

GENTLE SHEPHERD MINISTRIES

CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH ~ MAKING DISCIPLES ~ EQUIPPING THE SAINTS FOR MINISTRY

PO Box 3572 * Oldtown, ID 83822 * www.gentleshepherd.com * February 2017

Running the Race

Part 8

Getting Ready

By Rayola Kelley

For the last eight months we have been considering what it means to run the spiritual race as a Christian. Obviously, we can't be effective as a runner if we have failed to walk out the Christian life in obedience to God's Word, according to the leading of the Spirit, and with the right heart attitude.

One of the things I feel very passionate about is when we as Christians, who are part of Jesus' Church, His living body, and called to be an extension of Him in service, must ask ourselves, and others, when the visible church is going to quit playing at church and become the CHURCH, the lively stones that make up the spiritual house of our Lord and Savior. There may be a lot of religious posturing, but how much of it is genuine and produces fruits unto everlasting life? Pastor, Evangelist, and Author Vance Havner summarized the environment that is present today, "This is a day of anarchy in the world, apostasy in the professing church, and apathy in the true church."

It is clear that there is a spiritual vacuum in this nation and it is being filled with an activism that has no moral boundaries, a social gospel that is void of salvation, a tolerant New Age attitude that promotes a false light, and the Muslim religion that knows no grace. In some cases our churches have become tombs where some have become part of the pew, while being indifferent to their high calling to be co-laborers with Jesus Christ in the great harvest field. Others have become actual activists who fervently promote change through radical social issues that still leave souls lost and hopeless. All of these movements, philosophies, and false religions cannot forgive or save a person.

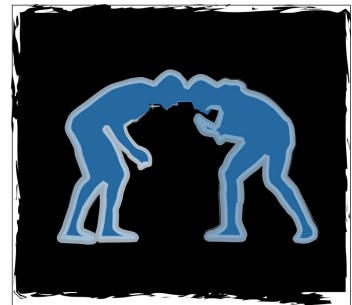
Humanity is clearly broken and the true Gospel is not about man doing good things; rather, it is about man realizing that he stands under condemnation, doomed, and on his way to being separated for eternity from his Creator and giver of true life. Good works will accompany salvation, but they are not the means of a person being saved. Salvation totally rests with what a person believes and does with Jesus Christ. I like what J. Gregory Mantle said about this subject, "Our works are either living or dead. 'Dead works' are works which have in them no breath of spiritual life. The corrupt root from which they spring is indwelling sin. All duties not animated with a loving regard for the glory of God are 'dead works.' They are legal works; service after the law of a carnal commandment, perfunctory and mechanical—and not after the power of an indissoluble life."

Before we can run this spiritual race we have to honestly address the old man, that fallen disposition in us. We have to quit giving our youthful lusts a pass, while trying to reform the old man by changing the appearance and action of the outward man to comply with some religious standard or image. A man can change the outside all he wants, but if the inside has not been revived, transformed, and sanctified by the Spirit, he is still very much lost.

It is hard to face our real foe, that selfish disposition. We try so hard to make peace with the old man, dull a boastful conscience against moral infractions while covering ourselves with religious garb that simply hides the darkness that looms behind it. I don't know about you, but I learned a long time ago that my human tendency is to selfishly desire accolades without paying the price to know God. I've always wanted to do great things for the kingdom of God while still settling into the routine of ordinary living that was void of real faith. I envisioned myself being part of something

extraordinary without being faithful with those things that seemed insignificant in everyday life and challenges.

Through the years I have wrestled with my attitude over everything from resenting the godly process evident in my faith walk, to stepping over my selfishness to be faithful, while denying my fickle, carnal feelings about a matter and simply doing right. I've had to wrestle with being envious when God blessed another saint, while comparing myself with those whom I considered "inferior." If you are human no doubt at different times in your life you have struggled with the same issues. I want to state that facing these human feelings doesn't mark actual failure, but ignoring them and giving them a pass will end in failure.



As I look back at those wrestling matches, the one thing I am thankful for is that God is not only longsuffering, but He is faithful to finish the work He has begun in me (*Philippians 1:6*). My inner man has been and will be a work in progress, and my life constantly under construction until that day this physical body is put off. I can't tell you how many times I acted like the spoiled American that I was, thinking that I deserved special treatment because I was serving God, while assuming I would be immune from the challenges of life, and that in the end I would somehow dance my way into heaven. Even though such Scriptures as Acts 14:22, "*Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God,*" stated

differently, I still held to the unrealistic presentation that being a Christian made me exempt from experiencing the tough challenges of life. It was J. Gregory Mantle who put these types of challenges in a realistic light, "The Christian is trained in the gymnasium of affliction, and when the conflict is over he reaps peaceable fruit."

It took me awhile to realize the challenges were necessary for spiritual enlargement and growth. The different challenges were directed at the quality of my faith, my inner character, my state, and my attitude. For example, the Apostle Peter is very clear that our faith will be tested to identify our real point of dependency (1 Peter 1:5-9). Our character will be forged with adversity, bringing us to a state of humility and changing our attitude.

It is important to once again point out that God is after our heart attitude. Attitude in this case does not just point to the condition of the heart but how we look at a matter. The big problem with the heart attitude for Christians is that there is an unholy mixture of the world and the things of God. We can have a tender heart towards God, while harboring a worldly attitude towards spiritual matters. Such a state points to spiritual immaturity which will manifest itself in unbelief. This is brought out in *Hebrews 4:2*, "For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it." True faith must be applied to what we know is true and then we need to respond accordingly.

A carnal attitude will cause us to wander in the great spiritual wilderness of confusion, mediocrity, and defeat. Like the children of Israel in the wilderness, we will be walking parallel to the promises of God, but never really entering into them. Even though we will receive manna from heaven we will end up lusting after the fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic from Egypt because our palates still want to taste the things of the world.

I say all of this because it appears that much of the visible church in America has maintained a worldly attitude towards the way it perceives agendas, success, and happiness. Instead of promoting the unseen king-

dom of God, much of what is being emphasized today has nothing to do with the saving of souls, furthering God's kingdom in people's hearts, or ensuring that people are lovers of God and His Word; rather, it is about big buildings offering entertainment with Jesus tacked on, failing to be sanctuaries where believers are being prepared to partake of God's Word and to worship Him in order to be effective in serving Him. Worldly methods are being instituted to bring in "unchurched" people to hear a feel-good message rather than the hardcore truth of sin and the hope of God's provision of Jesus which is the only means to address sin and take care of it. It promotes how people will benefit from being a Christian rather than what it means to become one who is taking on the very image of Jesus.

This brings us to the subject of attitude. An athlete who does not first adjust his attitude to take on the many disciplines and challenges of his or her sport will remain nothing more than a "wannabe" athlete. Good intentions may make a person feel good at the end of the day about half-hearted attempts, but it will not secure the prize at the end of the race. The closest "wannabes" will ever get to receiving a coveted prize will be in their imagination. This is true for Christians. It is not enough to want to be a godly, effective Christian, you must be willing to daily deny self to take up the torch of the Gospel in preparation to run the race and finish the course.

What kind of attitude will come out of refined faith, godly character, a humble state, and the steadfastness to finish the course? Again it comes back to having a right attitude. As long as we maintain a worldly attitude towards any aspect of our Christian life, we will be constantly challenged with the detours of the world.

The Bible is clear about the attitude we must adopt to finish the course. *Hebrews 11:13* gives us this insight, "These all died in faith, not having received the promises but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth."

The Apostle Peter made this statement in *1 Peter 2:11*, "Dearly be-

loved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul." The correct attitude we must adopt is that of being a stranger in the world and a spiritual pilgrim in our pursuit for God. It is vital we understand these two attitudes because they will respond differently in relationship to the world.

A stranger is a person who does not belong in a particular setting. These individuals are simply passing through strange territory in order to arrive at a certain destination. Strangers have no agreement with the places, the ways, and philosophies of the people of the land they encounter in their journey. They will not fit in the present culture because everything they encounter will seem strange to them. They will not speak the same heart language, understand the reasoning behind certain practices, nor will they possess the same appetites and perceptions. They are simply foreigners on their way home.

Jesus clearly stated that the world will hate believers because they do not belong to it (*John 17:14*). We are to separate from the thinking, ways, and practices of the world because there can be no agreement between these two conflicting kingdoms (*2 Corinthians 6:14-18*). In fact, to belong to the world makes us enemies of God, revealing that the love of the Father is not in us (*James 4:4*; *1 John 2:15-17*).

The more we come into agreement with the world and take on its attitude, the more we will walk like the world. As Christians we are to divorce ourselves from allowing the world to influence our attitude. The more we expose ourselves to the Lord and let His attitude be established in us the more we will walk contrary to the world and will not be tempted to give way to the world's corruption. (See *Philippians 2:5*).

Pilgrims are different than strangers. Their journey is a spiritual journey. They are not trying to arrive at a particular destination; rather, they are in search of a special place. Most pilgrims are marked either by persecution for their faith or a deep restlessness to find a place where they have the freedom to know and worship God according to their conscience and religious teachings.

When we think about the humble beginnings of this nation, we have to recognize that some of the first settlers were pilgrims. The first picture that most Americans have concerning the first pilgrims is not of pilgrims at all, but of Puritans who came later. Pilgrims were peasants, while Puritans came from the higher class of the British society and dressed in their black and white attire. Peasants wore everyday clothing and were being persecuted because they believed in a total separation from the influences of the world on their religious life. Puritans on the other hand tried to influence the religious thinking of their time without much success, which later resulted in many migrating to America.

When the first pilgrims came to the new land seeking religious freedom from oppression, they not only left the old behind, but they were willing to lose their very life. Their desire to secure the freedom to worship God was so passionate that they risked all to escape the oppressive political climate of their time. To them, the freedom to worship God was worth any cost required of them. Many of the first pilgrims paid with their lives. Out of the remaining 103 that arrived in the new land, 53 of them did not survive the first winter.

This is why Jesus' command to the disciples was to deny self of their rights to partake of the world and become crucified to its influences, allowing them to follow Him into the abundant life (*Matthew 16:24; John 10:3-10*). In our initial born-again experience we all start out as spiritual pilgrims, poor in spirit, seeking a place of spiritual freedom while fleeing the oppressive sin that enslaved us. Our deep abiding desire is to come to a place where we truly worship and serve a loving God.

Until there is such liberty, Christians can't follow Christ or effectively run the race. They must first adopt the right attitude towards the world in order to ensure a right attitude towards the Lord. Until they do, they will see no need to redirect their affections upward to become a stranger in and to the world and reject any mediocrity like a pilgrim to develop a passionate desire to gain Christ (*Colossians 3:2; Revelation 3:15-16*). This passionate

desire will ever motivate the believer to pursue a greater life, a greater revelation of Jesus, transforming his or her inner man to take on the very likeness of Jesus Christ.

What can we learn about being a stranger and pilgrim? In the Old Testament time they had refuge cities for strangers who were simply passing through the land (*Numbers 35:13-15*). These strangers had no interest in remaining in the area they were traveling through but they needed safe places to rest. For the Christian, Jesus is our place of refuge. We are to seek shelter and safety in Him as we travel through this present age from the lion, Satan, who seeks to devour; the wolves who would prey on our vulnerability; and the robbers and murderers who would rob us of spiritual treasures, kill our resistance to their advancements, and destroy our life in Christ (*Matthew 7:15; 10:16; John 10:10 1 Peter 5:8*).

This brings us to the problem that becomes apparent when a Christian possesses a worldly attitude. Since the world influences their thinking they will fail to see the danger that lurks behind such influences. They will be dulled down from discerning what is really going on and will fail to seek Jesus as the ultimate place of refuge and spiritual rest. That is why the Bible is clear that we must become crucified to the world and it crucified to us (*Galatians 6:14*). In essence, we must mentally and emotionally become a stranger in the world in order to become a spiritual pilgrim.

The Apostle Peter implies in *1 Peter 2:11* that we must become strangers and pilgrims in this world in order to be victorious in abstaining from fleshly lusts which war against the soul. In his second epistle, the apostle made it clear that we must be partakers of Jesus' divine nature after escaping the corruption that is in the world through lust (*2 Peter 1:4*). We see in Peter's first epistle that we are instructed to first take on the attitude of being strangers and pilgrims in the world to overcome lust, and once we do we can begin to partake of the divine nature of Christ. Whether we call it the great exchange or we talk about letting go of the old in order to take on the new, the same principle applies in

both concepts. You cannot mix the things of the world with the things of God. There must be a complete separation from the world in every area of our Christian walk in order to partake of the things of God. If the separation does not occur, the things of the world will pervert the things of God and the things of God will be defiled and rendered useless.

Hebrews 11:16 brings out the real focus of a spiritual stranger and pilgrim in this world, "But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God for he hath prepared for them a city." In *Hebrews 11:9*, it tells us that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were sojourners in the land promised their descendants and that they dwelled in tabernacles. Tabernacle is a tent and not a home or palace. It can be picked up and moved at any moment. The Apostle Peter pointed out in *2 Peter 1:13-14* that his body was a tabernacle. It is important that I point out these saints of old were strangers, aware of where they were and where they were going, and not a vagabond like Cain who had become lost to the things of God and was trying to find a place in the world where he would cease to be a wanderer.

Christians, we live in tabernacles, bodies. We are to be sojourners in this world and pilgrims that are seeking a new world, a city made by the hands of God. Nothing holds us here except the physical which will one day give way to the spiritual. The question is how rooted are we in this present world? How many of us have put deep stakes down to claim an earthly inheritance rather than pursue a heavenly one? How many are ready to walk into heaven because that is our real destination to live with our God forever and how many will trip into heaven by the grace of God because they are more like vagabonds than strangers in the world, and how many are like Lot, they will have to be dragged by the mercy of God into a place that will seem more foreign to them than the world they live in?

These are questions we must answer to determine if we are trying to graduate from walking towards heaven and running into it, or whether we are being spectators waiting for the

right time to slide into heaven, or perhaps we are settling for sitting in the middle of the road until someone rescues us from our lack of initiative and apathy towards God's kingdom.

I don't know about you, but each year for me has defined my desire to be with the Lord even more so because this world is making less sense, is offering even less than it did before, and is becoming darker. It is clear that my attitude towards it is lining up even more with heaven. Has, and is, your attitude changing towards the world? †

QUOTES & COMMENTS

"Repentance leads to revival. America is not going to wake up until the church wakes up." - Shahram Hadjian (The TIL Project Ministry) - WA

"The world is perishing for lack of the knowledge of God and the Church is famishing for want of His Presence." A. W. Tozer

"Loving the good with infinite intensity we must hate evil with the same intensity." - Herbert Lockyer Sr.

"Revival precedes evangelism. The church must first repent. This is the blind spot in our eye today. It is our Lord's last word to the church and the last thing most churches will do. Conviction of sin and confession of sin—these are lost notes in our preaching to the church today. We politely dodge it for fear of creating a disturbance" - Vance Havner

"The enemy has been extremely successful in using issues of sin in the church to defile the church, either through the leaven of sin itself or through conflict concerning how to deal with it." - Ken Butcher

"I re-listened to Rayola's sermon as it was so excellent and encouraging. (Sermon of Jan. 13). I'm so thankful for . . . the encouraging and uplifting challenging words to build our faith that you put out every month in the newsletter to keep us coming higher in Him and to trust Him." - ID

"I have learned a lot from you both. I get so much more out of my Bible reading." - WA

"You [Rayola] have truly brought joy to so many through the Word and the true guidance of the Holy Spirit! I truly know that you have taught me to be a good servant, steward and soldier. The fight goes on!" - ID

GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER

By Jeannette Haley

*"But Daniel purposed in his heart That he would not defile himself..."
Daniel 1:8a*

The month known for love's expression through cards, flowers, and candy is here once again. February seems to tiptoe its way into each New Year and snuggles

in between the long winter months of dark January and windy March. In the northern hemisphere February sometimes offers short, tantalizing hints of the spring to come before coyly retreating behind curtains of snowflakes.

Regardless of the weather, the state of the world, and predictable commercialism, Valentine's Day is a pleasant interlude with its reminder of the wonder and beauty of love and all of love's varied manifestations. The love of God shed upon human hearts, like the warm kiss of sunlight on a budding rose should cause an immediate response—a joyful quickening of the spirit in blissful abandon to our Father in heaven. *"We love him, because he first loved us" 1 John 4:19.*

However, the truth is we human beings are not predictable little rose buds, but rather agents of freewill with fallen dispositions that naturally prefer to receive love more than give love, prefer to be honored rather than give honor, prefer to live for self rather than live for God, prefer to love God for what He can do for us rather than for who He is, and in the end it all adds up to the fact that we really do love ourselves more than we love God. In addition, the incessant drumbeat and emphasis of the Church in the past few decades has been "God loves you," period. End of discussion. That's all you need to know, so now we can go party. It has also been the end of discipleship (commanded by our Lord) that begins with humility, repentance, consecration, self-denial, cross bearing, sacrifice, obedience, and emphasis on the virtues listed in



2 Peter 1:3-11 among other things.

Jesus said, *"If ye love me, keep my commandments" John 14:15.* It can't be any clearer than that. Anything less is sin. If you love God, you will obey Him. If you fail to obey Him by either commission or omission, it is sin. It's simple. But, somewhere somebody is going to figure out a way to gather a committee of over-educated idiots to dissect Jesus' statement, because, after all, it's in the interest of self that there must be some way around believing, being and doing what the Bible says. Everybody in the modern world of secular psychology is programmed to know that the three-letter word "sin" is outdated, irrelevant, repugnant, disgusting, and insulting to the degree that anyone who dares to pinpoint sin as the source of man's plight should be locked up in an insane asylum, along with people who believe God still speaks to people. As for the post-modern Christian who is marinated in the pickle juice of positive, possibility thinking, he or she has no problem believing that God has changed His mind about sin and the consequences of it (such as hell) since "sweet Jesus" came, and therefore, there has to be a more advanced explanation of Scripture to suit our "progressive culture." To such unbelievers that have convinced themselves they are "Christians" because they are "spiritual" sin is nothing more than "error" or a "mistake" or a "disease." Besides, you are supposed to love yourself, and love everybody and it is not considered loving to confront lost souls with that archaic three-letter "S" word.

Sin messes up everything in the belief systems and ideology of self-loving progressive, humanistic, modern man who, in spite of stark reality hitting him or her in the face from every direction insists on clinging to his or her excuses and delusions. Delusions that are propped up by excuses, wicked imaginations, pride, and rebellion are stick houses built on shifting sands. We all know what will happen when the floods come and the winds blow. Jesus gave us the answer as to why people prefer their delusions in *John 3:19, "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than*

light, because their deeds were evil". To love God is to love the light, the truth and righteousness.

Back to the antichrist experts who take their place around the conference table to discover the real meaning of *"If ye love me, keep my commandments"* some bright brain is going to question if that is what Jesus really meant, or if there is some hidden meaning that fundamental, Bible-believing, "uneducated" and "simple" people just don't understand. After all, the "laity village people" should be thankful that the "advanced, religious, intelligentsia" cares enough about them to redefine what Jesus "really meant." They are convinced that their righteous religious duty is to try and persuade everyone to conform to their way of thinking in the interest of unity. The problem is, however, people who have "cut their teeth" on the Bible, especially the King James Version, are the most difficult to "re-educate" into the post-modern, New Age, one-world, politically correct, counterfeit "church."

How can you persuade someone whose heart is fixed, who loves the Lord their God with all their heart, and with all their soul, and with all their strength, and with all their mind; and their neighbor as themselves" to forsake the God of the Bible and receive "another Jesus, another spirit, another gospel"? Such people love Him because they know Him. You cannot love, trust and obey someone you do not know, but you begin to know Him through the teaching of the Holy Spirit, by His Word, through prayer, through the "great cloud of witnesses" who have gone on before, the testimony of those who walk with Him, and through your own personal experiences and revelations of Jesus as you draw nigh unto Him in humility, and in Spirit and in Truth.

Consider Daniel, who as a young captive in Babylon, faced the same type of temptation in the idolatrous, godless, highly advanced, cultured civilization of his time. Instead of wringing his hands in self-pity and blaming God for his plight, because of the love he had in his heart for God he purposed in his heart to withstand temptation and not defile himself. The result of his refusal could have resulted in death, which shows us that his

love for God and his desire to obey Him (the Law of Moses) far exceeded his love for food, or even for his own life. Perhaps Daniel also knew *Proverbs 23:20, "Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh"* and it was his heart's desire to honor the LORD. Sometimes as Christians we need to remind ourselves of *Romans 14:17, "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."* Our love for God must be our priority in all things.

Think about Job whose heart was also established in his love for God which made him a target for Satan. The LORD said to Satan, concerning Job, *"Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? And still he holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause"* Job 2:3. How many of us could suffer as Job suffered and still declare, *"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him"* Job 13:15a? Job also purposed in his heart not to defile himself with sexual fantasies in his imagination. He said, *"I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?"* What would Job say today to the men of all ages (and women too) who are participants in our culture's obsession with pornography? How many people confess with their lips that they love Jesus, but are addicted to porn in their hearts? Jesus said, *"But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart"* Matthew 5:28. Surveys show that 60 to 70% of Christian men view porn. (See www.blazinggrace.org/). No one can faithfully serve two masters. A person is either a bondservant to Jesus Christ, or a slave to Satan.

Reflect on Peter's encounter with Jesus as recorded in *John 21*. In this account, nowhere do we read that Jesus tried to convince His disciples that He loved them. That was already understood and established. Instead, he asked Peter if he loved Him, and He asked it three times. No doubt Jesus publicly asked Peter three times because Peter denied Christ three times. Surely Jesus wanted to cause

Peter to go deeper into the depths of his own heart, for who truly knows his or her own heart? We can all give a surface, emotional, or automatic confession of love for Jesus, but when pressed with the question a second time by our Lord, we know that He sees beyond our shallow response to what lies underneath, and He wants to show us the state of our own heart. After the first response, Jesus said to Peter, *"Feed my lambs."* Now that Peter had confessed he loved the Lord, the Lord gave him a charge to new believers in the faith—innocent, vulnerable lambs. After Peter's second response, Jesus said, *"Feed my sheep."* Now Peter is given more responsibility to those growing in the faith. Then Jesus went deeper, asking Peter the third time, and Peter's heart was grieved. Jesus' three questions had completely filled Peter's heart, leaving no space for anything but Him. I believe it was a tearful Peter who confessed that Jesus knew the depths of his heart, *"Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee"* John 21:17b. Again Jesus said to him, *"Feed my sheep."*

It was then that the most remarkable thing happened, for Jesus revealed that He does indeed "know all things" (past, present, and future) when he said to Peter, *"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not"* John 21:18. All of Peter's life, from beginning to end was in the Lord's hands, and Peter's heart was now prepared to step into the calling of God, for God's glory. Jesus had brought Peter to the place where He could say, *"Follow me"* knowing that Peter would indeed follow Him unto death.

There is much to be learned about love for God from the account of Jesus eating dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee. *"And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of*

her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment” Luke 7:37, 38. The Pharisee watched this taking place in his house without saying a word, but in his heart he came to a conclusion about Jesus, thinking to himself, “*This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner.*”

Jesus, of course, knew exactly what Simon was thinking and said, “*I have somewhat to say unto thee.*” The Pharisee not knowing Jesus knew his thoughts, said, “*Master, say on.*” Then Jesus said, “*There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?*” Simon seemed eager to answer the question and said, “*I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged.*” I can just imagine that by now Simon felt pretty smart. But his exaltation didn’t last more than two seconds for Jesus “*turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment. Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little. And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven. And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgiveth sins also? And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.*”

There are many lessons we can draw from this passage of Scripture. Simon’s personal agenda to judge if Jesus was a prophet or not, and his pride set him up to be humbled by Jesus’ words. When it came to love for God, he would be the one people would automatically look to because of his religious training and position. Yet, he failed to offer the proper cultural hospitality of washing his guest’s feet,

greeting Jesus with a holy kiss, and anointing him. Each of these things is symbolic in Jewish culture. Anointing a guest showed respect and represented God’s special blessing, or commission. It also corresponds with consecration (setting apart) for God’s service. The Apostle John said that Christians “*have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth*” (1 John 2:20). Who is this Holy One? First John 2:27 gives us more on this anointing, “*But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him.*”

Foot washing in the Bible was not a ritualistic religious practice, but was a practical cultural service in washing the dust off of a guest’s feet. Generally the host’s servants would perform this duty. When Jesus washed the disciples’ feet He was showing self-humiliation and forgiveness, and taught his disciples to humble themselves and serve one another. As for kissing one another in greeting, this was an ancient practice and one which the Apostle Paul urged them to do in a godly or holy manner. Thus we see that Simon the Pharisee failed to honor Jesus with customary social hospitality, and we see the sinner woman humbling herself before the Lord because she knew who He was. Her actions spoke louder than words as she anointed Him with precious oil, symbolizing her faith in His heavenly origin; washed His feet with her tears in true humility and repentance because by faith she knew only God can forgive sins; kissed His feet without ceasing in love and thankfulness for who He is, merciful Savior and Lord. Truly, she loved much because she was forgiven much. What a beautiful example for all of us to remember and put into practice if we truly love Him. “*A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another*” John 13:34, 35.

In the book, *Pepper and Salt*, Vance Havner wrote, “I dreamed that I walked down the street of a town—it

could have been any town—and came to a church—it could have been almost any church. The congregation was singing ‘Onward, Christian Soldiers,’ and if there had been one more verse they might have sung themselves to sleep. The text was, ‘All things are possible to him that believeth’ (Mark 9:23). I said to myself, ‘If they really believe this, it will be interesting to see what happens after the benediction.’ After the sermon they sang ‘Rescue the Perishing’ and I could hardly wait to see them start rescuing the perishing. But nothing happened. Someone made a remark about the weather and when I asked, ‘But when do you start rescuing the perishing?’ He looked at me in alarm and hurried away. As I walked down the street, there walked beside me One whom I did not recognize at first. I asked Him, ‘Do they always act like this at church?’ Then I knew who He was when He said, sadly, ‘This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me’ (Matthew 15:8).” What is also sad to me is how so many people who claim to be Christians are publicly ashamed of Jesus, but not ashamed of talking and acting like children of the devil. It makes a person wonder who their father really is.

Concerning free will and our love for God, A.W. Tozer said, “Millions call themselves by His name, it is true, and pay some token homage to Him, but a simple test will show how little He is really honored among them. Let the average man be put to the proof on the question of who or what is ABOVE, and his true position will be exposed. Let him be forced into making a choice between God and money, between God and men, between God and personal ambition, God and self, God and human love, and God will take second place every time. Those other things will be exalted above. However the man may protest, the proof is in the choice he makes day after day throughout his life.” There it is again—free will. We all have a choice to make whether we will love the Lord with all our heart, or choose to ignore, disbelieve, or refuse to obey the first and great commandment to our own peril. If there was an award ceremony for those who love

God the most, who do you think would win it?

Again, Tozer gives us valuable insight: "For His own children our heavenly Father has provided right moral objects for admiration and love. The FIRST IS RIGHTEOUSNESS. Our Lord 'loved righteousness and hated iniquity.' (Hebrews 1:9) Here the pattern is fixed. To love is also to hate. The heart that is drawn to righteousness will be repulsed by iniquity in the SAME DEGREE. The holiest man is the one who loves righteousness most and hates evil with the most perfect hatred. The NEXT IS WISDOM. So high do the Old Testament writers place wisdom that sometimes we can scarcely distinguish the wisdom that comes from God from the wisdom that is God. Another object for Christian love to fix upon is TRUTH, and again we have difficulty separating the truth of God from God Himself. Christ said, 'I am the Truth,' and in so saying joined truth and the Deity in inseparable union. To love God is to love truth, and to love truth with steadfast ardor is to grow toward the image of truth and away from the lie and error." (Read Paul in Phil. 4:8)

It's all a matter of the heart. Jesus still calls to the Laodicean Church, saying, "*Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me*" Revelation 3:20. Are you supping (communing) with Jesus, or is the door to your heart closed because of guilt, shame, unforgiveness, bitterness, anger, fear, unbelief, or some secret sin? Perhaps you are afraid of surrendering your whole heart to the Lord because you cannot trust Him to do things your way. Maybe you are in an endless cycle of destructive behavior, addictions or habits that you need to be set free from. Whatever it is now is the time to open the door all the way open and let Jesus come in and make you free. "*(For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation)* 2 Corinthians 6:2. Salvation means deliverance, and oh! How we all need on-going deliverance from the world, the flesh and the devil.

Have you purposed in your heart

to love the Lord your God with all your heart? Or are you lingering like Lot, looking back like his wife, or leaning on the "arm of the flesh?" Who or what is more worthy than Christ? Who or what other than Jesus can save your soul? May the Holy Spirit today part the veil over every heart and reveal the mighty holiness, splendor and power of heaven and the one who sits on the throne in majesty—"And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever" Revelation 5:11-13.

What a day that will be! Amen! †

MORE COMMENTS

"The greatest gift is the Giver of eternal life! I just want you all to know how exceedingly joyful my heart feels as I 'drink in' the treasure I have discovered in/from your ministry." - WA

"We sure appreciate you. Thank you for keeping us informed on issues that is important to our faith. You are truly a watchman on the wall." - WA

"Thank you for all you have done to open my mind to the wonders and love of our Lord!" - ID

"Thank you so much for the '*More Heavenly Gems*' book by Rayola. We're looking forward to reading it every day as part of our daily devotions. We've loved all your books, but especially these ['gems books'] because of short and some long...but all truly sparkling gems! It's been our pleasure being a small part of GSM. You are all gifted and talented in each of your ministries." - WA

"Thank you for all your words of encouragement, and especially for '*Heavenly Gems*.' We look forward to its inspiration and wisdom." - ID

THE NOBLEST WORK OF GOD

By Herbert Lockyer

"What is man, that thou art mindful of him? . . . Thou hast put all things under his feet."

—Psalm 8:4, 6

In his *Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope wrote that "an honest man's the noblest work of God." Years later, Robert Burns used the same line in "The Cotter's Saturday Night." Without doubt, humankind is God's masterpiece in creation, but sin has robbed us of the pristine dominion David ascribed to us. Humanism exalts the individual as all-sufficient, requiring no assistance from God. Isaiah, who had some sarcastic things to say about pride, and haughtiness, exhorted us to "*cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils*" (Isaiah 2:22). But the Lord can bring down the mightiest from their seats (see Luke 1:52), that He alone may be exalted. Those who are terrified by the threats of proud people may be assured to know that the best people are only people at best, who God, in a moment of time, is able to wither up. The breath, even of arrogant, ruthless dictators, is in their nostrils and can be swiftly withdrawn by God.

We are guilty of misplaced trust when we depend on what others may have. Often, in church life and work, the one with the fattest purse wields considerable influence and is feared because of what is given. Scripture says, "*Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the LORD*" (Jeremiah 17:5). Is it not far better to trust in the Lord whose breath cannot be removed? The person after God's own heart is the new person in Christ Jesus, who alone is able to make the vilest one clean." †

QUOTABLE

"The need for the church to live under the exclusive headship of Jesus Christ has to be without doubt the greatest single issue for the church both now and throughout all time." - From *The Church—What On Earth Is It?* by Kenneth D. Butcher, pg. 243

RAYOLA'S Q & A CORNER

Q: *I have a particular question about unmarried couples living together who claim to be Christians. I am given the impression that if such a couple gets married, all is well, but for some reason that does not set right with me. Would you please give me your take on it?*

A: There are various issues confronting people today in regard to living together versus choosing the sacred institution of marriage. Sadly, much of the attitude about moral living and sacred institutions such as marriage and family in the church comes from the world making great inroads into the church. We live in a world that encourages liberal thinking and immoral practices even when it comes to the kingdom of God. Add to this the various enticements and justifications for buying the presentation of the world, while selling a bit of the soul for nothing but crumbs, you will create an unholy mixture that will most likely prove to be a total affront to righteousness. Sadly, we have heard of different Christian couples opting to live together, instead of marrying. The reasons for it are few and the excuses and attempts to get around it are interesting, but all the reasons or finagling around this matter does not stop the confusion about it, the division and hurt it causes in the family of God, or genuine concern for these people's spiritual well-being.

There are financial reasons for avoiding marriage, especially for older couples. The Bible refers to money as mammon, clearly stating that you cannot serve two masters, you must be prepared to choose who you are going to serve and obey (*Matthew 6:24*). Marriage for some of these individuals would mean losing some of their Social Security or pensions, which would cause hardships for them. Others see themselves emotionally married because of their love for each other. There are those who point out that in America before the government and the courts got involved, marriage was signified by the presence of a clergy, some witnesses and it being recorded in the family Bible and not in county courthouses, which has rendered it into a legality that has enriched lawyers while leaving the institution of the

family in utter ruin. There are those who are being taken care of by the opposite gender because of unhealthy family dynamics and feel leery of becoming a possible inconvenience to the church they may attend, because people who feel put upon and are void of grace towards such struggles prove to display what I call cruel mercy. In some of these situations, the couple's relationship is platonic. However, if you study the majority of the reasons for not marrying, it comes down to money or youthful lusts.

We can understand the reasons for such actions but it always comes down to what is God's view on people living together? It does not matter how sympathetic and understanding we might be of a person's plight, if God deems a certain conduct as being sinful, then it is up to His people to agree with Him and trust Him to work out the details. Whether we agree or not, cultural practices and the laws of the land influence what is deemed as marriage, not only in the sight of the Creator but in people's worldview, ultimately determining what constitutes an act of binding marriage. These customs and laws are meant to stipulate what actions must be taken to recognize the union between a man and a woman as a marriage, and is also meant to maintain the integrity of it. We know we are to adhere to the laws of the land as long as they do not undermine our responsibilities towards God.

However, for people who are faced with overwhelming circumstances, choosing the way of faith proves to be the greatest test when the world offers obtainable options and the church remains indifferent and silent. Whether such a relationship is simply platonic, the Bible is clear that as Christians we are to abstain from all appearances of evil (*1 Thessalonians 5:22*). It is vital that we keep our testimony free from any suspicions and accusations, which is the right thing to do but can prove to be hollow to those who see no other recourse because of their circumstances.

God considers all illicit sex outside of ordained marriage as fornication. Fornication is an abomination to God, a sin that is committed against

the body, not only physically but spiritually as it comes into spiritual agreement in an unholy union (*1 Corinthians 6:15-20*). This body is also considered a temple that is to belong to God and must be kept pure from such unholy agreements, which is also considered to be whoredom or prostitution. It is also clear that one of the church's disciplines is that we as believers must separate from such people until they repent, for such sins defile others and will ultimately keep people out of His kingdom (*Leviticus 18; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 5:7-13 Galatians 5:18-21*).

Couples who have given way to fornication and then married later on have not necessarily addressed the sin of fornication by their action. Granted, they may have covered up their sin and changed the outward appearance of their relationship, but there is only one way to address any sin and that is through genuine repentance (*Luke 13:5; 2 Peter 3:7*). Only Christ can take away the mark, stain, and stench of sin and bring cleansing to souls and consciences to ensure reconciliation with God (*1 John 1:5-10*).

Repentance entails agreeing with God about how He views personal attitudes and conduct towards sin. Such agreement will bring Christians to a state of humility that will be expressed in brokenness over the sin, as well as making a 180-degree turn in attitude towards the sin and ensuring the integrity of present and future conduct.

Through the years I have come to crossroads in my trials and tribulations. I had to learn that I must make decisions. It is easy to say we need to choose God, but when the giants are big and there is no hope on the horizon, we will naturally wrestle with whether we are going to trust God with each trial and situation or justify a matter according to the world. We can excuse ourselves over questionable issues, but God can only receive us at the point of the justification wrought by Jesus on the cross. Justification can only find a sure foothold when sins have been confessed by us as we seek mercy and forgiveness from the Lord who is quick to show us grace by restoring us and reviving us with His abundant and eternal life. ✠

