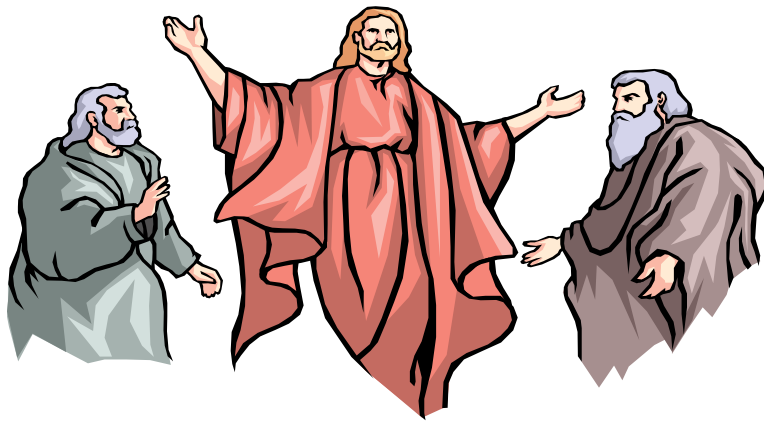


GENTLE
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MINISTRIES



DISCIPLESHIP SERIES

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Gentle Shepherd Ministries Discipleship Series

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CONTENTS

	Introduction	3
1.	Sinner or Saint?	4
2.	Preference or Truth?	8
3.	Curses or Blessings?	12
4.	Resistance or Repentance?	16
5.	Association or Identification?	19
6.	Knowledge or Revelation?	23
7.	Condemnation or Conviction?	27
8.	Duty or Intent?	31
9.	Tolerance or Charity?	35
10.	Hypocrisy or Love?	39
11.	Legalism or Grace?	42
12.	Wishful Thinking or Preparation?	46
13.	Mental Assent or Conversion?	50
14.	Reformation or Revival?	54
15.	The Broad Way or the Narrow Path?	58

INTRODUCTION

The series about discipleship presented in this book was written for the Gentle Shepherd Ministries Newsletter. It took fifteen months to complete it. Although the information in this book can be obtained from our website, we considered the subjects to be of the utmost importance to put it in book form as a means of making the whole series available.

Although the subjects in this book represent fundamental Christian beliefs, many of them have been watered down, defined or lost in the worldly Christianity that has taken center stage. The world has clearly come into the visible church, causing many to come under the spirit of the world. Instead of walking in line with the Lord Jesus Christ, many are resisting His Spirit, adjusting His Word to fit into personal agendas, and rebelling against the truth and authority of God. As a result, some have been rendered incapable of discerning the holy from the profane. Others have lost their spiritual edge by compromising with the ways of the world. There are those who are weary because they have been walking in their personal strength. Still, there are others who have become half-hearted in their walk because they lack vision.

The goal of this series is to reawaken Christians to the fundamental beliefs of their faith. Such awakening will allow them to see how far removed from the center they have traveled. It is vital to point out that true Christianity will never take people into the extremes. Rather, it will bring them back to center where order, balance, and godly wisdom can be observed in all matters affecting their spiritual lives.

My prayer is that this book will awaken sleeping, dulled down Christians as to the richness of their spiritual heritage.

1

SINNER OR SAINT?

In ministering to people, we have discovered that many of them have not been truly disciplined. Granted, they may have been indoctrinated according to a certain school of thought or doctrinal preference, but they have not been disciplined to follow Jesus. They may have been exposed to Christianity, but they have been allowed to define what it means to live the Christian life according to personal understanding and speculation. As a result, people may be following concepts and notions about what it means to be a Christian, but they are not following Jesus. Such environments do not produce disciples of Jesus.

There are a couple of problems that occur when such environments are in operation among Christians. The main one is that there will be no real agreement. As a Body of believers, our real source of agreement is Jesus Christ. Due to the diversity in the Body, agreement will be missing unless there is one sure foundation in which to take stock of a matter, and one Spirit in which issues can be properly discerned. Spirit and truth serve as the only real points of agreement among believers (*John 4:24*).

Discipleship is what establishes believers on the true foundation of Jesus Christ, and lines them up to the cornerstone of His truth, examples and work of redemption (*1 Corinthians 3:11; 1 Peter 2:6-8*). This is why the Christian's commission is really two-fold. In other words, it has one main root that connects individuals to the reality and work of Jesus, but it is two-pronged.

The one prong is our responsibility to preach the Gospel, while the other one is that of discipleship (*Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15*). One of the facts I remind Christians of is that Jesus' mission was to die as the Lamb of God, but His ministry was, and is, to serve as our Prophet, Priest and Lord to bring about the ministry of reconciliation (*2 Corinthians 5:18-19*). It is from this premise that He will fulfill His calling to set the captive free, and truly bring forth redemption as He rules in the believer's life as Lord, while unveiling the kingdom of God in the lives of His followers.

Since there seems to be much confusion about Christianity, I felt a need to do a discipleship series. It is important to point out that real discipleship entails a one-on-one investment. It is a matter of bringing one to the knowledge, understanding and obedience of his or her Lord. It is my desire that as a Scriptural foundation is laid, thus enabling the true spiritual teacher, the Holy Spirit, the means to bring life and revelation of the Scriptural teachings to His people (*John 16:13; 1 John 2:27*). It is the life in the Word of God that will affect the inner man to ponder in humility what it truly means to be a Christian or true follower of Jesus.

Christianity is not a belief system. It is a lifestyle. In other words, Christianity's identifying mark is the very life of Jesus being worked in us, through us and out of us. Obviously, Christianity is not just a matter of association with some Jesus; rather, it is a total identification, to and in, the Jesus of the Bible. This identification is for the purpose of being consecrated unto God according to the heavenly life that is being manifested in us by the Holy Spirit.

The question is how does identification truly distinguish us as believers? It is simple. It will come down to the way we walk. One of my struggles in my Christian life has been my identification. Am I a sinner or am I a saint? There are some Christians who can get quite adamant over this issue, declaring that as Christians, we are saints. However, when I first came to Jesus, I had to recognize that I was sinner, doomed by my sin. And, as we all well know, the

Bible is quite adamant about this fallen state of man that initially separated each of us from our holy God.

Scripture reveals that, because of our selfish disposition, our best is considered as filthy rags before God. Because of our wretched fleshly ways, there is no good or beneficial aspect of our inner life that would honor God in His holiness. Sin has indeed marred us so much that we fall short of our potential to reflect the glory of God in this present age of darkness. Our sinful condition has brought us under a death sentence. In such a state we stand doomed. And, as the Bible warns, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth of Jesus Christ is not in us. It also states that if we say that we have not had a real problem with sin, we make God a liar, and His Word is definitely not in us. After all, God considers us sinners, subject to the wickedness of this world, enslaved by iniquity, and prone to transgress His Law (*Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:23; 6:23; 7:18; 1 John 1:8, 10*).

Through the years, I have become more aware of my inner state. Granted, Jesus took away our sins (its activities) on the cross, but what about the inner disposition? We refer to this inner disposition as the “old man.” How did Christ deal with the inner man on the cross? It is simple that the work of redemption on the cross allows us to receive the “new man” or “new life” from heaven. In other words, we are given a new disposition: that of a new heart and new spirit when we are born again from above. The born-again experience makes us into new creations and places us in the position of a saint (*John 3:3, 5; 2 Corinthians 5:17*).

Saint implies a person who is set apart or sanctified. Such a person is a believer whose life stands distinct in holiness, sincerity and separation. The Bible tells us that as believers, Jesus is our place of sanctification, but it is the Holy Spirit who does the work of sanctification. Positionally, the Father sees Jesus’ sanctification, which makes us acceptable to Him. However, our life must be hid in Christ to ensure God views us from this vantage point, as well as allow the Spirit to actually do the work of sanctification in the inner man (*1 Corinthians 1:30; Colossians 3:3; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:2*).

Does the old disposition in us simply cease once we are born again? The way we are inclined, or bent, towards God may change, but many of the tendencies of the “old man” remain in us. Obviously, for tendencies to change we must change our attitude about matters. In Jesus’ instruction and example, He showed believers what they must do to ensure that the “old man” never reigns again. There must be self-denial of the old ways, before the rule and preeminence of the “old man” can be crucified. Once the ways are disowned and the reign of the old disposition put to death, then a person has the liberty to follow Jesus.

Once the old is put away through neglect and death, a person can begin to take on the new. The new points to new, godly tendencies. The inner man must be renewed daily by the Spirit of God to ensure that new tendencies are being developed in one’s life. This is why the mind must be transformed by the renewing of the Spirit.

As I have struggled with the issue of being a sinner or a saint in my spiritual life, I have had to come to terms with what really sets a person apart as a sinner or saint. The answer is quite simple. It is found in *1 John 3:9-10*: “*Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother.*”

What identifies a person in his or her walk? If a person is walking or living in sin, he or she is a sinner. If a person is walking in the ways of righteousness, he or she will be identified as being born from above. After all, those who truly have the very life of Jesus in them cannot sin without being convicted in their tender conscience. There will be no way in which they can ignore, justify or maintain such sin without a war raging in their soul. Sin breaks fellowship with God, and the new disposition will not be able to tolerate such a broken state for long.

As Christians, we must realize that our Christian identification is not a title or a means of association. It is about exchange and identification. At the cross of Christ I exchange the old

with the new in order to become totally identified with Jesus in a new life. The Apostle John talks about such an identification in his first epistle: “*He that saith he abideith in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked*” (1 John 2:6).

To ensure complete sanctification as saints, we must follow Jesus. Jesus stated in *John 17:19*: “*And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.*” We are not only positionally identified as a saint, but our lives must also brand us as being truly followers of Jesus Christ. He sanctified or set Himself apart so we could be sanctified through His truth. Let us now consider the path Jesus followed to be set apart in His life as a man.

Personal Glory: He gave up His capacity as God to take on the disposition of a servant, allowing Himself to be fashioned as a man (*Philippians 2:1-8*). He became identified with us, so we could become identified to Him in His work of redemption. According to Jesus’ example, before we can walk the life of a saint that is separate from the dictates of the flesh and the demands of the world, we have to give up our vainglory. This means we must give up our right to life according to our terms. To give up our personal glory enables us to humble ourselves as a servant so that we can be made or formed in the righteousness of God.

Established: As man, Jesus was established in His life with the Father. Most of this hidden life He had with the Father was developed in obscurity. As a result, Jesus was prepared to walk the path to Calvary. His face was set to finish His earthy mission, enabling us as believers the means to discover our heavenly inheritance. His example is clear; we must be firmly established in our life with Him, if we are going to live separately from the influences of this world.

Commissioned: Jesus was commissioned to die on the cross. In His ministry He made the intention of the Father known to those who would but hear. He came to heal the broken hearted and restore hope to those in captivity, by reconciling them back to a relationship with His God. As saints we have the ministry of reconciliation (*Luke 4:18; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19*). We have been commissioned to preach the Gospel that can bring peace, and teach others to observe the teachings and ways of Jesus that will line them up to the narrow path of life.

Sacrifice: As a servant, Jesus was prepared to offer all up for the glory of the Father, to benefit our spiritual state. He walked away from what was considered a normal life, sacrificed all attachments and recognition that belonged to the world, and walked contrary to the ways of the world. In the end, He became the perfect Lamb of God that the world not only hated, but also offered up as a source of reproach and humiliation on the altar of the cross. As saints, we are to become living sacrifices to prove what is the right, acceptable, and perfect will of God (*Romans 12:1-2*).

Death: Jesus died so we could have life. All sins have been placed in the silent grave so the guilt attached to them can no longer taunt believers’ conscience, allowing them to embrace the new life. As saints, we not only possess eternal life, but we are to live this life out in loving devotion. Jesus talks about this life possessing abundance or satisfaction. When Christians are not content, it is because they are not walking out the life entrusted to them. As a result, they fail to experience the abundance of this life that truly proves to be satisfying to the spirit and soul of man. Keep in mind that the very life of Jesus is complete, full and rewarding. We can only experience the contentment of this life by assimilating it into our thoughts, attitudes and conduct.

Resurrection Power: Resurrection power raised Jesus from the grave. As saints, we have this same power to raise us out of the quagmire of sin and the world, to live victorious lives over the enemies of our soul. We are no longer earth bound by the death that reigns in the world, but now we are identified to a life that is empowered by resurrection. There will be no excuse for the Christian who fails to walk the life of a saint. Saints reflect the glory of Jesus; they have been established in righteousness, commissioned to do His bidding, have presented their bodies as a living sacrifice, are identified in His death, and empowered by resurrection to be victorious in their lives.

Ministry: Jesus’ ministry did not stop upon His death, burial and resurrection. He now sits on the right hand of majesty. Here He serves in the capacity of our High Priest. As saints, we

must always be striving to go on to perfection in our life in Jesus. This maturity will enable us to serve our Lord in greater devotion, service and worship.

Jesus' path and examples are clear. We must walk in His footsteps to not only ensure our position of sanctification, but to make certain that we become set apart in our walk or life. Sadly, there is not always a distinction between the sinner who has no knowledge of salvation and the Christian who claims rights as a child of God.

The concept of a "worldly" saint is not scriptural. According to your walk (disposition, attitude and conduct) would you be classified as a sinner or identified as a saint? If you are a sinner, you really need to repent and become identified with the complete work of redemption. However, if you are a saint, rejoice in your Lord as you continue to go on to greater maturity in your Christian walk and testimony.

2

PREFERENCE OR TRUTH?

In the last article we considered our status as saints. The way we walk in this world will identify us as sinners or saints. This brings us to the next issue: That of our agendas and priorities. Our agendas and priorities will determine who or what we end up serving in this present age of darkness. Let us be honest, most of us maintain personal agendas that suit our preferences and self-serving priorities.

Jesus made it quite clear that man prefers his own darkness or reality because his deeds are evil (*John 3:19-21*). Such darkness serves as a cloak to cover such deeds. There are different words that are associated with darkness in Scripture. However, such darkness will consume the soul. This darkness entails the influence of sin and death upon the person. Individuals that are walking according to this inner darkness may perceive that such darkness is light, but in reality it is not light at all.

This type of light can be related to our personal understanding that will ultimately determine our reality. Jesus said of such light that if our understanding were nothing but darkness, how great would that darkness prove to be (*Matthew 6:22-23*). It would be great because individuals who are walking according to such inner darkness will perceive all matters of life from this premise, believing that the light they are walking according to is correct.

This type of personal understanding is made up of fleshly influences that harbor such dark elements as vain imaginations, judgmental opinions, prejudices, and superstition. These elements that constitute personal reality often erect and exalt idolatrous images and concepts of God. Such understanding has been conditioned by worldly philosophies that oppose the real truths of God. It has often been indoctrinated by man-made religions. As a result, such darkness becomes not only a darkness that invades a person's perception, but serves as the board in his or her eye that is quick to judge others, but fails to see the quality of personal fruits (*Matthew 7:1-4, 16-20*).

This brings us to the basis of this darkness. It is nothing more than delusion. Not only does such darkness blind people to their spiritual condition, but it also blinds them to the path that they are walking. Due to this deceptive state, we find that personal delusion can work from three different angles. We all can be deceived by other sources that will simply appeal to our preferences; or we can deceive ourselves by demanding our own reality; or we will deceive others by telling them what they want to hear. We know that deception is part of the fruit of sin (*Hebrews 3:13*). We also know that personal delusion operates from three platforms.

Intelligence: Many people are deluded by what they think they know. The Bible warns about the false wisdom of conceit (*Romans 12:16*). However, people who are blinded by their conceits cannot begin to imagine that there is any foolishness or fallacy in their way of thinking. The false delusion of conceits will blind them to the fact that they will often prove to be a fool in their indifferent and unrealistic conclusions.

Worldview: Worldview comes down to the philosophies about life we adopt or develop along the way. These philosophies are greatly influenced by the world. Our family, culture, type of education, and religious influences will greatly affect our personal take on life. Our worldview will also affect what we value and pursue, thereby, establishing our personal agendas and influencing our priorities. The Apostle Paul puts this matter in perspective: "Beware lest any man

spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

Notice how the philosophies of the world and the traditions of man will spoil a person. "Spoil" in this text means to lead away as in the case of seduction (Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, #4812). The traditions of man are powerless. There is no real spirit or life in them. Rudiments point to the foundation of the world. The world has no truth; therefore, it must seduce people into its fantasies, philosophies and false images. Clearly, as Christians, our philosophies concerning the matters of life must be founded in Christ Jesus.

Abilities: People put a lot of credence in their personal abilities or in the abilities of others. However, to lean on the arm of the flesh will bring individuals into a cursed life that can only destroy (*Jeremiah 17:5*). There is no real self-sufficiency of man that can be trusted or relied upon when it comes to facing and solving the challenges of life, whether it be in the arenas of religion, education or government. Yet, how many people, including those purporting to be believers, are putting their trust and confidence in man's "so-called" ability to save them? The Apostle Paul clearly tells us our sufficiency can only be found in God (*2 Corinthians 3:5*). The prophet Zechariah tells us that what is accomplished is not through strength or might, but through the Spirit of God (*Zechariah 4:6*).

This brings us to the main challenge that believers are being constantly confronted with. There is no real place of accountability that people can agree to submit to. The reason there is no real place of accountability is that there is no agreement as to what can be considered a correct standard of truth.

For Christians, we all verbally agree that there is one standard of truth, the Word of God. However, when it comes to a place of real accountability in which all matters concerning God and life are considered, there is a debate as to how to interpret the Word of God. As a result, various non-inspired versions of the Bible, man-made doctrines, mixtures of religious and New Age philosophies, and ideas and movements that are worldly inspired enter the scene. Needless to say, it all seems so logical and wise, yet there is no real truth. As the saying goes, any truth taken into an extreme is no truth at all. Truth that is compromised, adjusted or twisted becomes a form of deception, for the Spirit and life will be missing, creating a false reality or light. However, in the midst of this insanity the harsh warning of God remains standing in its certainty to bring judgment upon all such nonsense: "*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness*" (*Romans 1:18*). (Emphasis added.)

Romans 10:17 instructs us to approach the Bible to believe that it is the truth of God. However, most people approach the Bible to justify their own personal perception or reality. As a result, they pick and choose what they will believe. Needless to say, such people do not end up with any real continuity in their belief or understanding of God and His ways. They have a conglomeration of philosophies and ideas about God that has no real foundation. Such vague gods are nothing more than a matter of vain imaginations.

I remember dealing with a Jehovah Witness that had in a prideful way, confessed that she used to be a Lutheran, but she could not reconcile that a loving God could send anyone to hell. As a result, she looked elsewhere and found that Jehovah Witnesses advocated the type of beliefs that best suited what I consider to be her "fanciful notions" about God.

The reality of God's truths in His Word is that they do not cease to be because mere, pathetic, delusional man has a problem with them. Clearly, the warnings and truths regarding hell will not go away because this woman is uncomfortable with the idea of it. Sadly, when she passes through the door of physical death, she will have to face the harsh reality of hell. What is even sadder is that she could avoid such judgment if she would simply believe God that He sent His Son into the world so she could be spared from such a place of separation and torment.

There is another delusional person that many people are blindly following. Her name is Oprah Winfrey. Sadly, Oprah has become a guru to many people, including innocent Christians.

Admired for her rags-to-riches story, as well as overcoming the various barriers of race and gender, she serves as a source of hope to many who see nothing but hopelessness in their present situation.

I have occasionally watched Oprah, but often I have been left confused by her mixture. She occasionally purports Christian principles, yet she never really exalts the name and redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Granted, she mentions God, but so does every other belief system. In a discussion concerning the latest book Oprah has been promoting, "A New Earth", she was asked how she could reconcile these spiritual teachings (of the book) with her Christian beliefs.

Oprah admitted her Christian background was that of a Baptist. However, in one incident at church, the pastor brought out the point that God was a jealous God. Up to this point of the sermon she confessed that she had been caught up with the vastness and greatness of God, but that particular statement did not sit well with her concept about God being a God of love. Since she could not reconcile it according to her perception, she discarded her foundation, and let God out of the "box".

Obviously, since there were no real boundaries to guide Oprah's conclusions or understanding about God, she basically created her own concept of God. Today, Oprah believes that Jesus is not the only way to salvation; rather He came to show us a Christ consciousness. In other words, Oprah has bought into the New Age god, and has come totally under the antichrist spirit that is operating in this world (*1 John 4:1-3*). One of her inspirations is the New Age Bible called the "The Course In Miracles" which she is promoting through her radio program.

Imagine, Oprah was tripped up by one simple fact, yet how many others are being tripped up by some aspect of God that they do not understand, or refuse to, because it does not sit well with the preferred reality they have adopted about Him? Oprah had a problem with the fact that our holy God, who deserves our complete devotion, service and worship will not jealously share preeminence in our lives with any other god or idol. I am sure if you asked Oprah if she would want to share the affections of her male companion with another woman, she would adamantly say "no". Yet, according to Oprah for the sake of love, God is supposed to accept any unfaithfulness on our part just to make sure we do not become offended with His holy character. Sadly, many people are following Oprah into her delusion. On judgment day, these individuals may stand up and point an accusing finger at her, but it will be too late for them (*Hebrews 9:27*).

What happened to Oprah? It is clear that she had never been properly disciplined. As a result, she bought the wrong gospel. The gospel Oprah advocates is very popular. It is the gospel of worldly love. In other words, the world's concept of love is translated as being God's form of love. Since God's love is perceived from a worldly basis, there is no way He would reject anyone. However, God's love is not like the world's love. Granted He loves us, but it is because of His love that He provided the means in which we could be saved. Out of His sacrificial and committed love He sent His Son to take our place on the cross of judgment. It is Jesus that saves us, not the concept of God's love. In other words, you can try to hide behind God's love all you want, but it will not save you. Clearly, not only is God's love misrepresented, but it also has had a wrong emphasis placed on it, causing people to miss the real message of the Gospel. It is only by receiving the true message of the Gospel concerning Jesus' redemption that one can be saved from judgment through God's love.

Another mistake Oprah made is that she tested a truth according to how it made her feel, not according to the Word of God. Truth will not always set right with our perception. It will not cater to our fickle feelings. It will not adjust to our fleshly inspired agendas and priorities. It will not agree with our carnally inspired conclusions. And, the godly love that stands behind God's truth will never rejoice in any type of iniquity no matter what form it may come in (*1 Corinthians 13:6*). It will always expose the selfishness of our agendas and the self-serving

ways of our priorities that are often covered up by the different false cloaks of personal charity and religion.

The final mistake Oprah made is that she made the matters of God about herself, rather than acknowledge that God's ways and thoughts are higher than hers (*Isaiah 55:8-9*). She brought God down to her level of understanding, while deluding herself that she had let Him out of some religious "box" to truly discover Him. In the end, she opened up a door in which any type of conceivable presentation or lie about God could take root. Since Oprah preferred her own reality about God, she went into the darkness of delusion and unbelief, while giving way to the seducing, false light of the doctrines of devils (*2 Corinthians 11:2-4, 12-15; 1 Timothy 4:1-2*).

When we consider the light as being our personal understanding, which is often nothing more than our preferred reality, we begin to realize why the Bible instructs us to walk by faith and not by sight. In other words, we must not walk according to our own understanding, but according to the truth firmly established in the Word of God. Jesus stated that He is the essence of all truth. If we do not Scripturally get Jesus right as our foundation to what is real, as well as line up to Him as our cornerstone in relationship to what is right, He will become a stumbling stone of judgment to us as we come under the strong influence of a different reality (*John 14:6; 1 Corinthians 3:11; 2 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 2:6-8*). This is why we must be careful about who we choose to follow in our spiritual journey. The Apostle Paul put forth the real test to following anyone when it comes to the matters of our spiritual welfare: "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (*1 Corinthians 11:1*). Obviously, if Oprah is not leading anyone to the real Christ, then she falls in the category of being a blind leader that is leading those who are also blinded to the true Gospel. Both will fall into the ditch of judgment (*Matthew 15:14; 2 Corinthians 4:3-4*).

The harsh reality is that in our fleshly state, we will never prefer God's truth to our self-serving reality. This is why we are instructed to love the truth (*2 Thessalonians 2:10-12*). It is only by truly loving the Jesus of the Bible and His Word, that we will cause our personal preferences, thoughts, feelings, and conclusions to give way to what is right, pure and acceptable to God.

How about you? What are you presently giving way to? Is it your personal preferred reality about God or the unchanging truths of God?

3

CURSES OR BLESSINGS?

Most people think of Christianity as a belief system. However, this is a grave misconception. Christianity is the way we must live our lives as born-again saints. But, what does it mean to live our lives according to a heavenly calling and example? Since living is something that is a normal thing to do, most rarely think about what it truly means to experience life. The truth is there are various factors that determine how one will live his or her life. We are going to consider them.

Perception: We live our life according to our personal perception. Within this perception one will discover his or her disposition or state. In this state, attitudes are reflected, emphasis realized, agendas preferred, and priorities pursued. Each person possesses an attitude about God. This is why as Christians we are told to have the mind or attitude of Christ to ensure a right inner state. We have an emphasis as to what we will consider to be important. The Apostle Paul clearly established the main emphasis that every saint should possess: to know nothing except Christ and Him crucified. We have our personal agendas that determine our focus and priorities that influence what we pursue. The Bible is clear that our focus must be heavenward on Jesus, and we must pursue the type of life outlined in Scripture.

Desires: Desires are what often drive or motivate us. Most desires are attached to fleshly appetites and worldly attractions. After all, they will influence our preference, as well as the direction and focus of our affections. Ultimately, undisciplined desires can lead to covetousness and obsessions. The Bible encourages us to covet what God has ordained and become consumed with the desire to know Him. These activities point to faith. It is vital that we discern where our true confidence lies.

Light: The topic of faith brings us to the next subject: personal understanding. We either walk according to our personal understanding or according to our faith towards God. The Bible warns us that in our fallen state we prefer to walk according to our own darkness or understanding. Keep in mind that light points to the type of life that is in us. Whether we believe it or not, we walk according to the life that we possess. Such life represents what is natural to us. We are either bent towards our personal preferences or we are lining up to the eternal perspective of Jesus Christ. The Bible reminds us as believers that we are to be children of the light; therefore, we need to walk according to the life of Jesus in us. This requires us to not walk as fools, but circumspectly in a wise fashion, redeeming the time for the days are evil (*Ephesians 5:8-16*).

Environment: Another determining factor is what we expose ourselves to. We are in the world, but as saints we need to separate ourselves from the influence of the world. The world will actually desensitize us to its profane ways. It will condition us to accept its value system and philosophies. The challenge for most Christians is that much of the world is neither good nor bad, but if the matters of the world become a Christian's emphasis and pursuit, it becomes idolatrous. Once a Christian comes into agreement with the world, he or she will come under the spirit of the world. The spirit of the world simply works disobedience within people towards the matters of God.

This brings us to the quality of life. Depending on the type of life we choose will determine the type of character our life will take on. We know that real life comes from God. Life outside of God is simply a form of existence. In this existence people attempt to find some type of purpose

to life. They seek identity in worldly relationships and material stuff. They seek importance according to the world's various presentations. They work for recognition so they can feel good about themselves. However, such a feeling is temporary. They must therefore, continue to seek for such acknowledgement that will ultimately prove to be useless or empty. This is why Solomon summarized in *Ecclesiastes* that the activities of life that are pursued in light of the existence of this present world will prove to be vain. After all, worldly pleasures are temporary, for the activities of the world have no eternal value to them, and its ways lead to destruction.

God brings the issue of life to the forefront for the children of Israel in *Deuteronomy 30:19*: "*I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore, choose life that both thou and thy seed may live.*" Consider how God established that there is a record that He indeed set before the children of Israel concerning the ways of life and death. The quality of our life is associated with blessing, and the broad path of death with curses. God exhorted His people to choose life so they could actually live it. Such a life does not merely exist in this present world; rather it is experiencing the type of life God has ordained for His people.

Unbeknown to us, every day we are making life and death choices. We are either choosing the way of blessings or the way of curses. Again, blessings and curses stipulate the quality of the life we live. Let us consider how the quality of these two diverse environments will manifest themselves.

Let us begin with curses. Curses point to a life of contempt. Instead of appreciating it, one will despise his or her type of existence. It will be a life that will not be esteemed or desired. It will be considered vile and hard. Needless to say, curses point to the ways of death.

God clearly explains the ways of death in *Deuteronomy 27:15-68*. As you study the concept of curse, you will realize that God is simply withholding His blessings. The reason for God to withhold His blessings is because man has lightly esteemed Him. He has proven to be rebellious and treacherous towards God's commandments and covenants.

This brings us to the subject of blessings. Blessings imply that which benefits the well-being of a person. Such benefits point to prosperity, happiness, contentment, and pleasure. Therefore, all that is beneficial to man's well-being comes from God. *Acts 17:28* gives us this insight: "*For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.*"

We cannot live, move or have our very being without God. Everything that sustains our physical existence and our inner life comes from God. *James 1:17* tells us: "*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*"

Sadly, man thinks that he is the one who acquires worldly possessions to better his life in some way, while failing to recognize that all such blessings come from above. If God was not blessing man's work, activities or accomplishments, he would have nothing to show for his labor. Since man sees himself as providing those things that prosper his life, he will prove to be a fool in the end, as he fails to bless God in awe, adoration and worship for his many blessings.

Obviously, God blesses, but in what way? There are actually two types of blessings. There are worldly and spiritual blessings. It is important to understand how these blessings work. The first blessing is worldly blessings. God blesses man so he can live. He provided his need and opportunities to function in this world. However, in this arena, blessings are not meant to heap upon self. In fact, when man seeks life in such possessions, he will end tasting the vanity of this world. Jesus put it best when He stated: "*Take heed, and beware of covetousness; for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth*" (*Luke 12:15*).

Jesus is saying that our possessions cannot bring us well-being. When God prospers a person in the arena of physical possessions, it is so he or she can turn around and bless others. You see this principle through the Law. The people of Israel were to help the widow, the fatherless and strangers. They were to be liberal in their support of God's servants and work.

God even established that His people would enjoy such fruits of their liberal giving when it came to providing for their different religious celebrations.

The second type of blessings are spiritual (*Ephesians 1:3*). As you study the different covenants of God, you can see that they were made up of promises. These promises were conditional. In other words, the people had to keep their end of the covenant in order to experience the fulfillment of God's promises in their lives. What flowed from these promises were God's blessings. However, the greatest type of blessings that could be obtained were the spiritual blessings. These spiritual blessings proved to be far more reaching than the worldly blessings.

For example God's covenant with Abraham involved bringing forth an earthly nation. But, the spiritual blessing that flowed from Abraham's life in God was of far greater significance. It is found in *Genesis 15:1*: "After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram; I am thy shield, and thy exceedingly great reward." The real blessing that flows through God's many promises is God Himself. Abraham had the great privilege and opportunity of knowing his Creator in an intimate way. Knowing God in such a way means that His people possess the blessing of His incredible life.

Possessing God caused Abraham to acquire a vision that took him beyond the physical realm into the spiritual. This caused him to see that his real hope was not in God fulfilling earthly promises, but in realizing the spiritual blessings that were clearly attached to having a relationship with Him. *Hebrews 11:10* gives us this insight about Abraham: "For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

God establishes a place of covenant in order to fulfill His promises to His people. His people inherit the promises through faith (*Hebrews 6:12*). It is by faith that God's people fulfill the responsibility of the covenant by walking it out in obedience. Out of such obedience flow the spiritual blessings. For example, God's people prosper when they are rich in faith (*James 2:5*). They know contentment by being godly (*1 Timothy 6:6-7*). They experience lasting happiness when God is truly their God (*Psalms 144:15*). Lasting pleasures are attached to His presence being in the midst of them. King David summarizes this blessed life in this way: "Thou wilt show me the path of life: In thy presence is the fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore" (*Psalms 16:11*).

There is such inner satisfaction in gaining and possessing such life in our Lord. King David understood this when he stated: "As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake with thy likeness" (*Psalms 17:15*).

It is clear our life must be in God, knowing that it is contrary to the existence we often seek and obtain from this world. The world stands cursed in its wicked ways. Regardless of the riches it brings, the temporary happiness it offers, and the useless pleasures it promises, the things of the world will lead to spiritual ruin for those who pursue them. In *Galatians 3:13-14* we are told: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."

People must choose God's life to ensure they do not stand outside of His promises. Outside of God is a cursed life that leads to judgment, ruin and destruction. In Christ we meet God at the point of the new covenant secured by Christ in order to inherit His promises and experience heavenly blessings.

What about you? A lot of people are seeking the blessings of this present world, rather than the unseen blessings of heaven. Some are running around claiming to be blessed when they are really outside of God's promises. The key is that as His people we should desire the unseen blessings of heaven. These are the blessings that make an impact on our lives for eternity.

If you have not chosen life so that you can truly live in the light of His eternal blessings, now is the time to do so. You must come into the place of the new covenant by recognizing your sin has separated you from God, who has provided Jesus Christ as a sacrifice on your behalf. By

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receiving Christ as your Lord and Savior, you will place yourself in His hands as your owner, and He will deliver you from the old way to experience the new, everlasting way of His life.

4

RESISTANCE OR REPENTANCE?

I have been doing a series of articles involving discipleship. As Christians, we have been commissioned to preach the Gospel and make disciples or followers of Jesus. We have developed many methods to preach the Gospel, but discipleship is greatly lacking. As a result, many Christians have been left to try and figure out what it means to truly follow Jesus.

It is hard for people to understand what real discipleship entails. For example, when you go to a discipleship class at a church, it may consist of teaching people the doctrines of the church. This may be informative, but it is not discipleship.

Discipleship entails an investment that can take place in a group setting, but it also proves to be very affective when it takes place one-on-one. The main goal of true discipleship is to make a person familiar with the character and ways of God. It is from this premise that people are able to properly discern spiritual matters and to grow up in the ways of God. Therefore, one cannot properly disciple a person if he or she does not know the God of the Bible.

If people do not know the character and ways of God, they will fail to properly see or understand Scriptural instructions. For example, people do not understand the devastation of sin because they do not have a proper perspective of God's holiness. Therefore, it is vital that Christians be challenged and led into knowledge of the true God of heaven.

It is in light of understanding God's character that one can begin to understand his or her scriptural responsibilities. One of our first and main responsibilities throughout our walk is repentance. Repentance from dead works is the first doctrine mentioned in the principle *doctrine* of Christ in *Hebrews 6:1-2*.

This brings us to a very important consideration. How would repentance from dead works translate into our lives? To me, John the Baptist brings this into focus. In *Mark 1:4* we are given this insight: "*John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.*" First of all, John pointed to the fact that repentance is a type of baptism in the sense that one must totally be immersed in this act to ensure that sins are remitted.

In *Luke 3*, it is recorded that John warned people to flee from the wrath to come, and that they were to bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. In other words, flee from the destructive path you are on, and prove you have repented by obvious changes in attitude and practices. When John was asked by people as to what they should do to produce such fruits, John told them to be benevolent towards the needs of others, honorable in their practices, and to not abuse position, power or status at the expense of those less fortunate. Clearly, as those who were truly repentant fled from the old, they were to embrace that which represented the opposite of their old way of doing. Jesus explained what people were to embrace in their repentance: "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the gospel*" (*Mark 1:15*).

We know that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Therefore, the main reason we repent of the old is to embrace God's salvation. When John the Baptist hit the scene, repentance was the main emphasis of his preaching. After all, people had to first repent from their old ways to ensure that their sins would be remitted, allowing them to properly embrace the reality of the kingdom of heaven (*Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:4*). Jesus summarized the necessity of repentance in this simple way: "*I tell you, Nay, But, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish*"

(*Luke 13:3, 5*). This explains why repentance is necessary. You cannot embrace the kingdom of God and be saved unless you first repent.

Repent or perish puts into perspective the need for all of us to come to true repentance from that which is dead, doomed and destructive. The command to repent in order to avoid perishing in our sins seems simple enough. However, I have found that repentance can prove to be an impossible feat unless the inward environment of man is right.

One of the things that is fascinating to me is watching people moan and cry over their sins, failures and spiritual condition, but once the tears dry up, the people go on their way without any sign of change. Keep in mind, repentance is all about change, but not just change in what a person is doing, but change in his or her attitude about matters, as well as transformation of the mind and disposition. In other words, repentance involves a complete change of the inward man that will manifest itself in one's attitude and lifestyle.

Such a change involves changing direction to not only face the light of Jesus at the point of redemption and the forgiveness of sins, but to come into agreement with God as to what constitutes righteousness, and to begin to walk in the light, ensuring inward cleansing from all sin and spiritual reconciliation (*1 John 1:3-9; 3:4-10*).

However, there must be a right environment to ensure true repentance. A person must be prepared to come to the place of repentance (*Hebrews 12:17*). When you study the place of repentance, you realize that it is humility. There is no real repentance without coming in humility to God. Such a place means that one is able to truly repent. Such repentance involves a right heart condition, the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and a willingness to change perception, attitude and conduct. Without heart change and the conviction of the Spirit, people will not be prepared to be broken over the devastation that sin has wrought in their lives and in their relationship with God.

It is important to point out that people may feel sorry about sin, but if they are not broken by it, true repentance will be missing from the equation. Remorse and repentance are two different responses. Paul speaks of both in *2 Corinthians 7:10*. Remorse is worldly sorrow that will lead to destruction, while true repentance is godly, and will lead to salvation. Remorse may show tears, but it serves as a cloak that hides the person's prideful resistance in agreeing with God about his or her wicked attitude or action. True repentance recognizes that the person has offended God, and must take the appropriate responsibility to seek the necessary forgiveness.

Worldly remorse not only hides behind four major disguises, but it has the ability to delude the person who cannot discern the real spirit behind his or her outward display of remorse. The first disguise that worldly remorse hides behind is that of compliance. This is where a person appears to *comply* by quickly agreeing with the wrong that has been done or is being done. These people give the appearance of being wise in their compliance, but sadly there is no real fruit of repentance that confirms that the inner man of the person has been transformed. This type of individual continues on with their same attitudes and behavior.

Keep in mind, the intent of repentance is to truly change one's lifestyle. Changing lifestyle requires change in understanding, attitude, approach, and behavior. This process of changing begins with coming to a real understanding of a matter. In order to do this, we must understand the intent of something. For example, we must see sin for what it is, and understand that it results in some type of death to the quality of life or in relationships. Such understanding means we will not just know of a matter, or about a matter, we will know it as a reality. When something becomes a reality, we are able to adjust our behavior according to it, thereby changing our attitude and approach towards it.

When one complies, he or she usually agrees for the sake of peace or fake nobility making him or her appear as being wise. But, such an individual lacks the conviction and power of the Holy Spirit to change his or her mind and attitude; therefore, operating in the same destructive cycles. These individuals will not truly repent by giving up their right to the way they think. This

type of person simply resists changing his or her perception to truly come to a place of repentance.

There are those who *reform* outwardly by adjusting to the perception of others, but inwardly resist casting their emotional sentiment aside in order to discipline their behavior and change their stubborn attitude about something. They hold on to their right to feel a certain way, as they resist being vulnerable. But, each person must first become transparent if he or she is going to come into a place of complete agreement with God about a matter, ensuring godly repentance.

Some people *perform* to give an impression that there has been some change. However, behind the image is a fierce resistance to submit to any terms other than theirs. Nor will these people admit there is any wrong that must be confronted in their way of doing. In a way, this performance becomes a clever game in which this type of individual sees whether he or she can entice others to agree with his or her particular take on reality.

Finally, you have people who will *conform* outwardly in order to control their environment. They basically throw you a bone, while maintaining their right to resist any change outside of their particular understanding about a matter. The bone is to silence you as they continue down the same path.

When these different types of people are faced with consequences for their inward resistance against that which is honorable, righteous, real, and true, they can only express worldly remorse. Clearly, they have not come to humility in order to properly repent. The remorse is simply an outward show revealing that the person lacks any real intent of changing how he or she approaches something. Sadly, these four ways of expressing worldly remorse represent the ways of death.

We need to know how to discern ourselves. Because of pride, we can believe we are repenting, when in fact we are resisting coming to our Lord in humility and brokenness. In such a state, we will run around the gate, claiming we want to do what is right, but we refuse to enter the narrow gate of repentance. Therefore, nothing changes in our inner man. Granted, we may convince ourselves we want change, but we want circumstances, environments, people, and reality to change or adjust around us, but we do not want to change. In essence, we do not want to face the depths of our sin and be broken by it as we come into a state of humility. Such humility will bring us to a place of transparency and true repentance.

What about you? Are you still operating according to an appearance of repentance, or have you established a place of true repentance in the spirit of humility, where you can immediately come, seeking to find forgiveness for your sins, reconciliation with the Father, and restoration of heart, soul and mind?

ASSOCIATION OR IDENTIFICATION ?

This is the fifth article in the Discipleship Series. We have considered whether we are a sinner or a saint when it comes to our status in Christ. We have examined what is truly influencing our perception about God and life, as well as carefully considered if the quality of our life can be regarded as blessed of God or cursed by the ways of sin, self and the world. Last month we examined whether we are resisting when it comes to us truly giving way to God, or whether we have learned how to come to a state of true repentance.

As pointed out last month, it is important to understand the significance of godly repentance. Repentance allows us to turn around and face the harsh reality of our sins, moral deviation and hopeless state of sin and death. It allows us to fling ourselves on God in faith that He is able to bring life to our hopeless state of spiritual ruin, allowing us to walk in hope or expectation to a new beginning, a new life, and a new future.

This brings us to the next aspect of godly repentance. It allows us the means to become totally identified with our Lord in His death, burial and resurrection. The Apostle Paul talks about this identification in *Romans 6*. Identification points to being united in spirit, outlook or principle in order to become the same as or to share oneness.

We know according to *John 17*, this oneness was a major theme and desire in Jesus' prayer. It not only pointed to agreement and fellowship, but it was also the means in which the world would know that the Father sent the Son into the world. Clearly, such oneness would be seen in the Christian's life.

We are called into the place of complete identification with Jesus; therefore, we need to understand what it means for our Christian life. The first aspect that Paul brings out about this identification is the fact that we are dead to sin. Keep in mind that the death, burial and resurrection points to the Gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation (*1 Corinthians 15:1-4*).

Jesus died for our sin, was buried and three days later rose from the grave. If we believe this in our heart and confess that Jesus is Lord, we shall be saved (*Romans 10:9-10*). But, we must keep in mind that for Jesus to provide the way of salvation, He took on the disposition of a servant, by taking on the form of a man. In other words, Jesus became totally identified with us in order to address our sin problem.

Hebrews 2:9-10 gives us this insight: "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor, that he, by the grace of God should taste death for every man. For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through suffering." When Jesus became man, He was made lower than the angels. However, He had to take on a body to take our place on the cross as our Advocate. He had to suffer death in our place so we could inherit eternal life. The Apostle Paul stated that He became sin, or was made a sin offering so we could be made into the righteousness of God in Him (*2 Corinthians 5:21*).

The Lord Jesus Christ serves as our example. He went the way of Calvary to experience death. Likewise, we must experience death if we are going to truly become identified with Him in

His life. He was put to death because of our sin, and we must become dead to sin to experience the essence of His wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

If our life is hid in Christ as *Colossians 3:3* states, it signifies our death to the old way of life that was subject to the Law. The Law is what declares that we are sinners because we have transgressed it; therefore, we are worthy of death. The Apostle Paul in explaining how this all worked, related in *Romans 7* how if we are living according to the dictates of the flesh, we are bound to the Law in the same way husbands and wives are bound to one another. There is no way we can get away from the Law outside of our death. However, if we are identified to Jesus' death, we are already considered dead, freeing us to have a new husband, Christ Jesus.

Clearly, if we fail to come into identification with Jesus in this way, we still remain bound to the Law. It is in Him that we stand forgiven, redeemed and restored into a new, complete life.

Some of you might be asking how such identification can occur. The Apostle Paul also addressed this question in *Romans 6:11-12*: "*Likewise, reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Let not sin, therefore, reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in its lusts*". Reckon is a mathematical term. It means to count something as true no matter what angle we may approach it. When we consider reckon in this way, it simply points to faith. Faith is clearly a matter of reckoning a matter as being true. The Apostle Paul stated that the life of Christ that he was living in his body, he did so according to his faith in the Son of God (*Galatians 2:20*).

This brings us to the next part of being identified. We must be identified with Him in burial. We are told in *Romans 6:3* that we have been baptized into Jesus, which means we have also been baptized into His death. Baptism points to total immersion. Our lives have been totally immersed into Christ. Just as Christ was hidden in the grave, we are hidden in Christ. Just as the old was put off through death to allow the new to come forth, our old life that was marked by sin and death must be reckoned as dead in Christ, in order for the new to come forth. Keep in mind, the grave represented the victory of sin and death that freely reigned, but when Christ rose from the grave, it lost its victory. The reality of sin and death was silenced by the lifeless tomb of the grave, proving that the grave cannot hold life that has been empowered by resurrection of the new, eternal life of God.

In Christ, as believers, we not only become identified with Him in death, but our old life has been buried in His death. This allows for the last point of identification, the resurrection of the new. Notice, it is not the resurrection of the old, but of the new. The old has been left in the baptism, or grave, of death, allowing for the new to come forth. The Apostle Paul put it in this way: "*For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection*" (*Romans 8:5*).

It is important to point out that what stands as a place of identification is the cross of Christ. Standing before the cross of Christ allows us to see the dreadful reality of our sin. But, when one truly becomes totally identified or immersed in the work of the cross, which is death that leads to burial, then the expectation or hope of the cross can truly be realized. The hope of the cross of Christ is life that now abides in us. This life is not only eternal, but it has been empowered by resurrection. Sin has no claims on this life, death has no part in it, and the grave has no power over it.

Life is the glorious reality for those who are truly hid in Christ. These individuals look forward to realizing the fullness of this life in eternity. Meanwhile, this life allows these people to live unto God. Instead of yielding the members of their body as instruments of unrighteousness, now they can become instruments of righteousness unto God, fulfilling their purpose in this present world and reaching their potential in light of the next.

This brings us to the second group of Christians, those who associate with the Christian way. Those who are associates to the Christian way may keep company with believers, attend services, and develop common interest, but will fall short of becoming identified with Christ. These are the people who are forever walking on the outskirts of the deeper Christian life. They

may claim, or give the impression, that they want such a life, but they never really enter into the door that would lead them into the secret chambers of communion to experience it.

Sadly, it is not unusual to encounter people in the religious realm who do not want to really become identified to Christ. Even though it is His life in us that truly distinguishes us as His people, these individuals show no real desire to become identified with this life. Those who possess this attitude are simply associates to the Christian life.

There are various ways that people become associates to the Christian life. For example, there are those individuals who become associated to Christ through family. Since these people's families are linked to the Christian belief, they conclude they must also be Christians. People that operate from this premise assume that such association identifies them to Christ, when in reality it simply identifies them to their family. However, these people do not really possess the life of Christ. They are assuming that such identification will somehow allow them to slide into heaven. However, the Bible is clear that if a person is not born again of the Spirit and the water of the Word, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Another way people become associates to the Christian life is through religious association. People who associate themselves to a particular school of thought, denomination or religious leader will fall into this category. When people's identification is based on such associations, it becomes obvious that they are not looking to Jesus as their only source of life and hope. We are told that there is only one mediator between God and man, and that is the man, Christ Jesus (*1 Timothy 2:5*). Granted, these points of identification may possess aspects of Christianity, but when people are looking to such sources as their mediator or point of identification, Jesus will simply be tacked on to their religious activities to bring an appearance of credibility. In such a situation, we can see that instead of serving as the sole source or inspiration behind them, Jesus has been replaced by that which has no power to save.

The Word of God is clear. Jesus is the only author and captain of our salvation (*Hebrews 2:10; 5:8-9*). He alone saves. To embrace and experience Jesus' salvation, we must become identified with Him in His work of redemption. Such identification requires us to believe what has clearly been established in the Word of God. To believe not only requires us to receive Jesus' salvation as a truth, but to accept the responsibility of walking in obedience according to the way that has been laid out in the Bible. The writer of *Hebrews* makes this statement about Jesus: "*And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him*" (*Hebrews 5:9*). (Emphasis added.)

The third way people sometimes associate with Christianity is in name only. Anyone can say he or she is a Christian. These people can associate themselves to Jesus by using His name. In other words, they will drop his name to fit in to the scene. However, dropping the name of Jesus in the crowd or using the title of Christian does not identify a person as being a Christian. It is true that salvation cannot be obtained in any other name but Jesus. But, a person must know Jesus in order to be saved. Knowing Jesus requires having a relationship with Him. Therefore to use His name without knowing Him is the same as using His name in vain. It has no real personal meaning other than be used as a point of credibility. Such people may know of and about Jesus, but they do not know Him.

The important question is what keeps people from truly becoming identified with Jesus? After all, we see some people coming so far in their life in Christ, but stopping short of becoming identified with Him. There are three reasons people do not fully become identified with Jesus.

The first reason is that such people refuse to consecrate their life to Christ. The Apostle Paul relates consecration as presenting our bodies as living sacrifices. The life we live as Christians is the life of Christ, but we must consecrate the members of our body as a living sacrifice to ensure that the life of Christ is not only established in us, but also worked in us. For example, we must develop the inward disposition of Jesus, that of lowliness or humility. We must let His mind transform our mind so that we can have agreement. We also must learn how to walk as He walked in this world, dead to its influence, and alive unto the will of the Father.

The second reason people become associates to Christ is because they refuse to surrender all of their present life to Him as Lord and Master. After all, we have been bought with a price; therefore, we do not belong to ourselves. To consecrate our lives is to set them apart from the world to God, but to surrender our lives points to total abandonment. We abandon all ties with this present world and the influences of our self-life in order to surrender all else to God for His purpose and glory. The problem with many Christians is they will surrender certain aspects of their lives, while holding onto rights to determine what they surrender, in what way they will surrender it, and when they will let go of it. To reserve any right to any aspect of our lives is not surrender or total abandonment. Those who refuse to surrender all for God's purpose will never gain their complete life in Christ.

The third reason people operate as associates to Christ is because they lack true faith towards God. They have not chosen to trust Him with every aspect of their life. What has not been submitted out of child-like confidence to God becomes a point of unbelief in a person's life. Such individuals will fail to trust God in all matters of life that proves inconvenient or does not make sense to them. As a result, such people will only associate with Jesus in areas that will not challenge their self-sufficiency, personal understanding, and weak character.

This leaves us with the necessity of examining our present status in Christ. It is vital that we examine to see whether we are in the true faith that exemplifies a growing relationship with God through Jesus Christ (*2 Corinthians 13:5*). Perhaps in your examination, you will have to admit that you are simply an associate to Christ. If so, you need to be born again from above with the very life of Jesus. Humble yourself in true repentance and need for salvation, and ask Him to forgive you of your sin, and come into your life as Lord and Savior.

Maybe you are one who has come so far in becoming identified with the life of Jesus, but you have stopped in unbelief from entering into complete identification with Jesus. As a result, you walk in and out of the spiritual aspect of the Christian life into the fleshly ways and entanglements of the old life. If so, you need to repent of your independence and unbelief, and humble yourself before the Lord of lords and King of kings with the intent of paying the complete price of abandonment to secure your life in Christ.

Admittedly, I have been an associate in the past, but discovered that it leaves one empty, uncertain and miserable. But, thanks to the faithfulness of God, I have discovered the place of total identification in Christ. It is challenging, but a blessed place of assurance in Jesus, communion in the Spirit and peace in one's relationship with the Father.

6

KNOWLEDGE OR REVELATION?

Have you ever considered the different levels of knowledge that people might possess about a subject? In fact, if you consider knowledge, you will realize that knowledge has about four stages people can operate in. A good example of how these different stages work can be found with Jeannette, Krista and me in relationship to the computer.

When it comes to the computer, I have a love-hate relationship with mine. I know the computer as far as using a certain program, but my knowledge of it is quite limited. Jeannette's knowledge of the computer goes beyond my limited understanding of it. For example, she works with the Internet and on a monthly basis puts together our newsletter. In fact, she was learning how to use the computer in her 50's. I was impressed with the fact that she was willing to go into unknown technological territories that I would never dare to explore without major supervision.

Then there is Krista. Krista is our problem solver when it comes to the computer. She has managed to spare Jeannette and me from many emotional meltdowns when it has come to these technological wonders. Her ability to tread into problem areas of the computer has gained the awe and respect of both of us. She has done maintenance and repairs on our computers, as well as worked with various programs. She is the one who waded through the challenging process of learning how to do our website.

When Krista hits the end of her knowledge, or resolve, to solve a computer problem, we have a reliable computer technician who is ready to come in and save the day. This man is incredible. He not only knows how to put a computer together, but he understands the integral workings of those confusing, and sometimes touchy programs. Instead of showing any type of fear towards this blinking one-eyed monster, he swoops in and conquers it with incredible ease.

Knowledge is indeed a combination of many flowing rivers of facts, ideas, truths, or principles. These different rivers can occasionally merge into what we can refer to as understanding, but nevertheless, they each present their own challenges about issues and subjects confronting our lives. The level of knowledge we gain about a matter will determine how deep we tread into the waters of these rivers in regard to the subject.

For example, when it comes to the computer, I just want to get by. Granted, I have gone from getting my big toe wet to getting both feet wet, but I am not comfortable to wade any deeper into what I call the whirlpools of technology that surrounds the computer. As for Jeannette, she has waded deeper into the river. I would say she is knee deep as she slowly tests each new step in her attempt to explore new horizons. We both know *of* certain functions of the computer, but we probably will not wade any further into what appears an overwhelming river of information that eventually blurs into mass confusion for us. For Krista, she knows *about* the computer because she is willing to get in over her head in this river. The result is that she has managed to gain greater knowledge as she finds herself experiencing new depths in this area. For our technician, he *knows* the computer. He not only swims the raging river with ease, and skillfully floats the areas where there are dangerous whitewater rapids, but at times he even occasionally appears to walk on water.

When we consider the four levels of knowledge in which people can operate in regard to a matter, we must acknowledge that such levels are based on experience. Experience in the Bible

is associated with tribulation (*Romans 5:3-4*). In other words, if you are not willing to wade away from the comfort zones of what you know to experience the uncertainty of the frightening depths of the unknown in regard to something, you will never come to the *knowledge* or understanding of a matter. In summation, you must risk drowning in such a river before you can come to a place where you will actually *know* something as a truth or a reality.

To me, drowning in the river of technology is not my forte. In other words, it is not what I value or desire to know; therefore, it has never been my main emphasis. I would rather spend my energy elsewhere, while trusting those who are more equipped in this area to handle the details and challenges of the computer world.

The Bible also speaks of these four areas of knowledge when it comes to God. Some people know *of* God, but they remain fools about who He is. They do not care to tread away from their comfort zones of bigoted, limited opinions that they have developed towards Him. Granted, they may possess some type of theology towards Him or have some doctrine about the religious life associated to Him, but such knowledge is controlled according to their ignorance about God. Their lives of unbelief reveal that they do not really believe the God of the Bible exists in His state of holiness and majesty (*Psalms 53:1*).

There are those who have some knowledge *of* God due to religious experiences. Occasionally, this type of person will take his or her limited knowledge and become zealous in it. However, the Apostle Paul made this statement about such an individual in *Romans 10:2-3*: “*For I bear them record that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.*” Clearly, these individuals are taking their limited knowledge of God and trying to establish some type of righteous life before Him. However, such a life would be based on fleshly understanding and attempts, and not according to their faith in Christ, who serves as the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (*Romans 10:4*).

The third type of knowledge in regard to Christ involves those who are striving to come to the knowledge of Jesus. In other words, these are the people who are willing to go into the depths of the unknown to explore the possibilities of the example, character, and work of Jesus Christ. They are not just content to know of Him, they want to know *about* Him in a greater way. The Apostle Peter talks about such a person in his second epistle.

The Apostle Peter sets up the environment that must be present to come to the true knowledge of Jesus in chapter 1 of his second epistle. He tells us that it is through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus, our Lord that grace and peace will be multiplied to us. He informs us that according to the divine power of Christ, and through the knowledge of Him, we have been given all of the necessary elements that pertain to godliness and life, especially since we have escaped the corruption of the world. The qualities that ensure that we are not barren or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ are: faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity (love).

Notice how knowledge is sandwiched between virtue (character) and temperance (self-control) in the qualities named by Peter. If character is absent in knowledge, a person will fail to handle it properly. Knowledge applied in a proper way becomes wisdom. Therefore, knowledge that is void of character or wisdom will have no discipline or temperance to learn the lessons of life. Learning lessons points to experiencing a matter first hand, which reminds us that tribulation works patience in us, and patience allows us to experience the source behind the hope of life (*Romans 5:3-4*).

This brings us to the subject of *knowing* God. In order to know God, you must personally experience Him. Clearly, experience is not a matter of having a general awareness of Him, you must actually personally encounter Him. You may have information about Him, but information has no life to it. You may have facts about Him, but they can lack dimension. You may have ideas about Him, but they are often limited to personal conclusions or religious experiences.

You may possess certain truths about God, but without the Spirit to connect these truths, they will not take on any real depth that has the capacity to bring transformation and change. You may understand the principles of God, but if you fail to walk them out, they can become points of spiritual darkness and judgment.

The difference between knowing of or about God and knowing Him is *revelation*. Revelation points to an unveiling or uncovering of a matter. Scripture speaks of a mystery that has been veiled in the Old Testament by carnal ordinances until the time of reformation would allow it to be revealed (*Hebrews 9:9-10*). Granted, there was a figure present when it came to these practices that cast a shadow, but the outline was obscured from the physical eyes and proved to be in the far distance to those who could spiritually see this shadow (*Colossians 2:14-17*).

Twenty centuries ago this mystery was unveiled in a person by the name of Jesus Christ. However, the mystery was still veiled by His humanity. People could physically see, hear, touch, and encounter Jesus, but for many they still could not recognize who He was. His identity remained veiled to many individuals in the following generations to the present one. Although the fullness of deity was present in bodily form, it still remained veiled. His ministry as the Anointed One became a point of great contention, and His work as Savior became a point of mocking and unbelief.

How is Christ unveiled to the believer? The Apostle Paul answers this question in *Colossians 3:3-4*: “*How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery (as I wrote afore in few words, By which, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.*” It is the Holy Spirit who unveils the reality of Christ. He is the one who leads us into all truth about Jesus. It is through revelation that the Holy Spirit brings reality to the Person of Jesus. Instead of being a concept, belief, idea, or theology, He actually becomes living when the Holy Spirit connects scriptural knowledge about Jesus to the reality of the depths of His infinite, righteous character, the heights of His incredible redemption and ways, and the width of His unwavering commitment that brought Him into complete submission to the will and plan of the Father.

Without the revelation of the Spirit of God, the Written Word remains a point of knowledge that proves to be lifeless and powerless to impact our lives. The Apostle Paul makes reference to this in *2 Corinthians 3:6*: “*Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament, not of the letter, but of the spirit; for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.*”

Knowledge alone gives us a limited understanding of Jesus on an intellectual level. However, such understanding becomes stagnant because it never really develops past what it understands or manages to get into the spirit to bring forth life. Revelation brings us to a greater understanding about Jesus. Such understanding is not limited by some intellectual conclusion, but is open ended to explore greater aspects about His character, example and work. Knowledge involves processing facts into information, but revelation begins with faith that allows the Holy Spirit to unveil Christ in greater ways. In fact, real faith begins at the point of darkness where a person has come to the end of personal understanding about a matter, but still chooses to believe and trust the character of God through such darkness. It is at the point of such faith, that the light of revelation often breaks through the darkness to unveil greater depths and truths about the Lord, making Him real and personal.

The challenge with revelation is that it serves as a great test. When the unveiling of Christ occurs, a person must make a determination to apply it or walk it out. If an individual fails to properly apply or walk out the revelation, it will turn into the darkness of unbelief. However, if a person assimilates the revelation into their lives, he or she will become more enlightened concerning God and His ways.

The writer of *Hebrews* gives us this insight about being spiritually enlightened in *Hebrews 6:4-5*. He actually identifies four aspects about this particular stage of understanding. He said that those enlightened have tasted of the heavenly gift. To taste something is to experience the

flavor, texture and smell. As for the heavenly gift, it points to experiencing, or living, the life of Christ in us, which is eternal, complete and satisfying.

The next aspect of the enlightened state is that a person has also been made a partaker of the Holy Spirit. To partake of the Holy Spirit implies one has participated with the Spirit to clearly establish this gift of life as they walk it out by faith. Such participation also points to experience.

The next aspect of this state of insight is that the person has tasted of the good Word of God. In other words, a person has partaken of or assimilated the milk (doctrine) and meat (righteousness) of the Word to ensure maturity. Once again, such a person is experiencing the washing of the Word to bring forth cleansing, the sharpness of it to penetrate and expose the inner man, the hammer of it to tear down that which is unacceptable, and the fire of it to purge that which is deemed unholy.

Finally, a person who has been enlightened has also tasted the power of the age or world to come. In other words, such people have experienced the promises of God, as they have kept their focus on their real destination of that which is heavenly and eternal. Notice how those who are enlightened have experienced God in different ways.

The question is do you simply possess knowledge of spiritual truths or have you been enlightened by the life of such truths through revelation? Do you know of Jesus or are you striving to come to the knowledge or understanding of Him as far as His Person, work and glory? Have you settled for your present comfortable, controllable conclusions, or beliefs about Him, or are you striving to always come higher in Him to explore Him in His glory in order to reach down into His depths to discover His immutable character and ways? In summation, has the living Son of God been revealed to you?

CONDEMNATION OR CONVICTION?

We are clearly living in precarious times, but they are also exciting because we are watching Bible prophecy come true. *Hebrews 12:27* tells us that everything will be shaken that can be shaken. At this moment, the financial markets of the world, as well as our nation are being shaken. As I listen to the news, I realize, as a Christian, it is time to take stock in where my confidence lies, as well as my heavenly citizenship, and my eternal destination. The Bible tells us the things of the world are all temporary, but what I possess as a Christian is eternal. Such consideration allows me to once again confidently cling to the source of my hope, the immovable Rock of Jesus. Regardless of the dark times in which we live, Jesus will never change no matter how much the world may shake. He is the same today, as He was yesterday and will be tomorrow.

As Christians, we know that we are in this world, but we are not to belong or be part of it. We are to be strangers to the ways of the world, and pilgrims in regard to the influences and philosophies of the world (*1 Peter 2:11*). Being strangers and pilgrims in this present age points to not only the type of attitude we need towards the world, but how we are to walk in it. As strangers, we will not be attracted to the fleshly ways of the world, and as pilgrims we will not only separate from the ways of the world, but we will live separate from those ways.

Because of the times in which we live, it is vital we examine our walk. Since we are walking through this world, we must consider how it is affecting us. After all, there are the cares of the world that can make us anxious, and will choke out the power of God's Word. There are the entanglements of the world that have the capacity of causing us to get caught up with its endless affairs and causes. There are the ways of the world that will cause tribulation, the spirit of the world that works within those who are disobedient, and the god of this world that blinds people to the light or life of the Gospel (*Matthew 13:22; John 16:33; 2 Corinthians 4:2-6; Ephesians 2:2; 2 Timothy 3-4*).

As we consider the type of attitude we must have towards the world, we must recognize that our attitude towards it will determine how we walk in our present age. Walk also points to how we live or the type of lifestyle we develop along the way. In summation, our walk points to how we are going to actually live out our life in this present world.

The Bible tells us we will operate according to one of the two spiritual laws that are in operation. These laws are identified by the Apostle Paul in *Romans 8:2*: "*For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.*" To walk according to our life in Christ means to walk after the Spirit. To walk in the law of sin and death means to walk according to the flesh.

The Apostle Paul summarizes the conditions that these two walks will produce in *Romans 8:1*: "*There is, therefore no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*"

Our walk will also determine what we reap in our life. *Galatians 6:7-8*: "*Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.*"

There is a clear distinction concerning the two ways people are walking out their lives. Those who walk according to the Spirit will reap everlasting life, but those who walk according to their fleshly dictates will reap the corruption of death.

This brings us to the state in which we will walk out these different lives. We will either walk in a state of condemnation or we will walk according to a state of perpetual conviction. It is important to understand these two states, for they will clearly be identified by the fruit that they produce in our lives. Obviously, people are not only choosing the quality of life they will experience, but how that life will be expressed to others.

Let us consider the first state of condemnation. Condemnation first reminds us of the Law. When we walk according to the flesh, we are brought under the jurisdiction of the Law of God. This Law has declared us transgressors, guilty of breaking it, and, therefore, subject to the penalty of death.

In a sense, people who are walking in condemnation are the walking dead. They are spiritually dead towards that which can give them life. As a result, they have no hope, but only the fearful reality that eventually their death sentence will be carried out by the court of heaven. Although they may be experiencing certain aspects of the world, it all represents that which is corrupt.

Corruption points to that which has been contaminated by immorality, tainted by that which is depraved, perverted by dishonesty, and ultimately considered undesirable and putrid. This invading corruption points to that which will prove to be rotten, or decomposed to the core as it is brought forth into the light of the heavenly life that has been made available through Christ.

When we speak of the dishonesty of corruption, we must note that it points to the darkness of delusion. People who walk according to the flesh walk in delusion about the darkness they are walking in. Every aspect of this darkness contains the ways of death. There is no life that can be found in any of it. In the end, as they gulp to partake of the cup of worldly pursuits, they will simply end up tasting the bitterness left by vanity. They will blindly feel their way through this world according to their fleshly dictates and experience, leaving them in the wake of despair of guilt. They may cling to the small glimmer of hope the world offers, only to discover that it is fading into the abyss of hopelessness.

Although people walk in the tormenting and disappointing delusion of the false light this present age promises, they still prefer its darkness to the life of God. The reason for such preference is that they prefer their works of darkness. These works serve their purpose, as well as justifying their sin.

The second state people can walk in is the perpetual state of the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Conviction works from two premises. You have the conviction of guilt about sin. In fact, in this type of conviction you will actually be agreeing or taking God's side about being guilty in regard to trespassing His Law or breaking His covenant. We know that it is the Holy Spirit that brings such conviction upon our conscience with the intent of bringing us to repentance. It is only at the place of repentance that we can seek forgiveness or pardon from God by confessing our sin. Upon our confession, we must believe by faith that we have been forgiven, and that our conscience now stands cleansed.

As you consider the difference between condemnation and conviction, you will see that in condemnation, there is no hope. You have been judged and in a matter of time you will actually taste the judgment of it. Conviction is for the purpose of bringing a person to a place of restoration. When you think about how many people prefer to walk in condemnation to maintain their works of darkness, you begin to realize how foolishness is truly bound in the heart of people.

The second type of conviction involves attitudes that are established by a deep sense of fervor about a matter. This fervor results in actions that are compelled by passion and assurance. The Holy Spirit is the One who brings a powerful conviction to our spirits about spiritual matters. Such a conviction has to do with righteousness. The Gospel of John tells us

that the Holy Spirit reproves us of sin, of righteousness and of judgment (*John 16:7-11*). Clearly, the conviction of the Holy Spirit reveals sin, establishes what is considered righteousness, and shows that judgment has already been pronounced on Satan.

At this point people might wonder why the Holy Spirit has been entrusted with the responsibility of conviction. The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit serves as our witness. As Christians, we have two main witnesses to confirm a matter. They are God's Word and His Spirit. The Word of God tells us how to live according to the character of God. It brings a clear contrast between light and darkness. When we encounter or are challenged by the Word of God, the Holy Spirit will take it, and impart the intent or truth of it to our spirits. This not only validates or confirms the Word, but it will also bring forth the compelling conviction as to how we are to handle the truth to ensure right standing before God in our Christian walk.

Clearly, the Spirit must be the one who convicts us of a matter. I am sure you have experienced the harsh judgments of other people who are trying to be your conscience or be the Holy Spirit in a matter. These individuals come to you out of so-called "concern" about a particular action, belief or handling of a situation on your part. They voice their "concern" with the intent of stirring up your conscience in order to compel you to line up to their way of thinking. However, you know they are not your conscience, and that there are matters they are not aware of in regard to the situation. Nevertheless, you must discern or make sure that the Holy Spirit is not trying to bring conviction to you through this person.

If the Holy Spirit does not bring confirmation to the person's "concern," you can at that time consider it to be simply the person's opinion, thereby, disregarding it. The problem that arises from this development is that the individuals who are "concerned" often become insulted that you did not properly regard their instruction or warning. Due to pride, it can prove to be hard for them to accept that the "concern" they had came out of vain imaginations, and that it would not be proper for them to insist or force their particular reality on anyone.

The reason that Christians cannot accept any other conviction other than from the Spirit of God is because the Holy Spirit prepares and enables them to make the necessary change in order to come into line with righteousness. On the other hand, a person who is forcing personal convictions on others will simply be burdening these individuals with indifferent demands or requirements that will leave them feeling oppressed.

Since the Holy Spirit is the one who must bring conviction to us in regards to the quality of our walk, we are commanded to walk *after* the Spirit, be *led* by the Spirit and to walk *in* the Spirit. Although we could clearly exchange the intent or principle of these three decisive responses, they do present a picture that reveals the type of emphasis, attitude and approach we must adopt towards our walk.

We are told to follow *after* righteousness. Clearly, as we walk after the Spirit according to righteousness, we will find ourselves coming into submission to the *leading* of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit wants to lead us by way of revelation into greater heights in Jesus, as well as enabling us to experience the depths of His abiding presence in and upon our lives. Once He leads us to these inner places of growth and communion, we will discover what it means to truly walk *in* the Spirit concerning God's will and purpose for our lives.

The main question we must ask ourselves is how do we avail ourselves to this walk? The first thing we must do is become open to the work of the Spirit. This openness involves taking on the disposition of lowliness and the attitude of meekness. Once we become sensitive to the Spirit, we can begin to walk *after* Him in obedience to the ways of righteousness. As we follow Him, His fruit will be developed in our lives as we become submissive to His gentle *leading*.

Godly submission gives way to that which is greater for the benefit of God's kingdom. As we give way to the Spirit, He begins to work the life of Jesus in us in greater ways. The deeper He goes the more that Jesus' life and likeness will be lifted up in our life for all to see. As the life of Jesus is being established in us in greater measure, we will finally come to the place where we will walk *in* the Spirit according to the life of Jesus in us.

Because of the Spirit, the Christian walk is full and complete. There is nothing lacking in it. The Holy Spirit will go before us in preparation, will allow us to walk in His leading to ensure spiritual growth, and in the end we will come into step with Him to be identified to the future glory that awaits us.

What about your walk? Are you walking in condemnation or are you walking according to the conviction of the Holy Spirit? We know that the first type of walk will result in death, but the second walk will result in possessing the fullness of our heavenly inheritance. If you are not sure, consider the fruits coming out of your life. They will identify where you have been walking.

8

DUTY OR INTENT?

As most of you know, before the holidays I was writing a series of articles that would serve as a means to disciple people into the ways of God. Now that the holidays are over, I am going to resume this important series.

One of the biggest challenges we have in Christianity is that we make it a matter of rules and regulations, rather than a lifestyle. In other words, Christianity is a life that is to be walked out through application of God's truths, and obedience to His Word.

As I consider Christians, I realize that some of them have a lopsided understanding about the Christian life. This out-of-balance perspective has to do with majoring in minors, and downplaying what our real focus must be as believers. Jesus put it best when He used the illustration of straining at a gnat while swallowing a camel (*Matthew 23:24*). People actually miss the whole point of a matter because of the wrong emphasis they put on it. Instead of understanding the intent, purpose or principle behind something, people have simply made it into a religious duty that lacks real substance or meaning. In fact, this is how you kill the intent or spirit of God's truths, making them dead-letter.

A good example of missing the whole point can be found in the debate surrounding the Sabbath. Have you ever noticed how people who are caught up with this issue get stuck on one day, and it becomes their center focus or issue? Yet, Scripture is clear, observing one particular day will not save a person from the judgment of hell. Rather, salvation comes when a person believes upon the Lord Jesus Christ and walks in obedience to His commands.

However, this conflict and unscriptural emphasis on the Sabbath is not new. It is just an example of how far off people can get from the center of what is important. In fact, the Sabbath was the big issue of Jesus' day. It was one of the reasons the religious leadership justified their hatred and condemnation of Him.

It is important to understand how we can get off of center by putting the wrong emphasis on a matter. Since the Sabbath causes much conflict, we can actually use it as a good illustration as to how easy it is for people to miss the point, and emphasize something in a wrong light, causing untold confusion for many. As we consider this issue, consider what other subjects can fall into this same category.

The Sabbath is confusing because it is also one of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments pointed to the moral obligation people had towards God and others. In the past I have concluded that the fourth commandment of the Sabbath had to do with the moral responsibility we have towards God. But, after studying the Sabbath, I realize that it is really a moral obligation that was directed at one's personal responsibility as to maintaining his or her own spiritual well-being. Since it is directed at the betterment of our well-being, I had to conclude that the first three commandments were in regard to our moral responsibility towards God, the fourth commandment of the Sabbath has to do with a personal obligation to ensure a right environment in our spiritual life, and the last six commandments were in relationship to our moral responsibility towards others.

Jesus confirmed that the Sabbath was made for the benefit of man, and that He was the Lord of the Sabbath (*Matthew 12:1-12*). In other words, the Sabbath was subject to Him, not the other way around. It is also interesting to note, that when it came to the commandments that

Jesus emphasized that we are to observe, the commandment regarding the Sabbath was not mentioned. (See *Matthew 19:17-19*.)

It is important to realize that the Law of God had a purpose. The main purpose was to show man that he was a sinner or transgressor against the Law, and of his need for Jesus to save him (*Romans 3:20; Galatians 3:24*). The Law was made up of testimonies (serve as witnesses), statutes (ordinances or rituals), precepts (doctrines), judgments (required discernment and separation to ensure justice or righteousness), and commandments (moral obligations). In some cases, the requirements in God's Law were applied to one or more category. For example, the Sabbath was both a commandment (moral obligation) and a statute (ordinance or ritual) because it involved a regular ceremonial practice on the part of the people.

This brings us to a very important question: are Christians required to keep this particular commandment and ordinance? The only way I can answer this question is yes and no. In other words, as His people we must keep the principle of the commandment, but we are not required to keep the ordinance of it. Principle points to the intent of the Sabbath, which as we will see, points to an actual place of rest, while ordinance points to a duty to recognize a certain day in which we are to rest.

In order to properly understand how this issue affects our lives, we must study the Sabbath from the premise of principle in order to bring proper balance to it as a practice or ordinance. To start from the right premise, we first must come to an understanding of the principle of the Sabbath. To do this, we must go back to the very beginning of creation. God spent six days creating the world. On the seventh day He rested or ceased from all work. In other words, He came to a complete place of rest. Keep in mind that He rested from all work in order to enjoy the satisfying fruit of His labor. He said of it that it was good or delightful and pleasurable to Him. He also ceased from all work because it was finished or brought to completion; therefore, it was a time to be refreshed. For God to set something apart for His pleasure or delight is the same as sanctifying it to Himself. He actually distinguished it because it stood separate from all the other days that were marked by His activities and work surrounding creation (*Genesis 1:31-2:3*).

God's example establishes the principle of the Sabbath. It points to resting in terms of enjoying, recognizing or partaking of the fruits of our labors, or ceasing from all laboring because it has been completed, marking the time for being refreshed in those labors.

Therefore, the spiritual principle of the Sabbath for His people comes down to enjoying, recognizing and partaking of the life that God is bringing forth. In order to enjoy such a life as His people, we must cease from laboring with our daily tasks and responsibilities. To cease from such work in order to rest in the bountiful, satisfying blessings that God has brought forth is to set apart, sanctify or distinguish a day in which our only focus is to come into a place of rest before our loving Creator. Again, the principle points to coming into a place of rest by sanctifying or setting a day apart to do so. Therefore, the principle of rest points to the fact that any day can be a Sabbath day or a day of rest.

This now brings us to the commandment and ordinance of the Sabbath. It is important to point out that before God commanded the Jewish people to observe the practice of the Sabbath, the principle of it was already in place.

It is also important to establish the foundation for the ceremonial practice of the Sabbath. The Hebrews had been in slavery to Egypt for over four centuries. Their bondage had become so great that they cried out to God. Through Moses, God delivered them out of the bondage of Egypt. Keep in mind, when people are in bondage, they have no freedom to worship God. No doubt, in their slavery, the Jewish people had no days off to rest or regard their spiritual heritage or identity as a people.

Hence enters the covenant of the Law in which the practice of the Sabbath was clearly outlined. God established a Law for the people of Israel with the intent of setting them apart from the influence and practices of pagan nations. However, one of the principles they had to learn after being enslaved to the idolatrous and pagan ways of Egypt was how to come into a

place of true rest before their God, so they could worship Him and enjoy the life He was ordaining for them.

Exodus 16:23-30 clearly shows us that observing the seventh day as the Sabbath was not commanded or ordained as a practice until it was specifically given to Israel after their deliverance out of Egypt. We are told in *Deuteronomy 5:14-15* that the children of Israel were to remember the Sabbath as a means to remind them that they were slaves in Egypt. The word “remember” points to the seventh day serving as a memorial to the children of Israel concerning their past slavery. The reason for this reminder was to ensure that they would maintain their life of worship and service to Jehovah God. If they observed His holy Law, they would ensure their spiritual liberty, as well as the integrity of worship and service to the one true God of heaven.

Clearly, the practice of the Sabbath was to remind the children of Israel of their past slavery in order for them to come into a place of rest to enjoy the rich life they had in God. Therefore, the seventh day was to serve as a sign for each following generation of the people of Israel that the Lord had not only sanctified a day of rest, but that He also set them apart as a people for His purpose (*Exodus 31:13*).

Like circumcision, the Sabbath was to serve as a visible sign for the people of Israel. They were to keep the Sabbath to remind them of who they were, and what their purpose was in the midst of this world. They were to stand separate as a special people that belonged to Jehovah God.

This brings us up to date. Someone has put forth a challenge to prove the Sabbath is no longer the seventh day or Saturday. First of all, we assume the seventh day to be Saturday according to the Roman calendar, but does it truly correspond with God's seventh day? Does the seventh day make the Sabbath or does the intent of the Sabbath set the seventh day apart? In other words, what are we truly recognizing when observing the Sabbath, the day or the practice? There is a difference. If we strictly recognize the day, it becomes a duty, but if we approach the seventh day with the intent of observing the Sabbath, we will ensure the integrity of it. Keep in mind, the Sabbath points to an event or a place of rest, while the seventh day was simply the day that was set apart by God to observe the rest. Therefore, we must put a distinction between the practice and the day. To prove a point, the Jewish celebrations were marked by a Sabbath or a day of rest. These days of remembrance or celebration did not always fall on the seventh day. This is why you read this in *Colossians 2:16*: “*Let no man, therefore, judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days.*” Notice that the Sabbath days are plural, not singular. Here it proves any day can be designated as a day of rest if the principle is clearly in place.

As Christians, are we to observe the Sabbath? Yes, we are to observe the principle of the Sabbath to ensure our own spiritual well-being. In other words, we are to come into a place of rest before the Lord to honor, worship, meditate upon, and clearly consider Him. Here is the next question. Must we observe Saturday as our Sabbath? The answer is no.

First of all, observing the Sabbath on the seventh day was a specific sign for the children of Israel to keep before them. I don't know about you, but I am a Gentile, and my relatives were not held in bondage to Egypt. Granted, I was a captive to sin, but the sign that identifies my liberty is not one specific day, but that of a changed life in Christ.

Secondly, observing the Sabbath on the seventh day was part of the ceremonial Law of the old covenant. In other words it was an ordinance, ritual or duty. The ceremonial part of the Law was blotted out by an establishment of a new covenant (*Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 8:6-13*). The reason for the rituals being blotted out was because they were to serve as a shadow of another completed work, the work of redemption. This work was completed on the cross. Jesus even confirmed this when He stated: “*It is finished*” (*John 19:30*). Once the work of redemption was completed, the rest that was made available to those who embraced His redemption was far more excellent than the actual practice of the Sabbath.

Jesus is the fulfillment and completion of the intent or principle of the Law. Fulfilling the intent of the Law establishes those believers who are hid in Him in righteousness before God (*Colossians 3:3*). *Romans 10:4* confirms this: “*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth.*” At the end of the Law is Jesus. This brings us to the more excellent rest for the Christian. It is not a day, but rather the actual Person of Jesus that we can now find our real rest in. He stated in *Matthew 11:28-29*: “*Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*” (Emphasis added.)

As you can see, the seventh day was ordained to mark a day of rest for Israel, but Jesus serves as our place of rest. Our rest is part of a new, everlasting covenant that is far more excellent than the old. The new covenant reminds us that ceremonial practices will not distinguish us. However, as Christians we must become identified with Jesus in every way. Jesus was in the grave on the Sabbath, but arose on the eighth day, the first day of the week. Since Christians were to be identified to the new covenant, the first believers met on the first day of the week to commemorate, celebrate and worship their God (*John 20:19; 20:26; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2*).

Christians must learn how to discern between that which demands lifeless duty and that which requires intent in order to ensure life and integrity in the matters of God. The great push for many is to come under the burdens produced by the lifeless duty of religion. Lifeless religion cannot produce life, but instead, produces only self-righteousness and despair, for such duty becomes too heavy a burden to bear.

I don't know about you, but I do not want to settle for the shadows, when I can possess what is real. As a disciple of Jesus, we follow Him into a new life. In order to follow Him, we must beware of the endless detours that are constantly being presented in the name of religion and truth.

Next month, I will be sharing with you what brings balance between the intent of the Law and the Christian life. Meanwhile, heed the Apostle Paul's warning in *Galatians 5:1*: “*Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty with which Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.*”

9

TOLERANCE OR CHARITY?

Last month I talked about the intent of something. Intent points to motivation, approach, and fruits. *Motivation* has to do with personal agendas or the emphasis put on a matter. *Approach* is the manifestation of the attitude in which a person does something. *Fruits* are not just a matter of what an individual does, but the type of spirit in which he or she operates. Ultimately, intent has to do with the type of inward environment that will exist in the soul of man.

Without the right spirit or motivation, the intent will have a wrong attitude behind it. For example, take John and James in *Luke 9:51-56*. They felt righteous and justified in wanting to call fire down on the people of Samaria for not receiving Jesus. However, Jesus' intent for traveling by way of Samaria was not to preach the Gospel, but to go on to Jerusalem where He would ransom humankind back from the claims of sin and death. John and James were not mindful of Jesus' intent. They were trying to appear noble about taking personal offence for Him. Jesus told them that they did not know what spirit they were of. Their intent was not righteous but fleshly. They lacked the vantage point of God's will and purpose.

What does it mean to line up to the intent of heaven to ensure that I am walking in step with Jesus? First, there must be a right motivation or spirit. Since the spirit establishes attitude, the attitude must be right if we are to walk out the intent of a matter correctly. For the next couple of months we will deal with the motivation, and on the third month, we will follow up the two articles with the way in which we must walk out a matter.

Since motivation determines environment, we must consider the present environment we live in as far as the world. The environment will reveal not only the spiritual temperature of this nation, but establish the type of battle Christians must wage to maintain the integrity, life or spirit behind their Christian walk and testimony. A good example of this is the kind of battle Christians who live in Muslim countries have to personally wage to maintain the integrity of their Christian life.

The environment that exists in America is that of being politically correct. In such an environment, there are no absolutes. This means that to advocate any type of absolute classifies a person as being narrow-minded, dogmatic, contrary, and out of touch with reality. In such a society the people are demanded to exercise tolerance towards diversity, while strong moral convictions are considered hateful, prejudicial, and as standing in the way of everyone coming together into a one-world community. In fact, in a politically correct society tolerance is to be maintained towards every type of lifestyle and philosophy except in the case of fundamental Christianity.

In a letter to the editor in our local paper, a man actually voiced the philosophy of such a society when he referred to getting rid of fundamental Christians. After all, those who advocate and stand for righteousness will not leave people in their preferred delusion that all will be well in a world where the concept and teachings of a holy God and His Law are eventually wiped out, allowing for everyone to live in peace and harmony.

Clearly, there has been a powerful move in this nation to obliterate the witness and testimony of the God of the Bible, along with His holy Law. His Law reveals the state of darkness in regard to people's preferences for wickedness, and as a result, these individuals loathe such an intrusion into their delusion. They resent being identified as transgressors who

are dead in their sin, and that they have no real means outside of Jesus' redemption by which their transgressions are paid for without it costing them everything, including their very souls.

There was a woman who came to us because her demons tormented her. Clearly, Satan possessed her. After contending with her demons for many hours, she admitted she was a witch who willfully married Satan. When asked why she chose the way of Satan, she confessed that she became angry with God when she found out she could not just live any old way. We eventually discovered that she simply wanted relief from the torment of the demons, but she did not want deliverance from the power they had over her life.

Good is considered evil in a tolerant society because it will not adjust to any compromise, and evil is considered good because its darkness placates, justifies, and condones all wicked philosophies, preferences, attitudes, and actions. Consider what the prophet Isaiah says about this type of state in *Isaiah 5:20*: "*Woe unto them who call evil, good, and good, evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.*" Woe in this text means to express pain or grief. Its attitude is expressed best as "Oh, alas, I must face my day of reckoning, and experience the pain and grief of the bitter cup of my ways. Woe is me!" These words are because the Lord's vineyard, Israel, was in a state of utter spiritual ruin due to the people's unholy compromise and agreement with the pagans and their gods. In *Isaiah 5*, God actually pronounced six woes upon Israel. These woes were in relationship to those who refused to maintain the integrity of their spiritual inheritance as God's people. These people were described as wasting their lives drinking and partying, encouraging iniquity as a means to justify partaking of the vanity of this world, defining righteousness as being evil in order to embrace wickedness, considering themselves wise and prudent in being tolerant towards evil, and finding their strength and reality by partaking of that which is worldly.

Tolerance is the attitude advocated to bring about and ensure the state of political correctness. It is interesting to look this word up in the dictionary. It points out the obvious. A tolerant person will reveal a moderately good attitude towards diversity no matter how much he or she might disagree with it, and such a person can be most agreeable or show sympathy or indulgence towards apparent and disagreeable differences. However, the other meaning of the word tolerance has to do with enduring something that will prove to have unfavorable effects down the line. In other words, tolerance allows something that is unfavorable to a healthy environment to grow in that environment without any opposition.

The attitude of tolerance never has to be directed towards righteousness, because to do right and being right in a matter will not harm, defy or rip at the fiber or character of something. It is important to point out that tolerance never gives way or submits to what it disagrees with; rather, it simply allows something that is contrary and destructive to be without confrontation or challenge. In the majority of cases, such tolerance is nothing more than a mask that hides destruction, a cloak that hides pride, a robe that disguises the indifference of hatred and prejudice, and a covering that justifies dishonorable actions and practices.

This is why it is important to point out that the attitude of tolerance, which is being pushed upon our society, is for the main purpose of allowing the disease and ways of sin to have free reign in our society. This free reign will be able to express itself in any form, as well as grow without experiencing any opposition. Since sin is leaven, the sins that are advocated as normal, acceptable and righteous will have the capacity to consume and take over this nation. However, evil does have limitations. Eventually, wicked societies cave in on themselves because there is no substance or character left to maintain them, and/or they will be thoroughly judged by God.

Being in a tolerant society can cause Christians to become spiritually dull towards sin, compromise with the world and come into unholy agreements. This brings us to the battle that, as Christians, we must wage in this environment. We must choose to love the truth and hate what opposes, oppresses, and will ultimately destroy the souls of men. In summation, we must hate sin and wickedness. We know that righteous men such as Job possessed such hatred.

People think that by being tolerant towards that which opposes the righteous ways of God is a sign of love and wisdom. In a sense, tolerance is the world's substitution for godly love. However, as already pointed out, the lopsided tolerance that is being shoved on us is not love, but is the indifference of prejudice and hatred. Challenge the person who uses tolerance to hide and justify personal sin, and his or her indifference will express itself in unbridled hatred, something we witnessed during the recent presidential election.

Since February is the month in which we think about love, I want to take the next two months to talk about what the King James Version of the Bible refers to as charity. Charity, rather than love, is a good word to bring about a clearer picture of godly love. The reason for this is that the word love carries different emotional and sentimental connotations that will often cause a person to miss the intent of godly love. The word "charity" may also actually cause some to consider what the intent of this virtue is in regard to the Christian life.

The opposite of charity is pride. The attitude of the tolerance advocated in America is a disguise of pride. Pride is what motivates unregenerate people in their pursuits, passions and goals. Pride can serve as a premise, spirit, motive, attitude, look, feeling, and/or action. Likewise, charity should, and must, serve as Christians' premise, point of inspiration or motive, attitude, look, feeling, and action. Let us now consider how charity responds in each area.

The premise of pride is selfishness, but the premise of charity is *sacrifice* (*John 3:16*). Charity is willing to be sacrificial to ensure the spiritual well-being of others. This was the premise God came from when He gave His only begotten Son as a sacrifice. Because of His sacrifice, we now can embrace eternal life that is abundant, as well as a spiritual inheritance that awaits us in the next world. For Christians, the premise of charity will manifest itself as *selfless, consecrated service* in light of God's love.

The spirit motivating pride is the spirit of the world, which freely works within those who are disobedient. However, the spirit that should be compelling or constraining Christians is the *Holy Spirit*. The Spirit of God sheds abroad this incredible charity in our hearts. As this charity is worked into our lives by tribulations, patience, experience, and hope, we will express it through *joyful service* to God and others (*Deuteronomy 28:47; Romans 5:3-5; Ephesians 2:2*).

The attitude of pride is arrogance, but the attitude of charity is *meekness*. Meekness comes out of a state of humility, and is in subjection to the Holy Spirit. The truest form of charity displays humility and meekness in being sensitive to act in a way that is upright and beneficial on the behalf of others. For the Christian, such meekness expresses itself in doing *service that is honorable and upright*.

The look of pride is haughtiness, but the look of love is *compassion*. It is important to note the idea of "looking" is associated with how people intend to respond. Their response depends on how they actually see a matter in relationship to personal character, level of commitment, and the sense of responsibility they have towards others. Tolerance is actually a haughty indifference that often disguises itself with an outward show of sympathy. Granted, sympathy may show an emotional response, but it will remain indifferent when it comes to getting emotionally involved. On the other hand, compassion cannot ignore or remain indifferent to one who is truly in need or in trouble. This is why charity will rejoice only in the truth, and never in iniquity. It cannot remain indifferent to the destructive influences, workings and activities of sin upon the lives and relationships of people. Like the Good Samaritan, the look of compassion will cause one to do what he or she must do to help a person by making the necessary commitment to go the distance required. Such compassion will show itself in *service that completely identifies with, and enters into the plight of another*. This means making all personal resources available to help lift the burden of the individual who is in need or in trouble.

The feeling of pride is self-exaltation or an unrealistic feeling of euphoria because everything seems to be going the person's way; but such a feeling is temporary and fickle. However, the feeling of charity is *benevolence*. Benevolence is naturally kind; therefore, it is always ready to show kindness and gentleness in a situation. In fact, benevolence will never

stop to consider personal cost or inconvenience. As a result, benevolence expresses itself in committed, *sacrificial service* towards others.

The act of pride can express itself in good deeds tainted by selfishness, or it can come out in some form of cruelty such as indifference and mocking. The act of charity is *submission*. Godly submission gives way to that which is worthy of service for the benefit of the whole. Benefit in this text points to that which is good or moral. Such goodness will ensure the integrity of the service rendered, as well as the spiritual well-being of those who are being served. Regardless of the cost, submission considers all service to God as being *reasonable, or the least it can do* in light of the incredible charity God has shown each of us.

This brings us to the reality of this charity: it cannot be earned. Everything we receive from God is because each of us is a charitable case before the throne. Clearly, we are at the mercy of someone greater than we are, and worthy of devoted service. We all know that one day we will answer to Him for what type of service we have done in this body.

People can deny God exists, outlaw His Bible and moral Law, persecute and mock His servants, call His ways evil, and rage against His immovable truths about sin and salvation, but in the end each of these individuals will stand before this righteous God on a day of reckoning. Every lie will give way to truth, every form of opposition against Him will melt in fear, and every excuse will be silenced as His righteous Law is exalted as the true standard of justice. At this time, these people will be declared guilty and doomed.

My challenge to every Christian is that each of you must refuse to give in to the present, convenient attitude of tolerance in order to get along in this world. Rather, I want to encourage every one of you to fan the flame of your love for God, His truth and each other into a greater fire. My prayer is that this fire will burn up any residue that remains of your self-life in order to refine and enlarge the charity that is already present in your life. May you walk according to, in, and because of this eternal virtue. May it truly become your premise, motivation, attitude, look, feeling, and act in your life before God and your service to others on His behalf.

10

HYPOCRISY OR LOVE?

Last month I talked about having the right motivation. Man is either motivated by the love of God or he is motivated by pride. It is easy to discern between these two motivations. They have different emphasis, attitudes and approaches. Ultimately, these two different motivations will establish the environment or breeding ground that will determine the types of fruit that will be produced in the person's life and relationships.

In last month's article, I contrasted the difference between pride and God's charity or love. Such a contrast allows people to consider the type of breeding ground both of these motivations would produce in a person and in his or her relationships. As for pride, the best it can produce is tolerance and self-serving works. However, in the case of charity it will produce quality devotion and service that will bring glory to God.

Last month I used the word "charity" to set up the right premise concerning godly love. This month I am going to use the word "love." Charity represents the state of being in which all matters are considered and approached. "State," in this text, points to the inward condition of our disposition, which is comprised of spirit, attitudes and prevailing mood. On the other hand, love points to something that is alive and active. In fact, love is the living active fruit of godly charity. The fruit of love manifests itself in joy towards the truth of His Word, peace with God, long-suffering towards others, gentleness in approach, goodness in practice, faithfulness in service, meekness in attitude, and self-control in conduct. It is the active fruit of charity that fulfills the intent of God's moral Law. Since love fulfills the Law of God, the Apostle Paul stated that there is no law that is able to judge or bring accusation against a life that bears such fruit (*Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:22-23*).

A good example between charity and love can be observed in God. In John's first epistle, he tells us that God is love. In other words, God is a living, active revelation of what love is in action. Such active love is always ready to express itself in charitable ways to others. For example, God showed charity towards us by way of mercy and grace when He gave His only begotten Son as a means to ransom us.

Since each of us is born with a selfish disposition, we do not have such active love operating in us. The flesh's definition of love comes down to how something or someone makes it feel about itself, or whether it stirs up sensual passion or emotional sentiment. In a sense, the flesh often identifies it as love when something creates an unrealistic, euphoric environment or expectation as to the happiness something can possibly bring to a relationship based on present feelings. However, such fickle love is based on outward stimulation, not on an inward condition that already exists. Because of this fleshly condition, Christians must first allow a state of charity to be developed within their inner man. Such a state is completely opposite of selfishness, but must be developed before there can be any genuine expression of godly love. From a charitable state, Christians are able to show God the love He deserves, as well as express such love to others through acceptable attitudes and service.

The active seeds of godly love must take root in our hearts. It must grow and develop as we take on the essence and likeness of Jesus Christ. As we take on the mind of Christ, and give way to His life, love will be the natural response to a matter. We will be able to speak the truth in love, as well as strive to increase the function, growth and health of the Body in love. As saints

of the Most High, we will begin to serve and do His will from a heart of love. It is from the heart of love that all issues of life will be regarded (*Proverbs 4:23; Romans 5:5; Ephesians 4:15-16; 6:5-7*).

This brings us to a very important truth concerning our Christian life. Godly love is what makes something genuine and real. What does not come from the heart of love, regardless of whether it is attitude, deeds or conduct, will be considered hypocrisy. Hypocrites are big pretenders or actors. They give a false impression about a matter so they can look a certain way. However, pretending about a matter is not a true presentation, if you are not what you are presenting. For example, a person can present the appearance of love, but if he or she lacks it, then he or she is being a hypocrite. Such outward acts are mere pretenses, illusions, or imitations of what is real. Clearly, hypocrisy simply tries to create the same reality as that which it is trying to imitate, but there will be no spirit or life to it.

A good example of religious piety that was nothing more than an act were the Pharisees in Jesus' day. Jesus referred to them as hypocrites or simply actors acting a religious part. Behind the self-righteous masks, religious robes, and empty words and platitudes were tombs of dead men's bones. The stench of the decay of their dead religion had long dissipated, leaving the silent vacuum of the stifling empty darkness that had engulfed their lifeless ordinances and activities. Jesus stated that all these religious leaders could do was make converts to their hypocrisy, causing these converts to be two-fold the children of hell or destruction.

Due to the affects of sin upon our lives, we all have the potential to be hypocrites in our Christian walk. Whether we become practicing hypocrites depends on what decisions we make concerning our walk. If, as Christians, we settle for an outward religious façade that hides the real essence of any deviant character, selfish attitudes or self-centered moods, we will become nothing more than hypocrites. If we play the emotional or religious games to present a righteous appearance, rather than become godly in our lives, we will be nothing more than practicing hypocrites or religious actors.

The active fruit of godly love in our lives is what will make us genuine in our Christian walk. This is why the Apostle Paul made this statement in *1 Corinthians 12:31*: "*But covet earnestly the best gifts; and yet show I unto you a more excellent way.*" An important word in this Scripture is the word "way." The Apostle Paul agreed we could all pursue after and operate in spiritual gifts, but what he wanted each of us to understand is that there is a more excellent way in which to walk out the Christian life that will prove to be beneficial to everyone. He was saying if you do not walk in this excellent way that the gifts you may operate with will have no impact or significance.

We each are walking according to a particular way of doing things. In fact, our ways or terms seem clean in our own eyes. However, in many cases, most people are simply walking according to that which appeases and honors their self-life. Granted, it seems right to them, but it is still motivated by selfishness. Unbeknown to them, these people will naturally pursue that which will feed their high opinion of self, and will give way to that which brings them temporary satisfaction. However, God's ways are higher. And, if we fail to come to terms with His way of doing things, we will err in our hearts about the issues of life, as well as fail to enter into the place of rest where we will experience personal contentment, spiritual satisfaction, and victory over the present age in which we are living. (*Hebrews 3:10, 19*)

In *1 Corinthians 13*, the Apostle Paul described the way in which we must walk, that of love. In the state of charity, love will be the natural response to a situation. It will not be something we have to think about, because it will be present and active to respond in an honorable and upright way. Let us now consider how active love works and responds.

Commitment: Godly love is actually a commitment to do right, or be honorable in attitude, approach and conduct. For example, once reality challenges a married couple's euphoria or expectations concerning their relationship, they must make a commitment to stay true to each other in spite of the challenges, disappointments or disillusionment they may feel towards one

another or their relationship. Commitment is what makes love responsible to do what is right regardless of what is going on. This is why we are instructed to love God with all our mind, heart, soul, and strength. Clearly, we have to make a commitment to be responsible in our relationship with God by making Him the focus of our lives so we can walk in the way He has provided. We do this by being committed to direct the intents and affections of our hearts towards Him. We must also commit our souls to take on Jesus' disposition, and out of love for Him, all of our strength must come into total subjection to the Holy Spirit to ensure its integrity in service to Him.

Faithful: Since godly love is committed, it will also prove to be faithful to God in all it does. Faithfulness is the main emphasis in godly love. The reason for this emphasis is that faithfulness will naturally require a person to be responsible to see a matter through regardless of the cost. This is why the Apostle Paul made this statement about active love: *"Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7)*. Faithfulness must be present in three areas to ensure purity and endurance in a matter.

The first area faithfulness must be present in is motive. If a person is faithful in his or her motives, he or she will not allow self to condone, justify or qualify any thought, approach or act that would compromise his or her responsibility. Godly love will always demand that as Christians we are always faithful to offer the best that we have to ensure that a matter is carried out in a most excellent way for the glory of God.

The second area faithfulness must be present in is our emotions. We must be faithful to not let emotions dictate what constitutes reality. We must rein in the momentum of the thoughts and desires of our emotions, discipline their focus, and direct their affections in order to emotionally land. It is only after people land emotionally that they can be faithful to discern if they are of a right mind towards a matter. Mind points to attitude and prevailing mood. It is only after people emotionally land that they can change their attitude towards something, as well as kick out any prevailing mood that is contrary to the excellent way of love. Once people are of the right mind, they can faithfully come into line with their charitable state in order to properly express love.

The third area of faithfulness has to do with behavior. The only way people can be faithful in their behavior is if they consecrate their bodies to be faithful. Faithfulness that comes out of consecrated lives in God's kingdom expresses itself in obedience and service. This is why Jesus stated if we truly love Him, we will obey Him. He also stated that people would know we were His disciples because we have the same love for one another.

Sacrificial: Godly love is sacrificial. Jesus put sacrificial love in this text in *John 15:12-14*: *"This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you."* Love that has reached the pinnacle expression of selfless sacrifice proves to be a perfect love in motive, attitude and conduct.

Agreement: Jesus stated that if we have sacrificial love, we would know what it means to be friends. True friends have a special bonding or agreement. Godly love will submit to that which is worthy, and show itself honorable as it prefers the well-being of others over itself. Agreement is what causes oneness or like-mindedness about a matter. After all, if people are coming from the same premise because they are motivated by love, they will always be able to come into agreement about a situation.

Do you possess such active love? Without such love, you will not be able to walk out sacrificial service. Love must be at the basis of all we do as Christians. In fact, it walks hand in hand with all the godly virtues. Next month we are going to talk about one of the Christian virtues that love must walk hand in hand with in our Christian life to ensure a victorious walk.

11

LEGALISM OR GRACE?

For the last couple of months I have dealt with the concept of intent. The example used to bring home the point of duty or intent was the wrong emphasis that some people put on certain issues such as the Sabbath. However, if godly love is missing at any point, any act of devotion or service will become a legalistic duty that is often used as the standard to harshly judge the Christianity of others. This is why the Apostle Paul admonished Christians not to come under the yoke of the bondage of legalism.

When you consider the struggle that the new members of the pilgrim Church had, concerning what role the Law was to play in their lives, you wonder how that struggle continues to remain alive when we, as believers, have been brought under a new covenant. Our responsibilities have been clearly outlined in Scripture. For example, in *Acts 15* when the leaders of the new Church were posed with the question of Gentile believers being circumcised to keep the Law of Moses, Peter admitted that their fathers were unable to bear the yoke of the Law. Therefore, it was not right to put such a yoke on the Gentiles. Therefore, this judgment was passed down by James, the elder at the Church of Jerusalem: “*Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, who from among the Gentiles are turned to God; but what we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols (idolatry) and from fornication (moral deviation), and from things strangled (unholy participation), and from blood (life is in the blood and established the new covenant ordained by God)*” (*Acts 15:19-20*). (Parentheses added.) Note, the commandments towards God, along with proper conduct (towards the world and others), and a right attitude towards the significance of the blood are brought out, but there is no mention for the Gentiles to keep such ordinances of the Law such as the Sabbath.

The Apostle Paul was adamant that believers would not be brought under the bondage of the yoke of the Law that was too great for the people of Israel to bear (*Galatians 5:1*). The reason the Law was too great is that no one could keep it. People would fail to maintain some aspect of it, whether it was the intent of the Law or the actual rules of it. Keep in mind, that even in our courts, if the wrong intent can be proven, the person is considered guilty of breaking the Law, whether he or she has physically committed a crime.

We see this in the case of the Pharisees. Although outwardly they kept the Sabbath, inwardly they were defying the living God with an indifferent heart and profane worship. Even though they advocated that people keep the Law, they were simply making converts to their self-righteous way of doing, and not to the God of Israel. Clearly, the intent was missing from these people’s lives. Regardless of how religious and ritualistic they were, God could see their hearts. For this reason, Jesus called these people hypocrites and said of them that they were nothing more than white tombs that held nothing but lifeless bones (religion and works). Ultimately, they would receive a greater damnation for their self-serving emphasis regarding the Law (*Matthew 15:8-9; 23:14, 27-28*).

The Apostle Paul explained in *Romans 7* that being under the Law can be compared to being married to an overbearing partner. No matter what you do or how hard you try, you cannot please such a partner who constantly reminds you, or rides you, about your inability to please

their rigid standards. The fact that you cannot please such a harsh companion will bring you to an utter state of despair and hopelessness. After all, you are burdened down with the perfection and demands of this mate as long as you live.

The Law was not given so people could somehow please God; rather, the Law was given to reveal that we have indeed transgressed it, making us guilty of breaking the whole Law of God (*Romans 3:20; James 2:8-10*). To break a Law of God identifies us as one who has sinned against God or offended Him. We all know that we have sinned or transgressed the Law of God, bringing us under a death sentence (*Romans 3:23; 6:23*). This is why the Apostle Paul stated that the righteousness of God, which was apart from the Law, was manifested in His Son and would be imputed to those who believed (*Romans 3:21-22*).

The Apostle Paul talked about how the Law addressed sins along with its sentence of death, but he clearly pointed out it could not save a person. In other words, the Law had no ability to pardon, remit or take away sins. However, God in His loving faithfulness would not leave man in such a state. He would provide an advocate who would actually take our place by satisfying the judgment of death passed upon all men. This meant that Jesus would have to die in our place to suffice the righteous, holy demands of the Law.

When people think of Jesus as their advocate, they think of Him as a defense attorney, but this is a limited perception. Jesus in His righteousness could never defend us in our sin because we stand guilty and deserving of death. The only thing Jesus could do was become our advocate. Instead of simply pleading or interceding on our behalf, He actually took our place on the cross. Since He took our place on the cross, He serves as our defense or place of justification in the courts of heaven. The Apostle John put it in this way: *“And he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world”* (*1 John 2:2*).

The question we must ask is what about the people who lived before Christ paid the price of redemption for us? If keeping the Law could not take away their sins, or justify them in their fallen state, how did they please God? There is only one way anyone could ever please God. It is clearly outlined in Scripture.

Before Moses and the Law, there was a man named Abraham. Before the covenant of the Law was the Abrahamic covenant. This perpetual agreement clearly pointed to the blessings that God wanted to bring forth through the promises that He made to this great patriarch, specifically that all nations would be blessed through this man (*Galatians 3:15-18*). In addition, I might add that before the institution of such practices as the Sabbath, Abraham had shown us the way we could please God.

Clearly, this man Abraham was never subject to the Law; therefore, he never kept any established practice. Yet, God not only counted him as being righteous, but He considered him His friend. Many of the practices of the Law served as shadows that pointed to something that was more excellent or superior to the covenant of the Law (*Colossians 2:14-17*). Since the Law with all of its precepts, ordinances and judgments did not identify Abraham to Jehovah God, what did establish this man in his relationship with God? Most of us know the answer to this question. It was faith.

Hebrews 11:6 states: *“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”* The Bible is clear as to what truly pleases God. In fact, we are told that what is not of faith is sin (*Romans 14:23*). In fact, what is not of faith translates into omitting that which is right. James therefore, reiterates that to those who know to do good, but fail to do so, it is sin (*James 4:17*). The writer of Hebrews also states that the children of Israel could not enter into rest (Promised Land) because of unbelief (*Hebrews 3:19*).

The Apostle Paul dealt with the issue of the Law and faith in his epistles to the *Romans* and the *Galatians*. The apostle made this statement in *Romans 4:13-14*: *“For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through*

the righteousness of faith. For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of none effect."

Once again, we are reminded that the Law was not made for the righteous, but for the lawless, disobedient, ungodly, profane sinner (*1 Timothy 1:9*). It could not sanctify or justify. It was void of promises because it could only work wrath upon the offenders. It could not deliver a person from its judgments that clearly deemed all flesh as being under a death sentence (*Romans 3:19-20*). Under the Law, man had no hope of deliverance and experiencing God's promises.

It is for this reason God counted the faith of those who truly believed Him as righteousness (*Romans 4:2-3, 20-22*). *Romans 1:17* tells us that God's righteousness is revealed from faith to faith to those who walk by such confidence. Note, God counts or imputes righteousness to His people at the point of sincere faith. As a result, man is justified, sanctified, and able to inherit the promises of God through his faith (*Acts 26:18; Romans 3:28; Hebrews 6:12*).

What is sincere faith? Simply put it is unfeigned confidence and trust in the character of God. It chooses to believe His Word as being truth. It clings to His faithful character when tested by fires, and waits patiently for His deliverance. Its natural response is that of obedience towards what it knows to be true and right before God.

Since God can count or reckon faith as righteousness to those who believe, He can also show such people favor at the point of their faith. This is why we are told that faith serves as an access for God's grace to operate. Most people think God's grace allows them access to do as they please. However, such a concept is erroneous. Grace can only operate where sin once abounded. As the apostle declared, God's favor can only reign through righteousness. Moreover, righteousness, which is considered a gift, can only be imputed to people when faith is in operation. This is why we have been saved by God's grace through faith (*Romans 5:1-2, 20-21; Ephesians 2:8-9*).

This brings us back to the issue of the Law. We know that we have a responsibility to God and others, but such obligation brings us to love and not obedience to the Law. We are told that we must fulfill (not simply obey) the Law. In other words, we must fulfill the complete intent of the Law towards God and others (*Romans 13:8-10*). The intent of the Law involves honoring or preferring the well-being of others to our own self-serving agendas.

Sadly, there are Christians that are bringing themselves once again under the yoke of the Law (*Galatians 5:1*). Whether it is keeping the Sabbath or some other ordinance of the Law, they see themselves as obeying God. However, they are not pleasing God; rather, they are frustrating His work of grace. The reason for this is that keeping the Law is not a matter of faith, but of legalism that often translates into self-righteousness (*Galatians 2:21; 3:12*).

Faith is not walking according to what we can do in our religious life, but walking according to the character and word of the unseen God. If you consider that one of the principle doctrines of Christ is faith towards God, you can begin to understand the implications of putting some type of hope in the Law as far as pleasing God or making ourselves acceptable (*Hebrews 6:1-2*). Clearly, showing such confidence or emphasis on the Law has nothing to do with having faith towards God. It is all about outward works that might impress others, but is void of the Holy Spirit (*Galatians 3:1-14*).

Hence, enters the contrast between legalism and grace. You cannot be under the Law of God and know His grace. You cannot depend on the Law to make you acceptable before God, while claiming faith at the same time. In addition, you cannot have a mixture of trying to keep certain ordinances of the Law while trying to lay claim to grace. The Law does not require faith, only obedience, and faith cannot please the unfeeling Law, but God will honor unfeigned faith by counting it as righteousness and using it as a means to show His favor.

The Law is holy, but it also proves to be unyielding to our plight, while faith allows God to show us a more excellent way of grace through His covenant. The excellent way of grace is what ensures us of the salvation that was freely offered by God through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Gentle Shepherd Ministries Discipleship Series

The question is what side of the fence are you on? Have you brought yourself under the Law so you do not have to trust God with the matters of your life, or have you brought yourself under His grace by way of having child-like faith towards the one true God of heaven?

12

WISHFUL THINKING OR PREPARATION?

Last month I dealt with the subject of faith that allows us to experience the favor or grace of God. Faith enables us to walk out our Christian life in victory. After all, faith allows us to stand firmly on the Rock of Ages, instead of being shipwrecked on it by the various winds of ignorance, delusion and unbelief. Such stability ensures us that the robber (Satan) cannot steal what has been truly grounded in Jesus (*John 10:10; Ephesians 6:10-13*).

Faith also allows us to withstand the different and sometimes contrary waves of temptation brought on by the attractions and philosophies of this present world, or age, in which we live. As we line up to the Cornerstone (Jesus) of our spiritual lives, we will be strengthened against the bombardment of that which is temporary (worldly), seductive (demonic), and heretical (cultic, religious, and antichrist), allowing us to withstand that which could subdue or kill the work of the Spirit and His Word in our lives.

Genuine faith also ensures us that when the evil forces bring false accusation against the immutable source of our trust, strives to oppress the spiritual confidence and liberty that establishes us as believers in our heavenly assurance, and with hatred and persecution tries to destroy the eternal life that is brought forth in us because of our testimony of Christ, we will remain standing in light of our heavenly leadership and authority. Truly, genuine faith towards God is what allows us to walk in and according to the life of Christ in us, stand in the power of His Spirit, withstand with the authority of His Word, and when all is said and done, we will remain standing because of who He is.

It is of the utmost importance that we understand how genuine faith towards God enables us to walk, stand, run, and eventually finish the course of our earthly journey. It must be first noted that the real faith first delivered to the saints has been under attack from day one. Many of the epistles are actually contending for the one true faith in which the pilgrim Church was clearly established.

Today is no exception. Genuine faith continues to come under attack as heretics have tried to abuse it for their own purposes, adjust it to their heretical views, undermine it to replace it with their worldly, New Age methods, and redefine it according to their particular gospel. As a result, it can be hard to try to come to terms with the faith that pleases God in the midst of the many false presentations of it (*Hebrews 11:6*).

Hence, enter the Scriptural warnings. Jesus questioned if He would find real faith when He returned. The Apostle Paul talked about faith that is found to be worthless if it is not securely placed in Jesus. He also mentioned that it could become shipwrecked if people fail to hold on to a good conscience concerning the matters of God (*Luke 18:8; 2 Corinthians 13:5; 1 Timothy 1:19*).

If religious people are not operating according to genuine faith directed towards the God of the Bible, what are they walking in and according to? As I have listened to different individuals' perception of faith, it often operates according to two arenas: 1) the fleshly arena where the flesh or experiences are being exalted in accordance to how something makes a person feel, and 2) people's particular preferences that have been greatly influenced by man-made religion, occult inspired methods, or worldly philosophies. In such arenas, people are putting faith in the

type of environment they can set up according to their beliefs, practices and personal understanding.

Since we cannot please God without genuine faith, it is vital that we understand what real faith is and how it works. We must get rid of our unrealistic notions and embrace the faith that God wants to bring forth in our lives. Let us now consider the contrast, or comparison, of real faith with false presentations in regard to the areas that faith affects in our spiritual walk.

Perception of God: Genuine faith is solely directed towards the God of the Bible. Faith is a choice that chooses to believe God by believing His Word as being inspired and true. It is active in that it is ready to walk according to what the Word declares. Because faith chooses to believe God, it allows a person to discover God in His righteous, perfect ways. Clearly, active faith will result in a person's perception of God being correctly established and fine-tuned. If a person has a right perception of God, he or she will be able to allow God to be God, and trust that He will work out the details according to His eternal plan.

The problem with a false presentation of faith is that it is based on an idol, an unrealistic concept or an erroneous belief about God. Since a person's concept of God is vague, unrealistic, or wrong, his or her faith will usually be based on what God can do, not based on who He is. Such individuals will walk according to their presumptions about God and seek Him on the basis of orchestrating their life according to their personal perceptions, needs and desires. However, God does not operate according to what He can do, but who He is. Sadly, these people often put God to a foolish test because of their pseudo faith. These individuals have failed to understand that God's ways are determined by His attributes and not by His power. Such people end up erring in their hearts about Him, and will end up walking in unbelief towards Him because He fails to perform according to their understanding (*Hebrews 3:10-14*).

Reality: Another area that genuine faith enables a person to properly confront is reality. People have a hard time with the harshness that plagues life. They are forever trying to become an exception to the rule, rather than accept the harsh fact that they are subject to the same life and similar challenges as everyone else. People, in their attempts to control reality, often devise means in which to protect themselves against the realities of life; or, they develop some code or practice that will supposedly earn them the right to remain untouched by the various challenges of life.

Hence, enters the temptation and futile attempt to control life with a heretically inspired faith. Obviously, in order to control the challenging or sorrowful reality that can intrude into people's lives, they must know how to control God. Those who operate according to the heretical belief and practices such as Positive Confession or Contemplative prayer believe they can control God regardless of His will, with their very words, their minds or with their prayers. They perceive that they can speak, imagine, or develop a right type of environment to bring something into existence, or in some cases they can use God's promises on Him to force Him to give way to their desires.

How can one honestly control reality? The truth is no one can control reality. People are like corks on the ocean of life. The winds of adversity will blow and the waves of destruction will come crashing down into each of our lives, testing our character, exposing our point of reliance, and shaking every false way until it ceases to stand. The only thing we have control over is how these various challenging intrusions are going to affect our lives.

Genuine faith is not used to change our realities; rather childlike faith mixed with the wisdom and strength of God allows us to honestly face present reality. God cannot impact our lives with liberating truth unless we are dealing in reality about a matter. The reason most people resent reality is because it clearly exposes each of their inability to change a matter, their need for God's guidance and intervention at all times, and His abiding faithfulness to see them through situations.

By putting our confidence in the Lord during such dark times, we will allow Him to take us by the hand and guide us through each difficulty. This brings us to the next important point of faith, it prepares us.

Preparation: Most people have God in a controllable box of theologies, doctrines and religious notions. This box allows them to maintain their comfort zones, as well as operate from what I call wishful thinking. Such wishful thinking entails the concept or the idea that bad things only happen to bad people; therefore, it will not happen to my family or me because we are church-going Christians. However, bad things do happen to good people. No one person or family is exempt from the curse of sorrow, despair, loss, and death that plagues the world in which we live. Such an unrealistic notion may be pleasant and desirable as it allows such individuals to live in fantasy or denial about the challenges that life can present to them at any time, but it will also prevent them from being prepared to stand and endure when confronted by the challenges of life.

Since we, as Christians, are to walk by faith, we are to continually advance in our Christian life in taking on the new man, in our understanding about God, and in our spiritual growth. Active faith will not allow us to put confidence in any type of status or convenient works, while we simply try to wish the fullness of our life in Christ into existence; rather, it will cause us to go forward according to the leading of the Spirit and godly instruction to discover life. It is not a matter of thinking about the incredible life we can have in Christ, but it is about experiencing it on a daily basis. Faith is not a matter of hoping for this life; rather it is about walking in expectation of inheriting the promises of it. The Bible clearly tells us that what has not found its origins in true faith, or has not been properly mixed with it, finds its origins in the sin of unbelief (*Romans 14:23; Hebrews 3:19-4:2*).

Hebrews 6:12 states this about faith: “*That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*” Note: we are not to be slothful towards our life in Christ, wishful in thinking about the type of life we could have in Him, or hoping that somehow this life will come to us, we are to be active in following the faithful example of those who truly inherited the promises of this life through patience. Patience not only points to the character to endure, but it allows that endurance to be developed through the trying experiences of life.

We are clearly living in precarious times. Genuine faith will cause us to live in expectation of our eternal future, while faithfully occupying in this present age until our Lord comes for His Church. But, it will not allow us to live in wishful thinking and denial about the times in which we live. Faith will always choose to believe and consider matters according to what God’s Word says about the times we live in, regardless of how frightening or uncertain they may be. We can make plans concerning our present world, but we must realistically avoid holding tightly to them. James tells us in *James 4:13-15* that by making plans, in light of this present world, as if we can bring such matters about, is evil. After all, our life is a vapor that quickly vanishes, and the only real declaration we can make about the things of this world is “if the Lord wills it, then it shall be.” This brings us to the final point of genuine faith, that of faithfulness.

Faithfulness: Faithfulness requires endurance. We know that God is faithful to see us through a matter to its completion, including salvation. People can put their faith in God’s power, personal words, religious activities, and deeds, while living in denial or according to wishful thinking, but such points of reliance lack faithfulness to see a person through to the end. In fact, most people end up disillusioned, but such disillusionment is often directed at God and not at their failure to walk by sincere, child-like faith.

Genuine faith possesses the quality of faithfulness. Although there are people who are aware of the times in which we live, they may or may not be preparing for them. Many consider such preparation in terms of physically being ready for the grave uncertainties that are coming upon this world, such as famine. However, preparation for the Christian is in relationship to spiritual preparation more than physical preparation. Granted, there is nothing wrong with seeking God as to how to physically prepare for the times we live in, but as believers we must

realize that we must be prepared to stand in faith against the present darkness, withstand by faith with truth, and remain standing even if it might cost us our lives, as we know them.

Without faithfulness that is established in the faith walk, we will not be able to stand or endure to the end. After all, it is the active walk of faith that makes us open to the leading of the Spirit, as we are being prepared to truly stand.

Are you faithfully walking by faith, allowing the Lord to prepare you spiritually for the times we live in or you operating from the premise of wishful thinking, that all will ultimately turn out alright? Wishful thinking might keep people in an ignorant state, but it will never change the harsh wind or waves of circumstances or the impact they might have on our lives. Wishful thinking will not only cause you to become shipwrecked in your faith, but it will also produce disillusionment and unbelief towards God.

13

MENTAL ASSENT OR CONVERSION?

The concept of being a Christian has been greatly redefined through the years. Due to the professing Church embracing questionable beliefs, worldly philosophies and methods, along with the sweeping influence of “flash in the pan” movements, a dangerous spiritual vacuum has been left in its wake. For example, during the 1970s when I became part of the family of God after receiving Jesus as my Lord and Savior, the study of eschatology and the presentation of “easy believism” were on the rise, causing association with the Christian scene to become a popular fad that often overshadowed or confused the seriousness of the real message and purpose of the Gospel. In the 1980s different movements that embraced ecumenical ties rolled through Christendom, blurring the lines of holiness and truth, while encouraging unholy alliances. The 90s decade found some of the professing Church being swept up by heretical waves of delusion that hid behind the concept of pseudo revivals, “new revelations”, and the need to build bigger, earthly kingdoms (churches) in the name of Jesus.

This brings us up to the present decade. In this decade, we have faced the hateful design of terrorism to destroy anything that will not agree with or bow down to its oppressive, deadly ways. When we think of terrorism, we think of the Twin Towers in New York City. However, terrorism comes in different forms. One of the greatest examples of terrorism involves the affront that has been happening against unborn babies in mothers’ wombs since 1973. These silent victims are clearly being terrorized by inhumane, murderous practices that show no respect for the sanctity of life.

We know that terrorism’s main goal is to terrorize in order to intimidate and control through fear. Such treacherous acts are appalling to those who are being systematically pushed into a corner by a few people who have no real scruples. With this in mind, consider the threats or possible tactics (fairness doctrine) that could be used against the conservative and Christian talk show hosts as a means to silence them, as well as the recent controversial matter surrounding Miss California’s stand on marriage. Keep in mind that if Christians call certain preferences and practices sin, they are labeled as hateful and illegal. No doubt, any version of the Bible that fails to pass the test of political correctness will eventually be outlawed as well. There is also a move to redefine the word “terrorist” by applying the term to those who will not bow down to the wicked lunacy of how these people think. Is the attempt of these individuals to redefine “terrorist” a means to hide their own identity and purpose?

We clearly are living in a decade and age of terror where the events around us imply that we are living in the end of the last days. Jesus made this statement about the environment that would abound, *“And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved” (Matthew 24:12-13).*

Jesus made it quite clear that even in the midst of iniquity reigning, we as believers must endure to the end to ensure salvation. The question is how many of those professing Christianity will endure to the end when the Church is being refined in the fiery trials of oppression and persecution? Since, in the name of religious tolerance, there has been an unholy mixture of beliefs and practices placed under the umbrella of the Christian faith,

ecumenism and evangelism, we, as believers, have to wonder how much of what I refer to as quasi-Christianity will remain standing when tested in the fiery ovens of tribulation, and how much of it will give way to the pressure to sell, reject and trample under all truth in the name of the upcoming one-world religion. We also must consider how much of this quasi-Christianity has ignored, agreed with, inspired, and enabled the present abominable political environment to gain its present foothold. The heat is definitely being turned up for all of those who would dare defy the wicked agendas of these people to strip our Constitution of its authority and protection, and do away with the sovereignty of this nation, while ushering in a totalitarian government that will eventually come into line with the one-world government. We know according to Scripture that Satan and his cohorts will have their season of terror, and reign, in this world, followed by God's wrath. Meanwhile, we must as believers endure by faith to the end to receive our salvation.

Recently, I watched a Christian documentary detailing how this present-day quasi-Christianity came into being. Even though there have always been counterfeits presenting their own take on Christianity, the present false staging started over seventy years ago. As most false presentations begin, the present quasi-Christianity started with a split between two respected religious leaders. One leader decided to enlarge the boundaries of the Christian faith to include ties with those of a different spirit and agenda in the name of evangelism, while the other leader maintained the need to stand on the truth and principles of the Bible that command believers to come out and be separate from that which possesses a different spirit and holds to a different Jesus and gospel (*2 Corinthians 6:14-18; 11:2-4*).

When people begin to veer from the center of truth, there is no way of telling how far they will depart from the faith that was first delivered to the saints, which points to apostasy or a falling away from the truth (*Jude 3*). As the interviewer on the documentary asked the people who were part of the more "tolerable Christianity" about their beliefs, it became obvious how far from the mark this pseudo Christianity had veered from the center. These people's beliefs included the following: The Word of God was inspired, but it is not inerrant, Jesus was not born of a virgin, He is not God Incarnate, and we must avoid presenting the concept of Jesus as the only way to salvation, as well as eternal consequences because they are too negative. As I listened to how one particular individual judged eternal truths according to whether it would be positive, I had to wonder how he expected people to wade through his quagmire of positive hogwash that is devoid of spirit and truth, and come out with any real concept of salvation.

The one consistent thread that I could detect from the individuals who were part of this adjustable concept of Christianity is that when asked if they were saved, you could sense that they did not really have assurance of their salvation. Even though there was one who made reference to election, the individual could not stand on the Apostle Peter's exhortation in *2 Peter 1:10*: "*Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure; for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.*"

The Bible is clear about what constitutes salvation. Since these people do not believe the inerrancy of the Bible, how can they be clear or have an assurance about salvation? They may have some sentimental notion and wishful thinking, as well as a vague hope for salvation because of their religious views, association, beliefs, or practices, but salvation appears to be far from them.

Since these people associate themselves with Christianity, what would they use to link themselves to this religious umbrella? Where is their common ground to the faith that was first delivered to the saints? After all, they do not consider the Bible their final authority nor do they believe the Jesus of the Bible, while shunning or mocking any possible consequences for deviation from established Scriptural truths and teachings. As you listen to them, you realize that they align themselves to Christianity because they can agree with certain aspects of it. Such agreement involves some type of mental assent where these individuals can agree with such things as the main theme of the Gospel, as well as certain aspects of Jesus' teachings and

character, while brushing over, adjusting, and changing the intent of other aspects that would not compliment their quasi form of Christianity. It is because of such mental assent that these people believe themselves to be Christians.

Granted, these people can talk a good talk, give an impression of piety, and give a good explanation for their acceptance of some beliefs and their rejection of others, but there are inconsistencies in their life that are exposed when truth challenges their fragile reality and belief system. These people become fearful, obstinate and angry. Sometimes you can see the war between the convicting power of the Spirit and the overpowering flesh occurring within the souls of these individuals, but their tendency is to maintain their mental conclusions, rather than repent and give way to truth regardless of the gain. Each time these people resist the truth, they become more blinded to the true light of the world and the Gospel (Jesus), as their hearts become harder towards what is pure and righteous.

Even though these people may have agreed with the Gospel, repeated the "sinner's prayer," had some religious experiences, studied the Bible, attended church, paid tithes, and been active in some type of ministry, they have not been truly converted to the ways of righteousness. They may agree with some truths because it makes logical sense to them, but if they have not embraced the whole truth of God's Word by faith, they still walk in unbelief towards God. Even though these people may be adamant about some foundational Christian beliefs as being true, they have shown contempt for others by ignoring, shunning, and rejecting them.

Through the years, I have seen different stages of mental assent among those who call themselves Christians. There are those who have mentally agreed with Christianity on an association level because of family ties or how it makes them appear to others, but they have their own idea of what constitutes salvation. Others have shown mental assent on the basis of logic according to what makes sense to them, but these individuals often prove to be skeptical, mocking and unbelieving when challenged with what they consider to be the irrational side of Christianity. There are those who agree on a doctrinal level with certain principles and practices of the Christian faith, but ultimately will prove to be judgmental when their doctrine is challenged by truth that does not adjust to their understanding. There are those who agree with Christianity on a religious level, but because of their love of or for the world, it proves to be surface and hypocritical. These different forms of mental assent or agreement are devoid of a love for truth, genuine faith towards God, and true conversion.

The Bible tells us that we must be converted and become as little children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven (*Matthew 18:2-4*). Salvation is not a matter of simply agreeing with aspects of the Gospel and the Bible; it is about being born again with the very life of Christ. The new life points to a new disposition within the believer that will be formed into the very likeness of Jesus. It is the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in each convert that develops Jesus' lowly disposition and meek attitude in the Christian. Clearly, what identifies a person as a Christian is the presence of the life of Jesus in him or her. The Holy Spirit will be the one who bears witness to this salvation as the mind of Christ is worked in the believer. Obviously, Christianity is not mental assent due to intellectual agreement, a religious cloak we wear, a doctrine we take ownership of, or a religion we practice when convenient. It is a life that is expressed through genuine commitment, a meek attitude and godly conduct. It is a walk of faith that is established and advances forward through obedience to the Word of God. It is a conversion that involves turning away from the old (repentance) in order to be converted to a new way. Such conversion is not a one-time phenomenon, but an ongoing decision and action where one is constantly being converted to what is of truth and righteousness.

As I look back on my life, I can see where conversion has been ongoing for me. It is not a matter of just changing my mind about a matter; I must also be converted to what is right in order to experience a complete inward transformation or renewal. In fact, when I have been the most undone by a refreshed awakening to the depth of personal sin, is when the greatest

conversions have taken place in my life. The transformation in my state of being has often surprised me as to the fruit that is produced by such awakening. In every case, my attitude about something has been completely changed, my priorities realigned, and my focus more concentrated on the matters of God.

We must remember that we are all like onions. We have layers of the self-life that must be stripped away to expose the influences, workings and activities of sin upon our lives. Once a layer has been exposed and repentance applied, then there can be true conversion towards the honorable, righteous ways of God to ensure transformation.

As we consider the present day quasi-Christianity, we must realize that the minds of these people may agree about certain matters, but their prevailing attitude and mood towards truth has never been changed by true brokenness towards sin and repentance from their old ways. Since their carnal minds will not depart from their present understanding to embrace the complete truth by unfeigned faith, they are never transformed by true conversion. These people remain set or obstinate in their way of thinking, preventing them from ever humbling themselves in disposition to ensure complete conversion towards the ways of righteousness.

Obviously, salvation is a matter we must not assume, cross our fingers about, or wish for the best. We must resolve whether we possess the very life of Jesus and the witness of His Spirit, thereby ensuring that we belong to the true faith. The real debate is not once saved always saved, the real issue is whether salvation has truly taken place in the heart and is being established by faith in line with the leadership of Jesus (*Romans 10:9-10*). And, in our desire to believe salvation has taken place, we must not foolishly cling to an empty shell that gives an appearance of salvation. We must ensure that those of us who claim to be Christians have been *converted by* the life of Christ through the born-again experience, are being *converted to* the life of Christ through discipleship and obedience to the ways of righteousness, and will be ultimately distinguished *in conversion* because we are indeed taking on His very likeness, thereby, reflecting His glory in a lost, dark world of despair and death.

This brings us to the question. Are you a Christian based on mental assent or true conversion?

14

REFORMATION OR REVIVAL?

We have been considering various aspects of the Christian life. Last month I dealt with the subject of conversion. People are being converted to embrace some type of worldview according to philosophies of the world or the belief systems of man. Such a conversion will determine the attitudes and lifestyles of those who are converted.

When it comes to religion, conversion can lead to reformation or revival. Recently, I just finished reading a book about the revival that was prevalent in Charles Finney's ministry in New York in the 1800's called *"Holy Spirit Revivals."* The stories are incredible. One of the most popular stories surrounding this revival had to do with Charles Finney being invited to the next community to preach. Mr. Finney always prayed for his text. He was given the text of *Genesis 19:14: "Get up, get out of this place; for the LORD will destroy this city!"*

This text was in reference to the destruction of Sodom. As he was preaching, he noticed that the men looked angry. He could not figure out why they would be offended from this simple text. To make a long story short, he later found out that the community he was preaching in was called Sodom, and the man that had invited him to the community was named Lot.

We tend to remember such stories, but my goal in reading this book was to understand the environment that was present for such a revival to take place. Stories may inspire us in our faith, but coming to terms with the environment is how we can glean from the experiences of others.

Environment has to do with the state or disposition. State or disposition is determined by the spirit and attitude that is present. As I mediated on the environment conducive to revival, I could see a pattern. Note, I said a pattern, not a method, but a pattern that was obvious throughout Mr. Finney's book. The Bible talks about patterns. They can be followed, but to follow a pattern does not necessarily mean you will always get the same results.

Before I present to you the pattern that I observed through this incredible revival, I must establish what real revival is. When the Church attempts to come back to center to God, its calling and responsibilities, it has been known to work within the two environments that I have already made reference to: that of reformation and revival. Reformation points to reforming in the way something is being done. Revival is an awaking out of an indifferent or dead state. In fact, revival occurs when one is actually awakened to his or her spiritual state. Reformation involves changing our outward conduct, while revival entails a total transformation of the inward state or disposition. You can have reformation without revival, but you will not have revival without reformation following.

It is easy to study these two environments. Because of King Hezekiah's personal spiritual awakening or revival, he brought great reformation to Israel during his initial reign. As you study this reformation, you will see that the people of Judah may have complied outwardly to godly cleansing and separation, but under the next king, they went right back into their idolatrous and pagan ways. Therefore, reformation may result in people lining up to godly practices outwardly, while still maintaining a mixture of idolatry and pagan preferences.

A good example of revival is the story of Jonah and Nineveh. Nineveh was a wicked city, doomed by God. However, a reluctant Jonah was sent to the people of Nineveh to warn them of

the judgment that was about to befall them. Out of Jonah's preaching came true revival. These wicked people were truly awakened to their spiritual state and responded accordingly, and judgment was stayed for many years afterwards.

Today there is a lot of talk about revival, and some reformation, but is the environment surrounding the professing Church conducive to revival? There are individuals who are experiencing personal revival, but could the visible Church be a candidate for a true revival?

As I consider the trends, attitudes and emphasis of the professing Church, my answer to whether it is a candidate for true revival would be a resounding, "NO!" Granted, it is not impossible for revival to occur, but in its present state, the professing Church is not even close to experiencing a revival. I realize this blunt honesty will not make me popular, but as I considered the environment of Charles Finney's day there is no way that the environment surrounding the professing or visible Church would ever encourage a true revival.

There are three ingredients necessary for true revival. The first ingredient is God. Revivals are a sovereign move of God. They are done outside of religion and man's traditions and efforts. This is why many in the professing Church can talk about revival, but they most likely will not experience it.

In the past I experienced a revival. It was not on the scale of Charles Finney's, but the one thing that I was quite aware of was that it was a total, sovereign work of God outside of the church system. I witnessed an incredible move of the Spirit upon the hearts of people. They were being awakened to their spiritual condition, and as a result, they were open to the salvation message. As you read Charles Finney's book, he likewise was aware of this fact. He never took any glory for what God was doing. He was simply a messenger, a mouthpiece for God.

The second ingredient is referred to as a spirit of prayer. Nothing gets accomplished without prayer. But, this is not just any prayer. This prayer is inspired by the Spirit, is in tune with the heart and work of God, and is steadfast in seeing a matter fulfilled for the glory of God. There were times recorded in Mr. Finney's book when the Spirit lifted from the work of revival. Committed saints got on their faces and prayed that the Spirit would not lift, but continue to do the work of revival in the hearts of people. In fact, these individuals would mourn and wrestle before God if the Spirit was missing.

The third ingredient involves preaching. However, the main emphasis of the message had to do with sin. Charles Finney's anointed preaching was a sword that went into the very spirit and soul of people to expose their hopeless condition that was wrought by sin. In his book he made this very profound statement: "Ministers generally avoid preaching what the people before them will understand. They will preach to them about other people, and the sins of other people, instead of addressing them and saying, 'You are guilty of these sins' and 'The Lord requires this of you.' They often preach about the Gospel instead of preaching the Gospel. They often preach about sinners instead of preaching to them" (*Holy Spirit Revivals*, pg. 68).

Preaching that addresses where the people are in their spiritual lives gives the Holy Spirit something to work with. If a person is not being made aware of his or her sin, the Holy Spirit will have no means to convict or reprove him or her of sin. Sadly, people are not concerned about their sin breaking fellowship with God; rather, their main emphasis, even in some Christian circles, is that they want to feel good in their sin. They want to be esteemed in their sin, and be placated and pampered in their darkness.

This brings me to another important point. True revival begins in the Church. People who consider themselves to be Christians need to also be awakened to their spiritual condition. Finney wrote that there was a man who was a leader in his church. He even conversed with the pastor on various occasions. One day he approached Mr. Finney concerning the fact that his prayer to have all that God had for him was unanswered. Mr. Finney told him, he must be praying with a wrong motive. The man was insulted by the truth, but as he went to prayer, God exposed his selfish motive. Before it was over, the man had such a deep sense of his sinful

condition, he even asked God to take his very life. It was from this premise that the man was finally converted.

The truth is, without the awareness of sin there can be no revival. The main work of the Holy Spirit is to awaken us to our sin, the righteousness of God, and the judgment to come. If the issue of sin is missing from preaching, there will be no real premise or anointing in which to awaken a soul to his or her need of repentance from sin and conversion to righteousness. Without true repentance and conversion, a person has no assurance of being spared from the impending judgment that has already been pronounced upon those who belong to this present age of rebellion, idolatry and paganism.

As I considered my own situation, I realized the greatest transformations that took place in my life were when I was the most aware of my sinful condition. At such times, I could do nothing more than cry out for mercy, knowing that I deserved great judgment for my condition and actions. In times such as these, I also sense how far Christ had to go to reach me in the depth of my sin. He had to come from heaven as the sinless Lamb of God in order to die on the cross. He then went into the depths of the earth in order to be raised in newness of life.

This brings us to the environment of the professing Church. It may preach about various matters, but in some cases the matter of sin has been ignored, watered down or totally cast aside. Without the awareness of sin, a person will have no need to repent. And, as Jesus stated, we must repent or perish (*Luke 13:3, 5*).

Without repentance, a person will never turn around in order to be truly converted to the righteous ways of God. This brings me back to the pattern. The pattern of revival begins with the sovereign move of God upon the hearts of people. In this move, the Holy Spirit impacts a person in such a way that he or she feels totally undone and exposed. This usually occurs when certain people are interceding on behalf of others in compliance to the Spirit, or there is anointed preaching that strips away cloaks of delusion and religion exposing people's true spiritual condition.

Once an individual has a true sense of his or her spiritual condition, then he or she will be ready to repent. Repentance implies one has changed his or her will, mind or direction, which causes an about-face in relationship to God, sin and life. However, an about-face is just the beginning. Christians must face God in order to be converted to His way. Obviously, a person who is converted to some kind of religious code will reform his or her way. However, when a person is truly converted to the Person of the Lord Jesus, recognizing his or her need for forgiveness for his or her wretched condition, revival takes place in the inner man.

Sadly, sin has been negated, repentance has been perverted, and conversion has been misrepresented in the postmodern churches. Today conversion is a matter of saying a sinner's prayer, rather than a total conversion to a particular Person and His work of redemption.

Clearly, revival will result in conversion, while reformation often just produces outward change. This brings me to a very good question. Many people may be reformed in their practices, but how many of them have been revived to walk in the ways of righteousness? The problem with reformation is that a person can take pride in the fact he or she no longer sins a certain way, but, without conversion, such pride often ends in self-righteousness and delusion. Sadly, this person will not see that he or she has never been converted to what is right. These individuals consider themselves in light of what they are no longer doing, instead of in the light of the righteous ways of God.

In reading about the revivals that took place in China in the early 1900's missionary James O. Frazier pinpointed five manifestations of the Holy Spirit that were consistently evident in these revivals. They are as follows:

- 1) Conviction of sin in light of God's holiness.
- 2) Revelation of Jesus: We must behold the Son to begin to grasp His grace as our Redeemer and His glory as Lord.

- 3) Understanding the truth: God's truth must be presented so that people can clearly see their spiritual ineptness and condition.
- 4) Outpouring of love: Godly love is the only fruit that clearly identifies Christians. One of the major sins that will hinder revival, agreement, and growth in Jesus' Church is unforgiveness. Being unforgiving breeds anger, conflict, bitterness, and revenge.
- 5) Anointing of Power: The Holy Spirit is the One who brings such anointing to preaching, teaching and evangelism. Anointing breaks the yoke upon people.

My question to you is have you truly been converted to the person of Jesus Christ, resulting in being revived from that which was dead? When was the last time that you were undone by the Spirit of God moving upon your life in deep conviction of sin? When was the last time you repented because you were lifeless or near death in your spiritual life? Only the Lord can show you these matters, but if you are tired of nominal or lifeless Christianity, God is always near those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit. The prophet Isaiah put it best: *"For thus saith the high and lofty One who inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the heart of the contrite ones"* (Isaiah 57:15).

15

The Broad Path or The Narrow Way?

We are coming to the end of the discipleship series. For the last fifteen months, I have been dealing with the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. Clearly, the Christian foundation is simple, yet profound as to the depth it can reach into the soul of man. Sadly, through the years these simple truths have been complicated by man's need to understand a matter according to his personal take on religion and life. This need usually has nothing to do with becoming better Christians, but with controlling one's reality when it comes to God.

It is not unusual for people to put God in a nice controllable box. I thoroughly understand this box. I used to operate within one, and what I discovered is that this box allows people to believe that all is well with their spiritual lives. After all, they have weighed their spiritual life on their own balances, causing them to come out on top. Such an evaluation allows them to continue on their merry way, down the so-called path of personal happiness and bliss.

However, the various tragedies of life have a way of occasionally throwing a wrench into such unrealistic perceptions. Each challenge changes the tint of people's rose-colored glasses, disheveling self-righteous cloaks, ripping away religious masks, and pulling theological rugs from underneath their feet. After all, in ignorance we each can hold on to foolishness, in religious elitism we can hold on to delusion, and in our theology we can remain armchair Christians who maintain a lot of doctrines and theories about Christianity, while lacking any real experience, spirit and life in our walk.

When I tried to come to terms with the Christian life, I often had to rethink my former conclusions by divorcing Christianity from all attempts of fitting it into a doctrinal, theological or religious box, to recognizing it as a life that must be lived or walked out according to a law upheld by the Holy Spirit (*Romans 8:2*). This law has to do with bringing forth the life of Christ Jesus, which allows each of us as His followers the means to discover the excellent way of our high calling.

It is hard for people to realize that they are walking in some type of way. Their head, master and the husband they are bound to will determine the way in which they will walk. *Romans 5-7* identifies the type of leadership, service, and point of identification a person is actually giving way to. We know that there are two heads, Adam or Jesus. Head points to what determines our predominate focus, emphasis and agenda. In fact, our heart will naturally follow the direction of our head.

If Adam is our head, the world will serve as our focal point, we will emphasize our rights to partake of it, and our agendas will be to feed or appease the selfishness of the self-life. If Jesus is our head, He will serve as our focal point, we will emphasize the will of God, and the message of Christ and Him crucified will become our sole agenda.

There are two masters, God and sin. Masters determine what we will ultimately serve. If we serve sin, we will end up bowing down to Satan, the god of this world, serving the lusts of our flesh, and walking in the ways of death. If we serve God, we will be worshipping Him in Spirit and truth, obeying His will and ways in humility, and walking in the ways of righteousness.

There are two husbands that we can be bound to, which points to identification. They are the Law or the risen Christ. If we are bound to the Law, we are walking under a death sentence without any recourse. We will be identified by the ways of our corruptible flesh and we will be walking the broad path of condemnation that leads to damnation.

If we are bound to the risen Christ, we will be walking according to His eternal life in us, identified by His Spirit, and walking in the narrow path of the cross. This narrow path identifies us to the death (cross), burial (putting off the old life), and resurrection power (putting on the new life) of Christ. The narrow path also points to the ways of death. Its hard ways will go deep into our soul in order to bring us higher in our spiritual perspective. Its challenging ways will plant our feet firmly on the path of righteousness.

Jesus talked about these two distinct ways in His Sermon on the Mount. You can clearly see the contrast between the broad way and the narrow path as you follow Jesus' presentation in this sermon. Let us first consider the broad way.

The Lord said of the broad way in *Matthew 7:13* that the gate that leads to this way is wide. In other words, it is capable of embracing anything. It does not require any change of heart, mind and way of doing. Since a person does not have to change, he or she can establish his or her own religious or moral code. Such individuals can walk according to their own deluded reality. The false light of their own darkness will blind them.

These individuals wear a cloak of self-righteousness, convincing themselves that they are right before God, but they walk in unbelief and disobedience. Such people who walk this way can harbor, as well as justify, sin in the name of rights and happiness, hate God and His righteousness for opposing their way, lust after the world, and walk in unforgiveness without feeling any real twinge of conviction. They can give the impression of good intentions that are devoid of godliness. They may have a show of good works, but since their motives are treacherous and self-serving, such deeds will be considered iniquity on judgment day. These people can prove to be anxious about the things of the world because they lack faith towards God, thereby failing to seek first His kingdom in all matters. They are building their religious lives according to the ways of their corruptible flesh, which is establishing them on the sifting sands of judgment. Even though the broad way seems endless in its possibilities, its sifting foundation will eventually give way to the abyss of eternal damnation.

In *Luke 6:24-26*, Jesus pronounced four woes against those walking the broad way. These woes reveal these people's pursuit, attitude, state, and point of worth. Such individuals pursue the riches of the world, perceive they have no real need since they lack both the reality and sobriety to discern their way as being destructive, and they desire and seek after men's approval and recognition, rather than God. In fact, Jesus warned that many go in the broad way.

This brings us to the narrow path. The popular way is the broad way, but the way that leads to life is a path that proves to be the hard way for unregenerate man. Jesus stated of this narrow way in *Luke 13:24* that many would strive to enter the gate that marks the entryway to this path but fail to do so. According to *Matthew 7:14*, such people will fail to find their way to this path. We must ask ourselves why people fail to enter into the narrow gate that leads to everlasting life. Jesus actually gives us insight into the reason people fail to enter in "*Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber, John 10:1.*"

Those who are trying to enter through the narrow gate but fail to do so are imposters. They are thieves who are trying to obtain something that they have no right to claim. They are robbers because they want to rob, cheat or steal a heavenly inheritance without having any legal right or identification to it. These people are trying to enter in on their own merits, bypassing the narrow way of redemption. After all, their way is religious, marked by good deeds, outward piety, and devotion. However, any way that does not line up to the narrow path constitutes the broad way. Granted, the broad way may have been adjusted to embrace religious piety, or personally narrowed down by legalistic or moral codes, but it is still the broad way that

represents the ways of death. *Proverbs 14:12* states that there is a way that seems right to a person, but it still constitutes the ways of death.

What does the narrow way entail? After all, few seem to find the real entrance to this hard path that leads to life. Jesus gives us the insight into why people miss the entrance. First of all the gate is marked by an altar that requires sacrifice and death. It calls for repentance that will not only cause the person to cease walking according to the normalcy of the world and old ways of death, but it also requires him or her to walk opposite or contrary to the ways of death.

Past the entrance of the narrow gate is a single door. This door is not identified by religious affiliation, good deeds or piety; rather, it is actually a Person who serves as the only door in which one can discover life. Jesus identifies this door in *John 10:7*, as being Himself.

Jesus summarized His ministry in *John 14:6* by stating He was the way in which all believers must walk, He is the door of truth that each follower must constantly line up to and enter in by way of faith and obedience, and He is the essence of life that must be walked out to ensure reconciliation, restoration and communion with the Father. It is by walking the narrow way that the life of Christ, His lowly disposition, His meek attitude, and His image is worked into us. Clearly, the broad way is comprised of man's way. No matter how religious, noble and restraining it might be, it represents walking in the way of Adam, serving the god of this present world, and being bound to a Law that can only condemn a person. Therefore, either man is walking in his own way according to his desires or he is walking in the way of Christ according to the Word of God.

Although there are those who believe that they have one foot in the broad way and one foot on the narrow path, the harsh reality is that they have both feet on the broad road. They are simply balancing two lifestyles: that of religion with its outward façade, and that of the world with its philosophies or attractions. As they walk according to the different pattern of these lifestyles, they fail to realize that the stepping stones will eventually shift when the sandy foundation begins to move with the winds of judgment. The reason I say this is that the narrow path is on the same road of life as the broad way. The difference is the way. It is based either on the terrain of the self-life or on self-denial. Its direction is either towards the false glory of the world or towards the light of the world, Jesus. The destination is either leading downward into the quagmire of bondage and spiritual ruin or heavenward to an eternal inheritance. The unattractive narrow path leads in the opposite direction of the popular and well-traveled broad way. When man repents, he does not jump from the broad way to the narrow path, rather he changes the direction he is walking. He ceases to be a child of the devil, twofold a convert of hell, and walking in the ways of condemnation and death. In true repentance, he turns from the old to embrace the new. He becomes a child of God by being born again from above, a consecrated disciple of Jesus through faith and obedience to God's Word, and begins to walk in the ways of everlasting life.

When asked why he would walk away from Christ, a young man stated that Christianity is the hard way. It is important to point out that Christianity is only hard on the self-life, the fleshly appetites, and the bondage of sin. Granted, it cuts across insipid, small-minded comfort zones, challenges people to cease from allowing their lusts simply to carry them like an escalator to their final destination of eternal separation and damnation. On the other hand, it can also serve as a slide that will allow lost individuals the luxury of enjoying the deadly fruits of this world while they delude themselves about the consequences that await them. It is true the narrow path is clearly marked by death and its sole door allows no room for any type of compromise or hypocrisy, but the path was designed to save man from the consequences of traveling his own way of destruction. It becomes a hard way because it must forge something in man's vain thinking and useless character that is contrary to the dark preferences of his heart, the empty pursuits of the world, and the endless, perverted excuses as to why he prefers death to the choice of life.

The Bible tells us the way of the transgressor is hard (*Proverbs 13:15*). Granted, the path to life is hard on the ways of death, but this is different than the hard way of the transgressor. The way of life is designed to set a person free to live life, while the way of the transgressor ends in greater bondage, sorrow and bitterness of the soul, and spiritual ruin. The way to life leads to heaven, while the way of the transgressor leads to death, hell, judgment, and the lake of fire. Although the broad way offers pleasure as one heaps the world upon his or her self-life, it is temporary. In fact, the temporary pleasure of this world hides the devastating hardness that will lead to the judgment of spiritual death and ruin. However, the ways of life offer spiritual pleasures for evermore.

The truth is either way will prove hard; therefore, we must choose which way of hardness we will walk. Will we choose the hard, strait way that ends in our salvation, or will we fight any conviction of salvation as we insist on the hard ways of our personal transgression that will lead to death and eternal judgment?

Clearly, a person's destination is the only say he or she has in regard to the quality of life. It is your choice, and it is my choice. What way have you chose? What way am I now choosing based on my present walk in this dark, dying world?