conditions be maintained in our cities, that social reforms take place. But only one matter is necessary, and that is for people to accept Christ as their Savior.

The apostle Paul states this as his life's goal when he writes, "To the weak become I as the weak, that I might gain the weak; I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). Paul's life goal is summed up in five words, "that I might save some." This was the all-encompassing purpose of his life and labor.

Paul was a realist, knowing that not everyone would be saved. But he believed that everyone had a right to hear about Christ and should have the opportunity to decide "yes" or "no" concerning him. He also knew that if people had that opportunity, some would be saved. So the all-consuming purpose for which he lived was—that some might be saved.

This should be the obsession of every Christian. This should be why we live, why we preach, why we teach, why we give, and why we sing. The all-encompassing goal and purpose of our whole lives and ministries ought to be that some might be saved. This statement by the apostle Paul helps us understand the depth and the breadth of our commitment to evangelism. They are seen in the three statements: "... all things ... all men ... all means."

The Principle of Accommodation

Paul's first statement is: In order to win some to Christ, he was willing to become "all things" to all men. At first

these sound like the words of a conformist, a man who would go to any length, any sacrifice, any conviction in order to achieve his purpose. But if you know the apostle Paul, then you recognize that these are not the words of a conformist. He was one of God's original "minutemen." He never knuckled under to anybody. This is the man who wrote to the church at Rome, "Be not conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2). So Paul was saying, "When in Rome do not do as the Romans do."

This verse actually sets out the principle of accommodation. It suggests that a Christian is to fit himself into his society, into his culture, so he can get alongside of people and win them to Jesus Christ. So far as possible, we Christians need to dress like other people dress, talk like other people talk, and adopt the customs of other people so we can get their ear for the gospel.

Paul was no politician or wire puller, but he was a statesman, a wise general. He left unused no lawful means of bringing the gospel to people and people to God. To the Jew, he was a Jew; to the Gentile, a Gentile; to the weak, he became as weak that he might gain the weak; he rejoiced with those who rejoiced and wept with those who wept. He expresses in this statement the spirit which keeps the disciples of Christ forever up-to-date and in touch with people.

The man who cannot fit himself into the century and culture of which he is a part will be a poor representative of the Christ of all centuries. Accommodation to the times does not involve a compromise with the devil. Paul leads us to believe that when he was with Jews or with Gentiles, he tried to be on the same wavelength without compromising his basic Christian convictions.

John R. W. Stott noted that there are two tragic dangers

of witnesses: identification without proclamation and proclamation with identification. We sometimes get to know people and relate to them, and then we don't witness to them. That's identification without proclamation. Or we buttonhole a person before we get to know him and say, "Hey, buddie, are you saved?" That's proclamation without identification. Both of these are tragic. What we need is both identification and proclamation. That's what Paul was driving at here.

Too many Christians stand aloof from others and look down on them. The Bible teaches the separated life (2 Cor. 6:14, 7:11), but this is not the same as isolation. The Pharisees were isolationists. They would not mix with sinners. Jesus was a separatist. He lived a life different from others, but he was the friend to sinners. If you want a clear picture of the separated life, then look at Jesus. He lived a separated life, yet he never isolated himself from the lost. He walked the streets with men, he ate in their homes, he visited with them in the marketplace, he attended their weddings, but he lived a different life. We can't have a holier-than-thou attitude and win people to Jesus Christ at the same time.

Several years ago, a lady came forward in one of our worship services to rededicate her life. She had been going places with her friends and doing things that were not consistent with her Christian confession. As she made her recommitment, she asked, "Should I give up my old friends?" I said to her, "No! Jesus was a friend of sinners and you should be also. Keep your friendship with your friends, so long as you can keep friendship with Jesus Christ at the same time. Use your social contacts to introduce your friends to Jesus."

these sound like the words of a conformist, a man who would go to any length, any sacrifice, any conviction in order to achieve his purpose. But if you know the apostle Paul, then you recognize that these are not the words of a conformist. He was one of God's original "minutemen." He never knuckled under to anybody. This is the man who wrote to the church at Rome, "Be not conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2). So Paul was saying, "When in Rome do not do as the Romans do."

This verse actually sets out the principle of accommodation. It suggests that a Christian is to fit himself into his society, into his culture, so he can get alongside of people and win them to Jesus Christ. So far as possible, we Christians need to dress like other people dress, talk like other people talk, and adopt the customs of other people so we can get their ear for the gospel.

Paul was no politician or wire puller, but he was a statesman, a wise general. He left unused no lawful means of bringing the gospel to people and people to God. To the Jew, he was a Jew; to the Gentile, a Gentile; to the weak, he became as weak that he might gain the weak; he rejoiced with those who rejoiced and wept with those who wept. He expresses in this statement the spirit which keeps the disciples of Christ forever up-to-date and in touch with people.

The man who cannot fit himself into the century and culture of which he is a part will be a poor representative of the Christ of all centuries. Accommodation to the times does not involve a compromise with the devil. Paul leads us to believe that when he was with Jews or with Gentiles, he tried to be on the same wavelength without compromising his basic Christian convictions.

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Christians cannot isolate themselves from the world. We must become involved in civic affairs, the social life of our community, and rub elbows and shoulders with people so we can win them to Christ.

Go After the Worst of Them

Paul's passion was for "all men." It encompassed all classes and all races. That should be our passion as well. No person, no race, no class of people are outside the circle of the love of God. Our passion for the lost should compel us to point all persons unto him.

A shining example of the kind of passion which reaches out after all people is William Booth, the founder and the first general of the Salvation Army. Booth's motto was, "Go for souls and go for the worst of them." With impassioned oratory and militant faith, he marched to the thumping rhythms of brass bands and tambourines into the meanest slums of Britain's cities and into the hearts of her most wretched citizens. Alcoholics, prostitutes, the downtrodden, the oppressed, and the poverty-stricken found hope under the banners of his army.

Victorian Britain of 1865 was the richest and most powerful nation on earth. Yet her capital had spawned incredible slums. East London was one of the worst, a squalid labyrinth with half a million people crammed into what was called "a great large muckheap."

Every fifth shop was a gin shop. Most of them had special steps to help even the tiniest of children reach the counter so they could buy a glass of penny gin. It was not unusual to see five- and six-year-old children blind drunk in the streets.

The city stank of cattle hides, chimney smoke, stagnant

water, leaking gas, and dung. The Thames itself was nicknamed "The Great Stink." More than 350 sewers flushed into its yellow-grey waters, and for two miles between Westminster and London Bridge, a sticky black bank of sewage six feet deep stretched one hundred feet into the main canal. Disease was everywhere and death was a familiar sight. Cholera had struck three times since 1832.

The horrid sweatshops were located in this area. Many of Britain's manufacturers treated their employees like slaves. In one case investigated by the Salvation Army, a mother and her two children under nine worked a sixteen-hour day to take home little more than twenty-five cents. Unable to pause even for meals, they gobbled bread as they labored.

White slavery was on every hand. London alone housed eighty thousand prostitutes. The traffic netted millions of dollars a year. One large source of profit came from virgins—in trade parlance, "fresh girls." The most common bait used for procuring these was advertisements seeking country girls for London domestic service. When the girls came for employment, they were drugged, raped, and kept prisoner in a brothel until they complied with the madam's or pimp's wishes.

These dastardly conditions convinced Booth that God wanted him to work among these people. So, for forty-seven years he went after souls and he went after the worst of them. Denied access to regular chapels, Booth hired a dance hall and had chairs brought in at four o'clock in the morning on Sunday after the fiddlers ceased their playing. Weeknight meetings were held in an old warehouse where urchins threw stones, mud, and fireworks through the high windows. For a time he even preached in a hayloft so cramped that his top hat almost touched the ceiling. Night

after night he stumbled home haggard and fatigued, his clothes often torn and bloody from the stones hurled against him while he was preaching. At times he and his followers faced mob violence for their Christian service. But nothing deterred William Booth.

All of those years he labored like that for the Lord. "Go for souls," he told his recruits, "and go for the worst. No country is too remote, no people are too barbarous."

In time statesmen and crowned heads vied with one another to honor Booth. In 1898 he delivered the opening prayer in the U.S. Senate; 1904 saw him at Buckingham Palace with King Edward VII.

The King asked him to write in his autograph album. And Booth noted:

*Some men's ambition is art;
Some men's ambition is fame;
Some men's ambition is gold;
My ambition is the souls of men.*

In his last speech to 7,000 Salvationists packing London's Prince Albert Hall, he cried, "While women weep as they do now, I'll fight; while children go hungry as they do now, I'll fight; while men go to prison, in and out, I'll fight; while there yet remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight to the very end!"

On August 20, 1912, at the age of eighty-three, the General laid down his sword. In sixty years as an evangelist, Booth had traveled five million miles and delivered almost sixty thousand sermons. His body lay in state for three days while 150,000 people filed past the old warrior's casket.

His funeral was held in a vast exhibition hall in West

London, and 40,000 people attended the service. Salvation Army officers from all over the world came to kneel beside the casket to rededicate themselves to God and the army. Along with them knelt thieves, tramps, harlots, and the lost and outcast to whom Booth had given his heart and life.

Unknown to most, royalty was also there. Far to the rear of the hall, almost unrecognized, sat Britain's Queen Mary, a staunch admirer of Booth. She had elected to come at the last moment without warning.

Beside her on the aisle was a shabby but neatly dressed woman, who confessed her secret to the Queen. Once she had been a prostitute, and the Salvation Army had reached her. Years afterwards at a meeting, General Booth heard her story and told her gently: "My girl, when you get to heaven, Mary Magdalene will give you one of the best places."

The woman had come early to claim an aisle seat, she said, guessing that the casket would pass within feet of her. As it did, she had unobtrusively placed three faded carnations on the lid, and all through the service they were the only flowers on the casket.

Queen Mary was deeply moved when the woman turned to her and spoke simply in words that could stand as William Booth's epitaph: "He cared for the likes of us."

May that ever be true of us. It is to our shame that the poor, the outcasts, and the oppressed are not drawn to us as they were to Jesus.

There's a Price to Be Paid

Finally, Paul declares that he has become all things to all men that by "all means" some might be saved. This means "at all costs, at any price." Paul was declaring that he

would neglect nothing that was necessary to reach people. There was a price to be paid, and he was willing to make the sacrifice.

In the early 1700s there existed in Europe a missionary community, the Moravians, under the direction of Count Zinzendorf. They had as many missionaries on the foreign field as they had at home. One day there came to that colony two men by the name of Dober and Nitschmann. They heard Zinzendorf tell of the island of St. John in the West Indies where the blacks were treated as animals, worked, beaten, and left to die in the cane fields. Afterwards these two men approached Zinzendorf and insisted, "We want to go to the island of St. John to minister, but who will send us?"

Zinzendorf inquired, "Do you need anyone? God called, he will provide." But they asked, "How can we go?"

He suggested, "We will go down to the docks, find a ship, and you can work to pay your own passage over."

So that is what they did. When they arrived on the island of St. John, they asked the Dutch masters if they could go into the cane fields and preach to the slaves. The masters replied, "It is no use. These men are not humans. They do not have souls." Dober and Nitschmann insisted, but their pleas were to no avail and they were ordered out.

They went down to the beach, sat down on the sand, and wept, "Lord, you sent us here, and now we cannot go into the fields to preach. Lord, what shall we do?"

That night the Lord spoke to them. Early the next morning they went back to the Dutch masters and said, "We want to sell ourselves into slavery." The masters were astounded. "What? You want to sell yourself into slavery?" And Dober and Nitschmann answered, "Yes. God called us

to preach and we will become one of them and preach to them while we work."

In a few months other missionaries from the colony in Europe arrived on the island of St. John. They found there two freshly dug graves. Dober and Nitschmann had died from the heat and the deplorable working conditions. But on the island they found 30,000 slaves who had become Christians!

That's what Paul meant when he wrote, "I have become all things to all men that by all means—at any price, whatever the costs—some might be saved."

There is always a price to be paid. But none is too high to see people saved. Hudson Taylor confided in F. B. Meyer that, on the threshold of his great life work, God came to him and spoke these words, "My child, I am going to evangelize Inland China, and if you would like to walk with me I will do it through you."

To live by this passion is a part of what it means to be a Christian. It should be the burning desire of our hearts to see all people saved. To that end we ought to testify with the apostle Paul, "I am become all things to all people that by all means some might be saved."

12

Romans 8:28 Works

The British actor Robert Morley, when asked about his philosophy of life, answered, "I look upon life as a party. One arrives long after it's started and one is going to leave before it's over. And it's as well perhaps, not to try to be the life and soul of it and not to try to take too much responsibility for it." Shakespeare's Macbeth lamented, "It [life] is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

While these quotations sum up the philosophy of life for many people, they can never be sufficient for the Christian. Life for a Christian is seldom a party. It is oftentimes hard and difficult and filled with sorrows. Carl Sandburg was more nearly correct when he commented, "Life is like an onion; you peel it off one layer at a time and sometimes you weep."

Nor can life be regarded as meaningless to Christians. As Einstein said, "The man who regards his own life and that of his fellow creatures as meaningless is not merely unfortunate but also disqualified for life."

What, then, ought to be the philosophy of life for Christians? The apostle Paul supplies a good foundation when he writes, "And we know that all things work together

for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8:28-29).

There has long been a general misunderstanding of these words. They have given rise to the common assertion, often with the claim that it is a biblical teaching, that *everything* which happens is for the best. Many people have licked their wounds with the false comfort of this misconception. It is a comfort that leads to confusion.

To believe that everything which happens is for the best is not Christian optimism but blind fatalism. To claim this fails to take evil into account. It is to make evil good. Sin can never be justified by Scripture. Sin is never good or best. Evil is never appropriate. We cannot resolve evil by calling it good. This passage of Scripture does not teach that everything which happens is caused by God. Satan is also in the world and he is at work. Many of the things which happen in our lives are the result of his work. Nor does it imply that everything which happens is good. There are many things which must be labeled clearly and explicitly as bad.

What this verse does say is: God is at work in the lives of his children. He is seeking to make us like his Son. And to this good end, God can and does use all things. Romans 8:28 acknowledges that much which happens in our world is bad. Yet it assures us that no experience has to be a total waste. If we will give it to God, he will take that experience and bring something good and worthwhile out of it. He can use all things to make us like his Son, Jesus Christ. Rightly understood, these verses of Scripture ought to be the basis of profound optimism in life. They console us, that in spite of

suffering, weakness, persecution, and hardship. God is ultimately in control. God is going to work through all of the experiences of our lives and use them to make us what we ought to be.

What do these verses mean to us? They imply that we do not live in a world of blind fate, that our existence is not meaningless or unintelligible. They mean that God is working in our lives for our ultimate good. Therefore, we ought not to be discouraged, no matter what happens to us. We ought to face the future with confidence and with optimism because of this promise. Consider three truths about how God works in our lives.

God Is Not Haphazard

God has a grand design in what he is doing. Before an artist takes a brush to a piece of canvas, he has a picture in his mind. Before a musician ever scribbles a note on a piece of music paper, he hears a melody in his heart. Before a sculptor ever picks up a chisel and strikes a blow on a piece of marble, he can already see the statue in his imagination. Just so, God has a plan for each of us. He is not like some butterfly, flitting around touching life haphazardly. God works with purpose and design in our world and in our lives.

What is the purpose of God for our lives? What goal does he have in mind for us? What is the grand design of God as he works in your life and mine? It is to make us like Jesus Christ. God is not trying to give his people an easy time. Neither is he trying to make us all rich in material goods, nor is he trying to make all of us happy. But he does want us to be like Jesus in our character. If we love him, if we submit to his control, then he will make all things work

together toward that supreme end. What is the greatest good in life? What is the finest thing that could happen to you and me? It is that we should become more like Jesus Christ. Sometimes the child of God will develop this Christ-like character more during moments of adversity than at any other time.

One of the most glowing testimonies to his truth has come from the life of Dale Evans and Roy Rogers. Dale related this story in her classic book, *Angel Unaware*. It is the story of what a mongoloid baby girl, Robin Elizabeth, accomplished in transforming the Roy Rogers family. The baby came into the world with an appalling handicap, but Dale testified, "I believe with all my heart that God sent her on a two-year mission to our household to strengthen us spiritually and to draw us closer together in the knowledge and love and fellowship of God. It has been said that tragedy and sorrow never leave us where they find us. In this instance, both Roy and I are grateful to God for the privilege of learning some great lessons of truth through this tiny messenger, Robin Elizabeth Rogers."¹

Then she said, "This is Robin's story, this is what I, her mother, believe she told her heavenly Father shortly after 8 P.M., on August 24, 1952, when she died and returned to heaven. 'First of all, Dale had been success-minded from youth up, but we took care of that in short order. She forgot about success and she began to think of me.' 'Secondly,' she said, 'I destroyed pride in her life. Thirdly, I developed in her a love for other people like me and fourthly, I helped the doctor to become a Christian servant.'"² In exactly the same way, God is working in your life and mine with a grand design. He is working to make us like Jesus Christ. To do

this he must use all kinds of experiences.

God Is Not Hampered

To the end that we be like Jesus Christ, God can and does use "all" things. All—not just a few. I remind you, God does not say that everything which happens is good. Nor does he say that he causes everything that happens. But he does say that he can use everything for our ultimate good. It is a marvelous day when we realize that God is not limited in what he can use. He uses as the cornerstone for his kingdom what other builders would reject (Acts 4:11). This simply means that no experience is a total loss if God has it. He can bring good even out of bad. Not only is it true that God can use all experiences in our lives, but he must have all experiences to make us like Christ.

Suffering is as necessary for our lives as it was for the life of Christ. Being a Christian does not eliminate suffering or failure from our lives. Some people seem to think so. This is evident from the letter of a child to Billy Graham which appeared in *Decision* magazine (December 1967). The letter said:

I sure am glad that I joined up with God. Up in the town that I used to live in I used to play on a baseball team and I hadn't joined up with Jesus yet and every time I got up to bat I struck out. But since I joined up with Jesus I get up to bat, now I get a lot of hits and that proves that joining up with the Lord helps not a little but a lot. Love, Perry.

There are many people of all ages who think like that. But Christians do strike out! As long as the devil is pitching, throwing curves and spitballs, we are going to strike out

plenty! The Lord never promised that we won't strike out. What he does promise is that God, our coach, can take the strikeouts of life and can use them to make us better players and finally winners.

Years ago during a revival meeting, I visited with a man who had been blind for twenty-two years. During our visit he gave me his testimony. He was supposedly saved at the age of eleven. From then until he was sixteen he served God to the best of his ability. "Then," he admitted, "I went astray and from then until I was fifty-five years old, I lived as wickedly as any man who ever lived." In his own words he said, "I was forty years in the wilderness." During that time he felt guilty before the Lord.

Then he said, "At the age of fifty-five, I went blind, and for the last twenty-two years I have lived in a world of darkness." There was no note of bitterness or regret in his voice, only thanksgiving to God. With tears streaming down his cheeks, he quoted his favorite passage of scripture. "Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now have I kept thy word. It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes" (Ps. 119:67,71).

As I listened to his testimony I thought of the words of the song:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now I'm found,
Was blind but now I see.

God can bring good even from the tragedies, the disappointments, and the failures of life. He can use all things to make us more like Christ. God is not hampered in His work.

God Is Not Hurried

In order to see and to know that all things work together for good, we must have patience. Patience has been defined as "the ability to idle your motor when you feel like stripping your gears." If we will wait, then we can see that all things are working together for good. We cannot pick isolated events and prove our point. We must give God time to finish with these events and God will not be rushed. God is not in a hurry. It just takes time to see the works of God. We must remember that the verse tells us that all things "work together." You cannot take isolated events and find good in them any more than you can take the separate ingredients that make up a cake and find good in them alone.

Flour by itself does not taste very good. Baking powder or shortening by themselves are not very appetizing. But put all these ingredients together in the hands of a master chef, mix them in the right proportions, give them time to bake, and a delicious cake can be made. That's how it is with the experiences of our lives. The apostle Paul said something like this happened in his life. He was cast into a Roman prison for his preaching. It seemed as if the purposes of God had been frustrated for that missionary giant.

But in that very prison experience Paul penned many of the immortal truths incorporated into the New Testament. And he wrote in Philippians 1:12, "But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel." In time, Paul understood what God was doing in his life. God was bringing good out of a bad experience. It merely took time for him to see it clearly.

A man was once marooned on an uninhabited island.

With painstaking effort, for weeks and weeks and weeks, he gathered wood to build him a house. After the house was completed and he had cooked his meal on an open fire, he decided to walk along the beach. While he was gone, the house burned. Upon seeing his house burned into ashes, he sat down and wept. All hope seemed to be gone. The next day a ship came to the island and rescued him. After he was safely aboard, he asked the captain how they happened to stop at that particular island. The captain answered, "Why, we saw your fire last night and came to see who was here." What seemed to be a tragedy at one moment turned out to be the means of his own deliverance, his own salvation.

God can do something like that in your life. But to see it, you must wait until God is through with the experience. Know this then—God is at work in our world and he is not haphazard about it. Know also that he is not hampered. He can use any experience and above all, remember that God is not hurried.

These facts ought to be a source of profound encouragement to us. So, in the midst of the troubles and trials of life, don't give up—look up! For this promise is to all of those who love him and who are the called according to his purpose. Living by this hope is a part of what it means to be a Christian.

NOTES

1. Dale Evans Rogers, *Angel Unaware* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, Spire Books, 1963), p. 19.

2. *Ibid.*

3. From DECISION © 1967 by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, December 1967, p. 9. Used by permission.

13 Checks and Balances on Yourself

An admirer of Marian Anderson, the famous opera singer, once remarked to her: "I'd give my right arm if I could sing like you." Miss Anderson smiled and replied thoughtfully, "Would you give eight hours of practice a day?"

Jack Valenti, a special assistant to the late President Lyndon Johnson, told of attending a golf clinic given by the late Babe Didrickson Zaharias, the legendary woman athlete. "How can I learn to hit a golf ball the way you do?" he asked her.

"Simple," she said, laughing. "First, you hit a thousand golf balls. You hit them until your hands bleed and you can't hit anymore. The next day you start all over again, and the next, and the next. And, maybe a year later, you might be ready to go eighteen holes. After that you play every day until the time finally arrives when you know what you are doing when you hit the ball."

There is a widely prevalent notion today that a person can have an instant achievement of goals without any of the wearying, frustrating preparation that others have gone through. However, it is the unanimous testimony of those who have achieved that excellence comes by exercise and

agony. It never comes easily or automatically.

Even the scriptures confirm this basic truth. The apostle Paul, in exhorting Timothy to spiritual excellence, told him, "Exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come" (1 Tim. 4:7-8).

The word "exercise" comes from the Greek word that means gymnasium. It suggests the training, discipline, and exercise that goes into making an athlete. The goal of the Christian life is godliness. The means of obtaining that goal is strenuous effort. The value of it is eternal. Bodily exercise is of limited value, but godliness is of eternal value. Bodily exercise is good for you as long as you live. But once you die it ceases to have value. Godliness is profitable both in this life and in the life to come.

There are, I believe, five basic exercises necessary for any Christian to achieve godliness. They are: prayer, Bible study, worship, witnessing, and giving. To practice these spiritual exercises requires the same kind of dogged determination, painstaking preparation, and grueling sacrifice as an athlete goes through to become a champion.

The Devil Shouts for Joy

The first and most important of spiritual exercises is prayer. It is more important than reading the Bible, going to church, tithing, or even witnessing. I say prayer is more important than reading the Bible because we have not always had a Bible to read. The printing press was not invented until 1450. Loose-leaf books came later than that. So, prior to that time people did not have Bibles of their own to read. It has only been in recent years that we have had

Bibles available to the average person. Today it is possible for a person to be locked up in prison and have no Bible to read, no church to worship in, and no money to give. But even then a person can maintain a personal relationship with God because he is still able to pray.

Mark it down. Ultimately there is no personal relationship with God if there is no prayer life. You can have a relationship with other Christians without prayer. You can have a relationship with your pastor without prayer. You can have a relationship with your church without prayer. But you can have no personal relationship with God without prayer. It comes down to this. Unless you meet God in prayer you will not meet him at all. Prayer is the way to fellowship with God and you can't have fellowship with someone you don't talk to.

Prayer is nothing more than conversation with the God whom you know and who loves you. If you can talk, you can communicate with God. Someone has said that God has only one Son who lived without sin, but he has had no sons who lived without prayer.

If then you would be godly you must become a person of prayer. Corrie ten Boom said, "When a Christian shuns fellowship with others, the devil smiles; when he stops reading the Bible, the devil laughs; when he stops praying, the devil shouts for joy." If Satan can whip us at the point of regular consistent prayer, then he has won the victory in our life.

Prayer must be a daily experience. Paderewski, the Polish pianist, said, "If I fail to practice one day I can tell it. If I fail to practice two days my family can tell it. If I fail to practice three days the public can tell."

We must learn the art of daily, consistent, regular prayer

if we are going to be proficient in the Christian life. No person is greater than his own prayer life.

What does it take to develop a strong prayer life? Here are some practical suggestions:

1. Set a time and place for prayer at the beginning and the end of every day. Someone has said, "Hem in both ends of your day with prayer and it is less likely to unravel."
2. Get on your knees. This is the posture of humility.
3. Pray out loud. This helps you to concentrate better.
4. Use natural language. God has been hearing everything you've ever said anyhow.

5. Be specific. Socrates once said, "Generalities are the refuge of a weak mind." I believe that generalities in prayer are also a refuge of a weak spiritual commitment. Ask God specifically for what you want.

6. Confess your sins. If we regard iniquity in our hearts, the Lord will not hear us.

7. Pray earnestly and intensely. Really mean what you are saying.

8. Listen to God. Be quiet long enough to learn spiritual truth; "incline your ear and listen and your soul shall live." George Bernard Shaw first spoke out against noise pollution in 1922. Once, while he was eating in a restaurant, the waiter said, "While you are dining, sir, the orchestra will play anything you like." Shaw said, "Have them play dominoes—I like quiet with my meals." John reminds us to be sure to listen to the voice of God.

9. Pray in Christ's name.

10. Don't be a prayer dropout. While we always want God to give us an immediate answer to our prayers, He often doesn't. It has been appropriately said: "When the

request is not right, God says no! When the time is not right, God says slow! When I am not right, God says grow! When everything is right, God says go!"

Our Spiritual Bread

Andrew Murray said, "The more I pray, the more I feel a need of the Word. The more I read God's word, the more I have to pray, and the more power I have in prayer."

Have you ever noticed how often the Bible is compared to food? Jesus once said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." The Scriptures are the bread that strengthens and sustains us for life itself. The Scriptures are also called milk for the baby and meat for the fully grown man. They feed the inner being that cannot be satisfied with meat and potatoes.

Sir Francis Bacon said, "Some books are to be tasted, others are to be swallowed, and some few are to be chewed and digested." The Bible is to be chewed and digested on a daily basis.

Our biggest problem with the Bible is that most people favor it outwardly, defend it with bigotry, and hardly ever read it. What are the secrets to effective Bible study? How can we learn to read the Bible effectively? Here are some practical suggestions:

1. Read it daily. How healthy would you be if you ate only two meals a week and both of them on the same day? That's what Christians are doing when they only go to church on Sunday and never read the Bible on their own.
2. Read it systematically. You need to have a plan of Bible reading and follow it.
3. Read it carefully. The Bible is not for speed reading.

Keep a pencil in your hand to mark key passages. After a few years your Bible ought to look like a well-worn road map.

4. Use a modern translation. Words are always changing and so we must have God's word in an up-to-date translation.

5. Don't worry about the parts of the Bible you don't understand. There will always be more that you do understand than you can live.

6. Read it prayerfully. Ask God to direct you in understanding His word. The same Holy Spirit who led in the writing of the scriptures will sit down with you and help you to understand them.

7. Read the Bible with an open mind. Be ready to learn and to obey all that you understand.

8. Share what you learn with someone every day. Not only will this help you to remember what you read but others will be blessed by your study also.

9. Don't worry about the amount of time you spend in reading the Bible. Establish the discipline and the time will take care of itself.

Hymen Appelman once said, "The Bible is good when you are young, it gets better when you are old; it's good when you are flushed, it's better when you are broke; it's good when you are well, better when you are sick; good when your family circle is intact, better when you come back from the cemetery; the Bible is good to live by, and men say it's good to die by."

The Cross-pollination of Worship

Martin Luther said, "To gather with God's people in united adoration of the Father is as necessary to the

Christian life as prayer." Regular worship is another spiritual exercise that is essential to growing to be all that God wants us to be.

Dr. Steve MacNeely, a pastor friend of mine, wrote in his church paper recently: "When I began to garden I early learned that one long, lonely row of corn produces little fruit. Private stalks detached and alone, simply cannot pollinate one another with life—even with the help of the wind. Yes, corn needs closeness. It needs planting alongside in rows together, its leaves touching in the wind. When we worship as long, lonely rows of people we discover little life. Private lives simply cannot pollinate one another with life. Yes, we too need closeness. Let us plant our lives close alongside so that the wind of his Spirit may pollinate us with His living presence."

Why do we need to worship? We need to worship for inspiration, education, association, and cooperation. Any one who regards worship as optional in the Christian life is not serious about living for the Lord. Sometimes people excuse their absence from worship by saying, "The ox is in the ditch." I agree with Billy Graham, who said, "If the ox gets in the ditch every Sunday, you ought to either sell the ox or fill up the ditch."

An old man of eighty years said to a friend, "I have not had time to worship." His friend said, "But you have had 4,160 Sundays." God has given us a day to worship and a place to worship and has commanded us to worship him in Spirit and in truth.

A stranger passing a large mine in Pennsylvania asked a little boy why the field was full of mules. "These mules work in the mines during the week," replied the little boy, "and are brought up into the light on Sunday to keep them

from going blind." Worship is like that. It is a time when our eyes are opened spiritually, when our hearts are rededicated, when we gain new understanding and make a deeper commitment of our life to Him. Isaiah went to church and he saw the Lord in the right perspective. The psalmist went to church and he saw life in the right perspective. The publican went to church and he saw himself in the right perspective. And if you will go to church, it will help you to keep God, life, and yourself in the right perspective.

Reproduce Yourself

Statistics show that if a new Christian does not reproduce himself spiritually in eight months that he becomes like the others he sees in the church. How imperative it is that we learn to share our faith with other people.

Witnessing is a means of growing spiritually. We become fully conscious of what we believe only when we are able to express that belief to someone else. We may have many inner convictions about things, but those convictions will remain vague until they are formulated and expressed. There is nothing that strengthens your faith or puts steel into your convictions like becoming a faithful witness for Christ.

A new convert recently told me that before he became a Christian he was obnoxious, ill-tempered, and had no inner peace. Now all of that has changed. More than that he is now trying to share with other people what Jesus Christ means to him. He explained the effects of witnessing on his life when he said, "Every time I tell someone else how I feel about Christ, I feel more so the next time."

The Christian who witnesses is much like a water pipe. The water pipe transfers the water from the pump to its destination. As a result of the pipe, people have refreshing

water to drink and to cleanse themselves with. Life is sustained because of the pipe. Yet the very pipe that transports the water is also wet on the inside by the water and to some measure is cleansed by the water that passes through it. So, as we share the good news of Jesus Christ, we not only are a blessing to others but we ourselves are blessed also.

The Definition of a Christian

A young man complained to his pastor, "Every time I come to church you are talking about money. All I hear around here is give, give, give." The pastor replied, "Thank you, sir, for the best definition of a Christian I have ever heard." Giving is at the heart of the Christian life. If we want to grow spiritually, we must learn how to give generously.

The beginning place of Christian giving is tithing. However, we must remember that tithing is the floor, not the ceiling, of Christian stewardship. It takes discipline and sacrifice to tithe. If you tithe your income to the Lord every year, you could use that money to buy a new car, make the down payment on a house, or become the best dressed person in town. However, giving brings more joy and fulfillment to your life than any of those things.

John D. Rockefeller lived by the motto: "I believe that every right implies a responsibility: every opportunity implies an obligation, and every possession implies a duty." Rockefeller was right. And if we will live by that motto we will become good stewards of all that God has given to us.

The goal of the Christian life is before us. It is godliness. To achieve it, we must have the same kind of discipline that makes an athlete into a champion. Frank Leahy, the great Notre Dame football coach, had a slogan painted on the

wall of the fighting Irish dressing room. It said, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Life is tons and tons of discipline. We must learn to discipline ourselves if we are going to grow to godliness. Let's get going at it. That's a part of what it means to being a Christian.

I Like Being a Christian

**What is a Christian?
What does it mean to be
a Christian?**

Paul Powell not only resoundingly answers these questions, but he exclaims, "I like being a Christian." If you're already a Christian, this book will inspire you to appreciate and enjoy your Christian life even more.

If you're not a Christian, it may help answer your doubts. Perhaps you'll one day testify, "Now I like being a Christian!"

Powell writes about the origin and continued meaning of "Christian" (What's in a Name?), how a person becomes a Christian (You Can Go Home Again), the implications of dedication to Christ (Set Apart), the genuine Christian (Real or Synthetic?), the assurance of salvation (Saved and Secure), God's suggestions for overcoming temptation (Don't Flirt with Temptation!), concern to help others come to Christ (Yes, Lord, Others), and much more!

Dr. Paul W. Powell is pastor of the Green Acres Baptist Church, Tyler, Texas. He is known nationally for his speaking and writing. *I Like Being a Christian* is his eighth book.

Other Christ-honoring Books by Paul W. Powell:

The Saint Peter Principle, The Nuts and Bolts of Church Growth, How to Make Your Church Hum, and Beyond Conversion



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