

"Come, Follow Me"



Grace Makes It Possible

Ralph E. Johnson

***“COME,
FOLLOW ME”***

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Possible**

Ralph E. Johnson

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*Dedicated to those whom Jesus has
set free from bondage to life-
controlling problems.*

*My sincere appreciation to my wife Sylvia
for her love and patience during the
many hours I spent writing and
praying over this book.*

*Most importantly my gratitude to Jesus for
the righteousness, joy, and peace in
the Holy Spirit which is kingdom
of God (Romans 14:17).*

CONTENTS

<i>INTRODUCTION.....</i>	<i>5</i>
Chapter 1. <i>Godly Sorrow.....</i>	<i>11</i>
Chapter 2. <i>Repentance.....</i>	<i>23</i>
Chapter 3. <i>Accountability.....</i>	<i>33</i>
Chapter 4. <i>Counting the Cost.....</i>	<i>61</i>
Chapter 5. <i>Endurance.....</i>	<i>79</i>
<i>REFLECTIONS ON GRACE.....</i>	<i>91</i>

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Introduction

During my early years of medical practice as an oncologist, it was common to observe patients having a peace that passes understanding in the midst of a life-threatening illness. But this changed dramatically over the years. During my last years of practice, most Christians coped just as poorly as unbelievers with cancer. Both groups reacted with moderate anxiety to outright fear in most instances, and occasionally with frank depression. Those professing Christ asked for sleeping pills and antidepressants to deal with stress just as often as those without any spiritual belief. This experience is similar to the many surveys that record identical patterns of divorce, depression, life-controlling addictive behaviors, and suicide among those calling themselves Christians as compared to those who deny any faith.

Should this be the case? Of course not! Christianity should be a manifesting of divine power in the midst of human weakness. In times of trial, those who are born again should be overcomers by God's love and indwelling power. Trials should create opportunities for Christ's life and grace to be revealed to a lost world. Indeed, our heavenly Father does not expect His children to barely hold the fort. Rather, they are meant to be soldiers who occupy the land, at least in a spiritual sense!

As boy scouts fifty-some years ago, we camped deep in the dense woods of Illinois. On the way to our campsites, scout knives were used to nick the bark of trees. The purpose of this practice was to avoid getting lost on the return trip. At the time, we called this marking of trees 'blazing the way.'

That's what Jesus has done for us! He suffered and was tempted in every way as we are. Having blazed the way, He is now able to help us through the dangerous woods in life. As our spiritual scout master, Jesus commands, ***"Come, follow me!"*** The only reason anyone gets lost is a refusal to submit to Jesus' leading. To trust Jesus and follow Him is really what faith is all about, and Jesus explains it this way:

The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. John 12:25,26

One evening at Calvary Chapel in St. Petersburg, Florida, I listened to a prison chaplain named Kenneth Holley describe work in the Florida correctional institutions. As he spoke, the Holy Spirit stirred my heart: *Soul cancer is far more serious than cancer of the body.* And on returning home that very evening in November, 1996, I told my wife Sylvia of a burden for men incarcerated as a result of life-controlling addictions. A compelling had suddenly been birthed to devote myself to those bound by chains of drug abuse, alcoholism and other life-controlling issues. Shortly, a decision was made to answer what I felt to be a call of God. The following year, I closed my medical practice to begin serving as a volunteer chaplain in the jail and prison system, working with men who were suffering from the consequences of addiction in many instances.

One might question this reordering of my life, although I was not particularly surprised. Like many of my former patients, I also was plagued by fear earlier in life. In fact, personal struggles led me into addiction with alcohol and substance abuse to a point where I considered suicide. I had no insight as to my despair and fear at that time. However, I later found a clear explanation in the book of Genesis. Fear developed immediately when Adam and Eve rebelled against the will of God in the garden of Eden. Once they had sinned,

guilt caused them to hide among the trees. When the LORD called Adam, the man replied, “*I was afraid*” (Genesis 3:10). So it is with those who rebel against God. And I was one of those who rebelled.

When Jesus told Nicodemus about being born again, Jesus spoke of life as a new creation. Eventually I found that newness of life is possible! By the grace of God, this is my 15th continuous year of freedom from the bondage of addiction to drugs, alcohol, and smoking. But it didn’t happen because of my own willpower, or by my own strength and determination. I tried to overcome my addictions for years, and I repeatedly failed despite having the best of intentions.

In fact, I couldn’t even admit my inability to overcome. It is something called denial that is all but universal among alcoholics and addicts. Eventually I would learn that overcoming takes place by the power of the Holy Spirit. It was only in coming to know Jesus and the power of His resurrection that my addictions were overcome. It was not going to be to my credit in any way, because Jesus is the one who sets the captives free! And something else happened to me in the process. My fear was replaced with peace and joy!

As I began jail and prison ministry in 1997, two obstacles were encountered at once. The first was fully expected, namely that some inmates would have very negative attitudes about Christianity because of the hypocrisy they had encountered. They had previous experience with those who profess a belief in Jesus, yet live like the rest of the world. Hypocrisy in the Church is certainly one of Satan’s most effective weapons against evangelism.

The second obstacle was what many inmates believed about salvation. At the one extreme were those who believed that salvation must be earned. This is quite understandable, since all non-Christian religions teach that men must work their way up to God. In contrast, the good news of Jesus tells that God came down from glory to seek and save the lost. Many inmates didn’t understand that being saved has more to do with getting God into us than with escaping earth to get into heaven.

Furthermore, the Bible is very specific that salvation is never gained by good works. *“For it is by grace you have been saved through faith...not by works, so that no one can boast”* (Ephesians 2:8,9). There is no possible way to gain heaven through good works. Only the blood of Jesus has enough power to wash away sin and to allow a holy, righteous, and just God to receive us into His family.

When Paul tells us to work out salvation with fear and trembling, he isn't saying work “for” salvation (Philippians 2:12). Paul is saying as does James that as deeds without faith are dead, so also is faith dead without deeds (James 2:26). No effort on our part can diminish the importance of Jesus' shed blood. He alone paid the price required to ransom us from our sins, and we do not make any contribution whatsoever to the payment of that price.

At the other extreme were inmates who believed that salvation is by so much grace that they could continue to live in Satan's orchard on earth and not risk losing the inheritance of heaven. They were deceived into thinking they would not reap what they were sowing on earth...the same heresy against which the apostles taught so vigorously in the early Church.

They believed a lie spreading spiritual death within the Church today, a lie the German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer termed ‘cheap grace.’ It is a lie that salvation is without conditions or cost. It is the lie of gaining salvation without Lordship...that the salvation given freely by God has no cost to those who accept the gift. These inmates believed a widely accepted lie that grace will always excuse sin, even though one continues living without repentance in accord to the sinful nature.

They believed there is no requirement to follow in Jesus' steps, because any degree of “faith” somehow does it all. They had listened to teaching which is contrary to the gospel that clearly says, *“This is how we know we are in [Christ]: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did”* (1 John 2:5,6, emphasis by the author). They had listened to the type of teaching that must have caused the Holy Spirit to have John pen the following words:

If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what [Jesus] commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. John 1:6; 2:4

What deception these men had fallen into! The scriptures tell that we are liars to profess Christ, yet fail to do as He commands. Nothing is easier to understand, yet many find their ears offended by truth. It is far more pleasant to listen to the false shepherds of whom Jesus and the apostles often warn. Jude refers to such teachers as godless men who change the grace of God into a license for immorality (Jude 4).

My incarcerated brothers needed to realize salvation is not a one-time event, but a relationship. Salvation is walking hand-in-hand with Jesus as the Lord of one's life. The kingdom of God is nothing less than what Jesus taught. It is like a treasure hidden in a field for which a person gives up everything to possess (Matthew 13:44). And my frustration over this belief in cheap grace and easy salvation would peak early in 1998, only weeks after I had closed my medical practice permanently.

Then came a most unusual dream!

It spelled out five simple points. Remarkably, the first initials of each point formed an acronym spelling **GRACE**: **G**odly sorrow; **R**epentance; **A**ccountability; **C**ounting the cost; and **E**ndurance.

My immediate reaction was that these were subjects to be taught others. Little did I realize how I myself would be convicted of spiritual poverty in certain areas of my own life. And in preparing the lessons, my personal walk with Jesus began to change. Now two years later, I am reminded how Paul tells that a time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, they will gather around them teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear (2 Timothy 4:3). Most certainly, this time has arrived!

“Come, Follow Me”

The Church needs to restore teaching of repentance, dying to self, sacrificial living, and a need to endure in the face of adversity. Jesus never promises an easy road for those who follow Him. His promise is to be with us during the storms all must face to enter the kingdom of heaven (Acts 14:22). We must always beware of those who teach that the way is easy, and that a person may continue to sow habitually to the sinful nature and still be certain of inheriting eternal life. Any idea that Jesus tolerates deliberate sin because of His mercy and grace is not to be found in the scriptures.

Life is made up of choices. During life on earth, Jesus chose to obey His heavenly Father. And there is only one other important choice. It's a choice that every person must make, and this book is about that choice. It's deciding whether or not to follow Jesus, and to realize that fence straddling isn't allowed in this regard. We are either saved or lost, sheep or goat, finding a narrow road that leads to eternal life or not finding it, and inheriting eternity in the presence of God and the angels or inheriting the lake of fire.

If we listen for Jesus' call, we'll hear it. And if we answer the call, we'll find joy and peace in spite of whatever cards might be dealt us during our life on earth. For Jesus has gone ahead of us to blaze the trail, and we'll be able to follow Him! Because He will provide all the grace that is necessary for us to do so!

There is a legend about a Bohemian king named St. Wenceslaus on his way to church during a heavy snowstorm. His aged servant tried to keep up, but found it impossible. So it was that the king told the servant to step in his footprints where the snow had been pressed down. By doing as he was told, the servant was able to follow his king and make his way across the difficult countryside. In the same manner, Jesus has gone before us to blaze the way so that we can follow Him.

So let us see exactly what Jesus means by saying to us, *“Come, follow me.”*

Chapter 1. *Godly Sorrow*

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regrets, but worldly sorrow brings death.

2 Corinthians 7:10

Adam really had it made! Temperatures were comfortable, the water from the river crystal clear and cold, and the garden was absolutely amazing. There was no need to even fertilize, yet there was always an abundance of fruit. And things were so incredibly peaceful that even animals were friendly with each another. Adam and his wife enjoyed watching the wolves and lambs take afternoon naps together under lush, graceful shade trees.

At the beginning, Adam lived in perfect communion not only with his environment but with himself and God. Adam's spirit, soul, and body were in harmony with each other, and his spirit was in accord with the Spirit of God. Adam's body was free of disease, and his mind and emotions did not have a slightest trace of anxiety. Because his will was obedient to God, Adam's conscience remained perfectly clear. He was God's representative on earth and was given rule by over all living things (Genesis 1:26-28).

Having formed man in His own "*image*," God intended for Adam to reflect His likeness and represent His authority over creation. But the situation changed when Adam rebelled and ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Spiritual death took place that very day (Genesis 2:17, KJV). Harmony between spirit, body, and soul was immediately shattered. Sickness began to attack the body, and led to physical death. The soul, also called "*heart*" in the Bible,

became susceptible to bondage by the cravings of the flesh, lust for possessions, and temptations of Satan. Man also lost dominion over creation by turning it over to Satan who became the prince or god of this world (John 16:11).

Despite man's rebellion, God continued to desire fellowship with those He had created in His own image. To this end God chose to reveal a preordained plan of reconciliation through a chosen people – the nation of Israel. To put this plan into action, God set forth a covenant or agreement in which He made certain promises along with conditions under which the Israelites were to live for the promises to be fulfilled.

From the very onset, God required obedience for covenant blessings to be passed to successive generations (Genesis 26:4,5). And in time, the Israelites received what came to be known as the law or *torah*. This included a moral code for holy living as well as rules to govern their civil life. A system of animal sacrifices also was established to provide forgiveness for those who repented after violating the commands of the law.

Under the old covenant, staying in a saved relationship with God depended on obedience to God's commands and the shedding of animal blood for forgiveness when His commands were broken. However the history of the Israelites is a story of failure to remain in relationship with God. OT history tells about what we would call 'repeat offenders' in today's judicial system. It is the history of a people who obeyed God for periods of time, only to backslide and rebel against His laws. This occurred repeatedly despite the fact that God had made it abundantly clear that He would only bless them in return for their obedience.

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse – the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey. Deuteronomy 11:26-28

Over the next fourteen centuries, the law and commandments given by God through Moses showed that man is not capable of living up to God's standards in his own strength. At the same time, God's demand for obedience has never been revoked. From the very beginning, God has chosen to work His purpose on earth through humans, and He even became human to make this possible, But God is unable to use rebels as His hands and feet today, so the demand for obedience remains in effect.

It was with Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection that a new covenant came into existence, a covenant God foretold through Jeremiah and Ezekiel as will be described. During the Last Supper with the disciples, Jesus took up the cup and said, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you*" (Luke 22:20). With the coming of this new covenant, grace became the one and only means by which man today is able to obtain the gift of eternal life.

GRACE – appropriately referred to as

God's
Riches
At
Christ's
Expense

In contrast to the first covenant, known as the ministry of the law, the new covenant of grace is known as the "*ministry of the Spirit*" (2 Corinthians 3:8). Grace refers to all of the redemptive benefits that are available to believers by way of the Holy Spirit. These benefits include God's love which causes godly sorrow over sin and brings people to the repentance that leads to salvation (2 Corinthians 7:10). It is by grace at Christ's expense that spiritually dead men are forgiven and reconciled with a holy God.

By grace God sets aside His wrath and right to punish us as we deserve because His own Son has paid the price. By grace we're

set free from our bondage to sin and Satan. By grace, we are sustained during our Christian life. And by grace we receive empowering that is necessary for us to follow Jesus, and to do God's will in our lives.

When Jesus took man's sinful nature on Himself, and died as our substitute, salvation became available to all men. Does this mean that everyone will be saved? Does it mean that all will benefit from the gift of eternal life so freely offered by God? The answer is an emphatic "NO!" As Isaiah wrote, "*Though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness...they go on doing evil and regard not the majesty of the Lord*" (Isaiah 26:10). Jesus tells that only a few find the narrow road to eternal life, while most people follow the deceiving and seducing ways of the world which lead to condemnation and destruction (Matthew 7:13,14).

An arrogant emperor once claimed all roads led to Rome, although such was not really the case. Today deceivers teach that many roads lead to heaven, or to what some call eternal bliss. But Jesus isn't the *best* way to heaven. He is the **ONLY** way! There is no other name by which men must be saved (Acts 4:12). Every born again person should be confident of a truth that no other way exists to heaven. Jesus says no one can come to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). One either believes this or he doesn't! It is a point of faith without any room for compromise, because Jesus says that He is the only way to the Father!

Furthermore, many speak of having a personal relationship with Jesus, yet scarcely know Him if at all. If asked whether Jesus gives personal direction to their lives, the reply is only a blank look. Yet Jesus says, "*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me*" (John 10:27). What can anyone possibly think Jesus means other than what He says? But many who claim a relationship with Jesus only repeat what has been taught as the correct thing to say. It has sadly become a rather casual matter to speak about having a personal relationship with Jesus.

However, Jesus defines a personal relationship in terms of love and obedience. *"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me"* (John 14:21). Once when told that His family wanted to speak to Him, Jesus pointed to the disciples and replied, *"My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice"* (Luke 8:21). Jesus says it is those who listen to His words and then obey who have a personal relationship with Him, not just those who profess His name or who once said a 'sinner's prayer.'

Many profess Christ today, yet show little evidence of separating from their old ways of the past. They claim to be the sons of God, but Paul says it's only those who are led by the Spirit of God who are sons of God (Romans 8:13). Many excuse disobedience by saying, *"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus..."* But they ignore the last part of the verse, *"...who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit"* (Romans 8:1, KJV). Other translations convey the same idea in this passage, namely that those habitually living in accord with sinful ways of the world have no valid claim to a promise of no condemnation.

Dilution of the gospel has led to terrible pollution within the Church. Scarcely a week passes without a report of church leaders having fallen into disgrace. Much of Christianity in America is now a form of godliness, lacking the power to change lives, to overcome addictions, and to dispel sexual immorality, anger, and greed that besets many who profess the name of Jesus. There are often surface changes in those who profess Christ, but a radical transformation of which Scripture speaks is never seen to take place. Sinful desires of the flesh continue to reign in the heart, although perhaps disguised by less flagrant behavior.

Paul writes, *"Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction"* (1 Thessalonians 1:5). When the gospel comes into the heart with power, the Holy Spirit brings deep conviction of sin and deliverance from its bondage. Not only does change in attitude take

place, but also change in behavior. Jesus didn't die as our substitute for the penalty of sin alone. By His resurrection He broke the power of sin and Satan over our lives so that we might live sanctified lives and enjoy victory over issues which bound us in the past.

Scripture never indicates that believers remain under control of sin and Satan. The redeemed are set free from slavery to sin so that evil thoughts, desires, and conduct can be cast aside. The angel Gabriel told Joseph that his wife Mary would give birth to a son conceived by the Holy Spirit. *"You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins"* (Matthew 1:21). The angel didn't say Jesus would come to save us in our sins, but *from* our sins.

Those born from above are not forgiven and left in bondage. The old self is crucified with Christ so that those born again are no longer slaves to sin (Romans 6:6). *"Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure, or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God"* (Ephesians 5:3,5). When the gospel comes with words, power, and the Holy Spirit, the words tell us that we are free and the power of the Spirit makes us free.

How does one enter into this saving relationship with Jesus? Scripture tells us that something called *godly sorrow* is involved. But before we come to that, let us realize all persons share certain basic needs and desires. Together with obvious essentials such as food, water, and air, we need to love and to feel worthy of being loved. And we need to find a certain measure of deep satisfaction or fulfillment in life.

The humanistic view claims that mankind can find self-fulfillment in the absence of God. This view proposes that if we can control our instincts, become educated, obtain a good job and gain financial security, our lives will be fulfilling. But sooner if not later

we find ourselves in the midst of something called *sin*. In simple terms, sin is rebellion against the will of God for our lives. Sin is allowing self to reign on the throne of the heart, rather than allowing Jesus to reign in what is His rightful place. And sin has a way of upsetting plans to have a happy and significant life.

We find ourselves in a battle for which we're not prepared. It's a battle not only against our flesh, but against Satan and a world he controls, a world totally committed to seducing us from the ways of God. It is a world opposed to God in every aspect from education and psychology to entertainment. And corporate America makes a deliberate effort to destroy godly standards by a promotion of self-centeredness. One example is the mailing of credit cards to millions such as teenagers who can ill afford to increase their debt level. Such companies attempt to serve the stockholders by putting people into financial bondage. It is not surprising that the Holy Spirit warns us about the danger of materialism.

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. 1 John 2:15,16

The battle against sin continues during the entire life of a Christian on earth. It is a battle in which either sin or God's life must die. If the life of God rules, sin will be killed. On the other hand, sin will kill the life of God in a believer if it is not put to death (Romans 8:13). And we need to recognize that our fleshly nature does not always easily surrender in this battle.

We listen to advertisements about what should satisfy man's desires. We put wealthy and famous people on pedestals and watch their lives glorified on television. Keeping up with neighbors remains very important, and we ignore God's word: "*You adulterous*

people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

Solomon wrote that God has set eternity in the hearts of men (Ecclesiastes 3:11). God places a desire in us to find eternal meaning and purpose for our lives. If that desire isn't filled with the kingdom of God, something else will fill it. I know this to be true. For years I tried to find personal significance in what the world promotes: fame, wealth, and all kinds of pleasure. Instead of being hungry for things of God, I did exactly as Solomon describes about himself. And I ended up with the same conclusion regarding what I had achieved in life.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Ecclesiastes 2:10,11

There was no lasting satisfaction in achieving what the world had promoted. The goals I had set out proved empty of real meaning once they were reached. When what we accomplish in our strength becomes a goal, we never climb the ladder of success quite high enough because the ladder is leaning on the wrong wall. To climb became addictive, and my appetite for approval could not be satisfied. The frustration that resulted eventually led to escapism in alcohol, drugs, and immoral living. I had to learn the bitter truth that man reaps what he sows (Galatians 6:7). The result was emotional, moral and spiritual bankruptcy in my life.

There were times that I felt guilt and regret for my behavior, and even times when I asked God to forgive me. But my prayers weren't designed to change a life of rebellion against God. I only wanted my guilt taken away and the stench of the pigpen removed. I

was a slave to sin, and there was no genuine desire inside my heart to leave the pig pen. Turning away from personal pleasure seeking was too great a sacrifice because my eyes were spiritually blinded.

My sorrow was the *worldly sorrow* as described by Paul (2 Corinthians 7:10). It was sorrow for having to pay the consequences of my poor decisions. In looking back, I'm amazed at the power of slavery to sin that held me captive for so many years. It was power from which I couldn't escape. Spiritual blindness convinced me of a lie that I could play in the devil's orchard without having to eat the fruit of my sin. It was the lie believed by a great many who attend churches in America today.

Worldly sorrow is like the attitude of many football players toward a penalty for unsportsmanlike conduct. It is sorrow for being caught, yet without sorrow for injury caused another player. That's how I was for years! No conviction over what I was doing to others, and no grief for rejecting God who'd sent His Son to die for me. I was not able to see myself as one of those Jesus looked at from the cross with His eyes filled with love and tears.

I was fifty years old before I experienced another kind of sorrow that Paul calls *godly sorrow*. Twice divorced, estranged from my family and career, and now having blackouts from alcohol and drug abuse, my life was on a downward spiral. Still I remained in almost unbelievable denial as to what was causing my problems. But Jesus has told us that the Holy Spirit will convict the world in regard to sin (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit used the powerful testimony of a recovered alcoholic to finally bring me to godly sorrow. His story seemed to be the story of my own life, and I came under deep conviction as I listened to him tell of turning his life over to Jesus after a life of heavy drinking.

Overwhelmed by sorrow unlike anything I had ever known, guilt swept over me like crashing waves. The need to be forgiven literally caused an aching inside my chest. It was nothing like any of my sorrow in the past because it was sorrow brought by working

of the Holy Spirit. It was **godly sorrow** that comes only by the grace of God. It was a sorrow which brings repentance that leads to salvation (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Suddenly I had more than a broken heart. By the **grace** of God, I now had a contrite spirit. No longer could I justify my life-style! No longer could I excuse myself for how I was living, and for what I was doing to others. No longer was it simply being caught with a hand in the cookie jar, needing to say, "I'm sorry!" Suddenly it became a matter that had to be settled with an Almighty God who held my eternity in His hands.

Here is where certain evangelists lead unsuspecting people astray! They teach that a sinner only needs to confess sins, and then ask Jesus to forgive him to be saved. Salesmen of cheap grace urge this shortcut, and boast about how many persons they presume to have led to the Lord.

In the process, however, a step vital for salvation is ignored. A step called *repentance*.

By promoting salvation as they do, these evangelists often immunize against the truth!

In medicine, vaccines are given to protect against illness. Vaccines consist of damaged viruses or broken pieces of virus that are unable to grow. These incomplete viruses cannot cause serious illness or infection. But damaged or incomplete virus is still capable of producing immunity or resistance that protects the body against infection should a person be exposed at a later time to someone who is sick with the healthy virus.

Incomplete teaching of the gospel also has an immunizing effect. Belief in the lie of 'cheap grace' causes a major resistance to truth. Once sinners are offered an easy road to salvation, they can become very resistant to the true gospel. While salvation is a gift freely given by God, the gift is very costly once it is accepted. Jesus not only demands repentance, but His teachings are very clear about the cost of discipleship.

There is no option when it comes to repentance. God's grace does not cause the conviction and remorse called **godly sorrow** just to bring about confession of sins. It's not enough to confess sins and ask forgiveness. Godly sorrow is intended to bring us to repentance, because **repentance** leads to salvation (2 Corinthians 7:10). As the apostle tells us, "*God is not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*" (2 Peter 3:9).

My wife and I attended the Tampa crusade of Billy Graham in the fall of 1998. This servant of God brought a biblical message, proclaiming that salvation involves three basic steps: repentance, making a commitment to God through faith in Jesus, and then living out that commitment. It was the same message as my dream. And headlines of the **St Petersburg Times** the following morning read, '*Repent Now, Graham Says!*'

There once was a shepherd able to call each of his sheep by name. A man challenged the shepherd to prove his claim, and they went to the pasture where the shepherd kept his sheep. The sheep came to the shepherd one by one when called by name, while the others continued to graze contentedly.

The doubter was amazed, and he asked the shepherd, "How in the world can you tell one from another? They all look exactly alike to me!"

"Well," answered the shepherd, "that sheep over there has a black spot, and that one to your right has a piece of his ear missing, and the one to your left has a slightly bent leg." The shepherd knew each sheep by its flaws, as not a single one of them was perfect.

Jesus knows each of us in much the same way. Each of us sins and falls short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). And Jesus says to every person willing to listen, "*Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow*" (Isaiah 1:18).

God doesn't want to condemn us. His earnest desire is to have us reconciled with Him. But God does not allow reconciliation

“Come, Follow Me”

without repentance. Before returning to heaven, Jesus told the disciples that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached in His name to all nations (Luke 24:47). And no true messenger of the gospel will offer forgiveness of sins and salvation without first insisting on repentance.

Godly sorrow is the grace of God calling for repentance.

So let us see what repentance means, for to understand repentance is a serious matter. It is serious enough that repentance will determine where eternity is spent.

My eternity...and yours!

Chapter 2. *Repentance*

Produce fruit in keeping with repentanceevery tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Luke 3:8,9

Baseball umpires have a standard cry to begin a game: “Play ball!” And the Old Testament prophets had a standard cry as well. It was “Repent or perish!” These men of God saw events through the eyes of heaven, and they had little tolerance for people not living in obedience to their covenant relationship with God. Prophets felt inward pain as they watched immoral and idolatrous living of their fellow man. While they foretold events with remarkable accuracy at times, their major role was to speak the truth of God and exhort the people to be faithful to God. Prophets emphasized the righteous and just character of God which required that sin be punished.

Because of the spiritual compromise that usually existed, the OT prophets were constantly reminding people that while God is merciful, He is also greatly offended by sin. The prophets warned that judgment would eventually come, and they never hesitated to challenge powerful kings and priests as well as the common people. Even when prophets knew their message would be rejected, they still felt compelled to speak out at great personal cost. As a result of this boldness, prophets were not only persecuted, but even suffered death at the hands of those in authority.

At the same time, false prophets in OT times misled people by teaching doctrines that compromised the true ways of God. And Jesus and the apostles repeatedly warn that false prophets abound in

these last days. Indeed, many a pulpit is occupied today by those who dilute the gospel. They teach a person can inherit eternal life without repentance, without changing their lifestyle of drunkenness, drug abuse, greed, sexual immorality, fits of rage, covetousness, and other sins that are offensive to a holy God. They promote God as a spiritual Santa Claus who blesses, but never brings punishment. But true prophets understand the character of God. They realize that the love, mercy, and grace of God are balanced by righteousness, holiness, and a demand for justice.

Four centuries of silence by true prophets had elapsed when a son was born to a Jewish priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, cousin to Mary the mother of Jesus. It was the destiny of their son John to prepare people for the coming of Christ. John the Baptist was the one of whom the prophet Isaiah had written hundreds of years earlier: *“A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God’”* (Isaiah 40:3). John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the desert area around the Jordan, and large crowds came to be baptized.

Although they were related, God revealed the true identity of Jesus to John. Seeing his cousin come toward him to be baptized, John told the crowd which had gathered, *“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world”* (John 1:29). John’s message of repentance stressed that repentance is to be evidenced by a life that is changed. In fact, John’s words foreshadowed the very words that Jesus would speak at a later date.

John said to the crowd coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance...every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Luke 3:7-9

When John the Baptist and Jesus told people to repent, there was always a spiritually deaf group of people. These deaf were not those considered sinners by most, such as the prostitutes and tax collectors. Rather, the deaf were self-righteous hypocrites like the Pharisees, scribes, and teachers of the law. Jesus recognized these men as pretenders whose public faces betrayed the reality in their hearts. Jesus' words angered these religious leaders when He said, *"You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me'"* (Matthew 15:7,8).

For the Pharisees, religion consisted of obeying rituals as a means of achieving status in the eyes of men. To them, religion was a legalism that thrives in the midst of pride and self-righteousness. Their counterpart today are people who do what is meant to draw attention to oneself instead of to Jesus. They worship with hands uplifted, kneel at the altar before others, and take notes during the teaching. But their private lives are filled with unforgiveness, anger, strife, lack of love, greed, and impurity. Legalism does not refer to the laws of God which believers are commanded to keep. Rather, it is doing things with a motive other than a desire for true intimacy with God and to serve Him sacrificially out of love.

Were Jesus to visit earth today, it would be out of character for Him to dine at 'members only' clubs to which many Christians belong. Jesus is an inclusive person, and nothing suggests that He'd be comfortable in those settings of luxury which exclude the less fortunate. Neither would we likely find him in churches which are little more than upper middle-class country clubs. Such churches often have some type of outreach to less fortunate people, but the majority of members have little if any compassion in their hearts for the underprivileged. They rarely if ever invite 'that kind of person' to their home for fellowship, sharing a meal, or other type of close personal contact.

Yet Jesus touched lepers all the time!

And He commands us, ***"Follow me!"***

Pharisees are not found today among the lepers who need embracing with love: drug addicts, alcoholics, homeless people, ex-convicts, prostitutes, those with AIDS, and other ‘sinners.’ Such people are carefully kept at arm’s length by a majority of those who call themselves Christians in America. The very ones Jesus sought for personal ministry are avoided. Jesus would not be welcome in the homes of these that refuse to minister to those He calls “*the least of these brothers of mine.*” Jesus always had sharp words for hypocrisy. If the truth were known, it might be down-in-the-gutter sinners who would be most comfortable in the presence of Jesus. Spiritual pride is a great obstacle to repentance and Jesus might well confront a self-righteous person today just like the Pharisee in this parable.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. Luke 18:10-14

A blind man sat by the side of the road with a lantern resting on the ground next to him. When asked by those who passed about his lantern, the blind man would reply, “It’s there so people won’t stumble over me.” And many Christians have so little light of Jesus shining in them that they cause unbelievers to stumble and reject the gospel. A Pharisee is one of Satan’s most effective tools in combating evangelism today, because a Pharisee avoids repentance that

can be costly. It causes a person to make significant if not drastic changes in his or her lifestyle.

So what is repentance? The Greek *metanoia* translated as repentance means to literally change one's mind. It is a changing of all elements in one's life that concern the demand of God for right living. As the result of repentance, one converts or turns in another direction (Gk *epistrepho*). In practice, this involves both a *turning from* and a *turning to*. In a biblical sense, repentance is a change in thinking and attitude which results in *turning from* a self-centered life and *turning to* a Christ-centered life through faith in Jesus.

Repentance **IS NOT** simply confessing sins or making a profession of faith in Jesus. Repentance is a total experience which involves not only thinking, but also feelings and behavior. Feelings are involved, in that there is remorse (godly sorrow) for past sinful acts. There is a change of will by deciding to not allow one's sinful nature to remain in control. And there is a sincere desire to allow Jesus to become the Lord of one's life, a desire that must be made valid or genuine by a change in behavior.

Many an altar is crowded by tearful people who confess their sins and ask God to forgive them, yet remain in the very same lifestyle. When John the Baptist said, "*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance,*" he was saying those who claim to repent need to show it by change in behavior. Their walk must go along with their talk! The apostle Paul stressed the same thing: "*I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds*" (Acts 26:20).

John the Baptist and Paul are both telling that saving faith is not a profession of the lips, but belief in the heart which leads a man to repent and change behavior. Repentance is seen in the fruit of a godly life as a person follows Jesus' footsteps through the power of the Holy Spirit who indwell each believer. Paul gives stress to the importance of change in behavior by describing his own apostleship as calling people to obedience that comes from faith (Romans 1:5).

The apostle John speaks of saving faith as involving repentance in a similar way by connecting faith with conduct. *“The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what [Jesus] commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him”* (1 John 2:4). And James refers to repentance as necessary for salvation, saying faith must be obedient in order to be saving: *“You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone”* (James 2:24).

Repentance that amounts only to talk without a walk wasn’t enough for John the Baptist, Paul, John, or James! And talk without walk isn’t enough for Jesus. Salvation requires repentance, and that means to walk the talk! One cannot strip repentance away from saving faith. Those who minimize the demand to repent ignore the warning of Jesus that all who fail to repent will perish (Luke 13:3). Jesus was a true ‘turn or burn’ preacher by telling people they must either repent (turn) or perish in the lake of fire.

At times, God uses a rod of affliction to bring a person to godly sorrow and repentance. People are often heard to claim that God never causes suffering, but such claims are simply not biblical! The Bible tells us God uses a *“furnace of affliction”* to bring godly sorrow and repentance, and to refine (Isaiah 48:10). This happened repeatedly to the nation of Israel throughout the entire OT history. Speaking through the prophet Amos, God specifically says that He was the one who caused their affliction.

I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me. I sent rain on one town but withheld it from another. People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to me. I struck your gardens and vineyards, I struck them with blight and mildew, yet you have not returned to me. I sent plagues among you as I did to Egypt. I killed your young men along with your captured horses, yet you have not returned to me. Amos 4:6-10

As a physician, I frequently watched God use illness to bring people to repentance. Whether their illness was self-induced like lung cancer in smokers, or whether caused by God or the devil, I usually couldn't tell. But I know that the heart only seems to yield to the Holy Spirit's work during periods of adversity in some cases. The psalmist expresses this in words I found to be true in my own life: *"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees"* (Psalm 119:67,71). When the Lord brings affliction, it is only done out of love and kindness that we might not be condemned with the world (1 Corinthians 11:32).

There is something else I have seen as a physician. It's the similarity between the treatment of cancer and repentance. In both instances, it is very important to avoid stopping short of the mark. Leaving cancer cells behind at the end of treatment is an open door for the cancer to regrow and eventually to kill. In a similar manner, repentance is spiritual surgery for the soul. And failure to repent of all known sin leaves the door open for spiritual downfall.

In the classic book of John Bunyan, **Pilgrim's Progress**, Interpreter says to Christiana, "One leak will sink a ship, and one sin will destroy a sinner." This is quite biblical and should be taken seriously. A small amount of yeast can spread through a batch of dough (1 Corinthians 5:6). Unrepented sin can spread and defile if not put to death by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:13). Paul exhorts us to purify ourselves from *everything* that contaminates body and spirit (2 Corinthians 7:1). He never suggests that the blood of Jesus automatically does this purifying. We are to work at the cleansing (2 Timothy 2:21), depending on the grace of God to help us do what we are unable to do in our own strength.

God intends for us to repent of all sins, and to put to death all fleshly misdeeds. Any deliberate sin will eventually affect faith in a very negative way. We're to cooperate with the Holy Spirit who makes divine power available to us so we can live in victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil. We are urged by Paul to live

by the Spirit and not receive God's grace in vain. This is a process called sanctification, and it is our responsibility to cooperate. God has chosen us to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit as well as through belief in the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Do not be deceived. There is no room for compromise with the spiritual forces of wickedness. Some Christians never come into the victory won at Calvary. They continue to live in habitual sin, in contrast to God's intent for those who are born again. *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come"* (2 Corinthians 5:17). These words are to be practiced in our lives outside the church walls just as they are to be preached inside. As James tells us, *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."* (James 1:22)

John tells us Christ appeared that he might take away our sins, and that *"no one who lives in Christ keeps on sinning"* (1 John 3:5,6). Many refuse to accept these biblical teachings at face value. But permissiveness toward sin is never found in the Bible. It is only to those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality that God gives eternal life (Romans 2:7). Because of a casual attitude toward sin in the early Church, Paul warns against using the grace of God as a license to continue living in sinful ways:

Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Romans 6:1,2

Once a decision is made to accept Jesus Christ as the Lord of one's life, habitual sin is rebellion against the indwelling Spirit. Continuing to sin on a habitual basis is never consistent with true repentance, as repentance is to be a lifestyle rather than a one-time experience. Christians must continue to repent as the Spirit reveals new areas in need of cleansing. To surrender the will to control by the Holy Spirit is perhaps the major issue with which man struggles.

When godly sorrow brings repentance, Scripture tells that a person isn't filled with regret over changes that repentance requires (2 Corinthians 7:10). In fact godly sorrow brings hatred of sin along with an earnest desire to change any behavior that is not pleasing to God. Grace removes craving for things that must be purged from one's life. This does not mean temptation ends, by any stretch of the imagination. Tempting still comes, just as we can't keep birds from flying over our heads. But we don't need to permit the birds to land on our heads and build nests. So it is that grace makes it possible to resist in times of tempting, providing we cooperate.

God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. 1 Corinthians 10:13

I've heard people claim they've never done anything they need to repent about. But every person born except Jesus sins in the eyes of God (Romans 3:23). All of us do what is pleasing to self at times, and ignore the command of God to deny self for the sake of others. Sin doesn't require an act that results in a prison sentence. Sin is doing that which seems to be right in our own eyes and not what God desires.

One Greek word translated as sin literally means to miss the mark. It's failing to score a bulls-eye in everything we do, and the wages of this failure is an eternal separation from God in the lake of fire. Everyone needs a Savior and the only escape from punishment for sin is to be ransomed by the precious blood of Jesus (Acts 4:12).

God does not wish anyone to perish, but the only way to be saved involves repentance (Luke 13:3; 2 Corinthians 7:10; 2 Peter 3:9). The Bible never teaches salvation comes by confession of sins. There must also be repentance! If you've never repented, ask God to open the eyes of your heart. Let Him make you aware right now of things you should not have done but did; and aware of things you failed to do, but should have done.

“Come, Follow Me”

Do not resist the grace of God that brings godly sorrow so you can come to repentance. If you are in a difficult situation, see your circumstances as the kindness of God calling you to repent (Romans 2:4). God never awakens guilt just to crush us. Our conscience is intended to be a spiritual alarm system. God desires to bring godly sorrow so that we might be saved from condemnation with the world. It is the grace of God that causes us to have remorse over sin, so that we will repent.

Jesus will accept you just as you are, no matter what the past was like. Surrender to Jesus, and receive Him as the Lord of your life. No greater joy comes to a heart than knowing all past sins are completely forgiven. God’s grace will provide everything needed to deliver you from addiction, greed or any other form of bondage that Satan uses to destroy. You only need to trust that Jesus will do what He promises...to set the captives free!

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus. Acts 3:19,20

Chapter 3. *Accountability*

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord,Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Matthew 7:21

Asked by the disciples for a sign of His return and the end of the age, Jesus first spoke about deception. And cancer of deception grips much of the Church today in the West. The crab was used as a sign for cancer centuries ago because it clings to the part it seizes so that, like cancer, it cannot be removed without great difficulty. The deception attacking the Church today is resistant to removal as well, because it isn't even recognized as being malignant by many in the body of Christ.

This spiritual cancer is deception that man isn't accountable to God for behavior, and it is spreading in both the evangelical and liturgical branches of the Church. Jesus' warning is being ignored to not neglect doing what He teaches (Matthew 7:21; Luke 6:46-49). Preaching has become commonplace that getting 'saved' is easy, a statement that is true in only one sense. By His sacrificial death and resurrection, Jesus has made salvation freely available to all men. Jesus came to pay a debt He didn't owe because we owed a debt we couldn't pay.

But salvation is scarcely free of cost to a person who accepts the gift. We cannot have Jesus as Savior without allowing Him to be Lord of our lives. In fact, Jesus says, *“Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple”* (Luke 14:33). However, these words of Jesus are rarely taught from the pulpit. We live in a time when it is popular to teach what tickles the ears of the

people who listen, and to give assurance of eternal security even to those who deliberately refuse to obey God's will (2 Timothy 4:3).

BIBLICAL BASIS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Satan wants people to believe that it is easy to be saved, that repentance is unnecessary, and that following Jesus is optional. Such lies from the father of lies are swallowed by many...hook, line, and sinker. But Peter tells that judgment will begin with the Church. *"It is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"* (1 Peter 4:17,18). Note Peter says *it is hard for the righteous to be saved* when he asks what will become of those who don't obey Jesus' teachings. The Holy Spirit also had James pen the same warning: *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says"* (James 1:22).

Next to unbelief, nothing is so dangerous as the idea of no accountability. Satan feels fine when people add a little *religion* to their lives while ignoring the demand of God for a relationship that results in obedience and holiness. Scripture warns that in the last days, men will not put up with sound doctrine, but will turn their ears away from truth (2 Timothy 4:4). The pure gospel says radical change is required to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It was referred to as conversion in the past, which implies making a sharp turn. An analogy is a conversion van. The outside may look similar while the inside is transformed. When the Holy Spirit takes up residence in a person, His intention is never to sit by idly. He intends to do a total conversion. And we're expected to cooperate!

A day of accounting is coming when all will appear before the judgment seat, and each will receive what is due him for things done, whether good or bad. On that day, Paul says we'll know what

it is to fear the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:10). This will be especially true for those who've been deceived into thinking grace is a white-wash for their disobedience instead of enabling them to live a self-controlled, upright, and godly life (Titus 2:11). For indeed on that day of accounting, Jesus will only be a source of eternal salvation for those who have obeyed him (Hebrews 5:9).

The Bible never says Jesus will be a source of salvation for those who refuse to obey His commands and live in holiness. It is a lie that faith can be separated from obedience. Believing on Jesus is more than just acknowledging Him. This is why Paul exhorts us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). All deeds will be revealed openly at judgment, both good and bad: deeds of kindness seen by no one else, along with deeds that show a lack of love as well as secret sinful acts done behind closed doors (Romans 2:16; 1 Corinthians 4:5).

John the Baptist preached about a need to live in a way that gives evidence of having repented, and Jesus uses nearly identical words to those of the Baptist: *"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit, you will recognize them"* (Matthew 7:19). Teachers will be recognized by the fruit (or lack thereof) of their followers. The false teachers are followed by those who continue to live in accord with the sinful nature, and thereby fail to bear good fruit.

Jesus is very specific that believers must bear good fruit. He warns that every branch *in Him* bearing no fruit will be cut off and thrown into the fire (John 15: 1-6). This is an explicit statement that *once in the vine does not necessarily mean always in the vine...* that relationship with Him can be severed for a lack of fruit-bearing. But we must recognize that bearing fruit isn't some kind of performance to pay back God for salvation. We are forgiven and justified only by grace purchased for us on a blood stained cross. No effort on our part can detract from the finished work of Jesus on that cross and the importance of the blood He shed.

Only by grace through faith can we be grafted into Jesus like branches are grafted into a vine. Then it becomes our responsibility to submit to Jesus' lordship and allow the Holy Spirit to work in us the purpose of God. Only then will fruit pleasing to God come forth in our lives, because all fruit must be produced by the Holy Spirit. In the economy of God, the Spirit is the person who is in charge of fruit production. We are simply the distributors of fruit, and never are to take credit for producing it.

Nothing less than submitting to the lordship of Jesus results in fruit bearing. Paul describes his own ministry as the teaching of lordship, to call people to obedience that comes from faith (Romans 1:5). Those who profess faith in Jesus are expected to bear witness to their faith through obedience. And because a person is involved in church activities doesn't necessarily mean that he is bearing fruit. We can *do* things in the name of Jesus while failing completely to *become* what God desires.

The desire of the Spirit is to produce the likeness of Christ in each of us. When this happens, good deeds that are pleasing to God will automatically follow. Scripture explains, "*Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain*" (Psalm 127:1). Lordship involves the will, that part of our thinking process where we make decisions. Lordship is a decision to obey God's will, and each of us will someday be held accountable in this regard. Jesus makes this clear by telling exactly who will be allowed to enter heaven.

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Matthew 7:21

PLANT THESE WORDS IN YOUR HEART! Jesus tells us that entrance into the kingdom of heaven is conditional on doing the will of God. Not thinking or intending to do, *but doing!* Verses like this are often ignored or distorted, along with others like James 2:24 that tells us, "*You see that a person is justified by what he does and*

not by faith alone.” We hear salvation proclaimed today by any kind of faith alone, and obedience is left out of the equation. Yet Jesus says *“only he who does the will of my Father”* will enter the kingdom of heaven. Is it any wonder we’re warned about teaching in the last days? Seldom do we hear these words preached boldly.

Man’s accountability to God has existed since the garden of Eden. The LORD said to Adam, *“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die”* (Genesis 2:16). And we are familiar with the consequence of Adam’s failure to obey. Mankind fell into spiritual death because of disobedience.

Centuries later, God chose the Israelites to be those through whom His law as well as His Son would be revealed to the world. Conditions were set forth for blessing to be received. *Obey and you will be blessed! Disobey and you will be cursed!* (Deuteronomy 11:26). After these instructions were given, tragedy after tragedy occurred because of their disobedience to the revealed will of God.

Paul says OT history is a lesson: *“These things happened as examples and were written down as warnings...so if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall”* (1 Corinthians 10:11). The Israelites were in a saved relationship after the exodus from Egypt. They experienced God’s grace, were guided by Him in a cloud by day and pillar of fire at night, and drank from a spiritual rock that was Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4). Yet God was not pleased, and most of them were destroyed in the desert. No one is free of condemnation if he deliberately rebels against God as Paul warns:

Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God; sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you also will be cut off. Romans 11:20,22

The idea that it is impossible to be *cut off* is deceiving many to believe accountability is canceled under the new covenant. But grace does not remove man's accountability to God. Rather, grace teaches us to say "*No*" to ungodliness and to worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives during life here on earth (Titus 2:12). The grace which comes to us by the Holy Spirit is an empowering that makes it possible to live in a self-controlled, upright and godly manner as God desires (Philippians 2:13).

Those in Christ no longer live under law in that Jesus paid our sin debt in full so we might be free from the curse of the law. But that doesn't mean the moral law was discarded, and obedience is no longer necessary. Do not buy into a lie that grace is a frosting of mercy that covers a lifetime cake of deliberate rebellion against God. Grace never excuses the command of God to be holy (1 Peter 1:16). Instead, grace gives us every provision needed so that we can live in holiness by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The traditional creed of the Bible is to confess Jesus as the Lord. "*That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*" (Romans 10:9). But the creed being taught by some today is to confess Jesus as Savior rather than as Lord. I believe the devil is delighted with this teaching of saviorship which ignores the issue of obedience that is contained in the meaning of lordship.

Discarding of lordship is certainly part of what Jesus warns about when He refers to false prophets who wear sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). These false prophets appear as dedicated ministers with credentials of ordination, and their work appears successful at first (Matthew 7:22). But once having gained positions of influence, they undermine the pure gospel. If anyone stresses either lordship or holiness, they cry, "Legalism! We don't live under the law. We live under grace and obedience isn't required!"

Make up your mind to remember Jesus' words about who will someday enter the kingdom of heaven: "...*only he who does the will of my Father.*" Keep a focus on the teachings of Jesus, and

beware of Satan's helpers who masquerade as servants of righteousness. They teach that a lack of obedience does not affect salvation, and that acting to please the sinful nature will not reap destruction. Be careful to test what you hear by careful study of the scriptures, and memorize the following words.

“Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life”

Galatians 6:7,8

Saving faith has three parts, recalled by the letters **AAA**. These letters stand for awareness, agreement, and action. One must be **aware** that Jesus is the only Son of God who died as a ransom for sinners, rose from the dead, and now sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven. He broke the chains of bondage to sin and death, and there is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved (Acts 4:12).

But there's more to saving faith than simply being aware of these truths. James says even demons are aware of truth, and they “*shudder*” (James 2:19). Saving faith also means to **agree**, and to firmly believe that with repentance and through faith in Jesus, a person can be justified in the eyes of a just and righteous God. It means understanding the consequence of sin is death, and that only by trust in the finished work of Jesus at Calvary are we forgiven and accepted into the family of God.

Then we must **act** on faith by a commitment to follow Jesus. James tells, “*You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith only*” (James 2:24). This is what accountability is all about. Accountability means a man is saved by what he does, and not by faith alone. To claim having faith without striving to live a life of obedience with the help of the Holy Spirit is talk without a walk. Jesus illustrates this principle in the following parable.

Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on a rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

Matthew 7:24,25

Here is where a correct understanding of grace is crucial. The old covenant was a ministry of the law that no man could keep because it did not impart power to obey. God's standards were so high that no one could achieve what He required. Only in Christ is found the righteousness that a just God demands. And only through faith in Jesus can His righteousness be credited to our account. So it is only through faith in Jesus that we can be saved by grace.

However, there is more to grace than forgiveness based on the life and death of Jesus. The riches of God called grace include indwelling *and* empowering by the Holy Spirit. The new covenant is a “*ministry of the Spirit*” in contrast to the old covenant that was a ministry of the law (2 Corinthians 3:8). It is by the Holy Spirit that the benefits of God's grace come to us, including the power to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives.

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

1 Peter 1:3,4

Peter doesn't say we are given some things to help us live godly lives. Nor does he say we are given most things. We are given *everything* we need to escape corruption in the world caused by evil desires. Nonetheless cooperation is required. We must desire to have the Holy Spirit help us separate from evil ways of the world and put to death lust, greed, bitterness, anger, envy, and a host of crippling addictions. It is a process the scriptures call sanctification.

This is where man struggles and makes excuses! I'm aware of my hesitancy to give full cooperation to the sanctifying work of the Spirit at times. It can be painful to crucify the flesh because old 'Adam ways' do not like to die. Nonetheless they *must* be put to death. When Jesus calls us to follow Him, dying to self is never an option. It's a demand! "*Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it*" (Matthew 16:26).

Teaching about sanctification is full of compromise in these days. But numerous scriptures commend us to this work of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:19-21; Romans 6:1-4; 1 Corinthians 6:9,10; 1 John 1:6; 1 John 3:7-10; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). We're to throw off everything that hinders our walking with Jesus (Hebrews 12:1). A person puts himself at risk by refusing to cooperate with the sanctifying work of the Spirit. To resist not only grieves the Holy Spirit, but continued resisting can risk putting out the fire of His presence in our lives (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19).

As we look at what God intends for our lives, there may be a tendency to feel overwhelmed. We recognize there is a wide difference between having good intentions and acting on those intentions. But no matter how inadequate we might feel at any moment, Jesus promises us the grace we need when tested beyond our ability to endure. In fact, self-confidence can be a handicap. Jesus says His power is only perfected in weakness. We must accept our inability to do what God expects in our own strength so that we will learn to depend on His grace (2 Corinthians 12:9).

As we look at the tolls to be paid in following Jesus on the narrow road to eternal life, let us be determined to seek humility. It

is only in being emptied of self that the Holy Spirit can fill us, and make possible what is impossible in our own weakness. Just as we are saved by grace, we need to recognize that grace is also required to sustain us in our daily Christian walk.

ACKNOWLEDGING GOD

To acknowledge is to speak publicly about that which might be kept secret. And be not mistaken! God insists on being acknowledged by those professing to be His sheep. Every believer in Jesus is expected to speak openly about Him before others, even when to do so is certain to bring opposition if not persecution. Can you ever imagine a person terribly in love with a person of the opposite sex not wanting to tell others? Shouldn't that attitude apply to a person in love with Jesus?

Believers should speak of Jesus with irrepressible joy. Yet some who profess to know Jesus claim religion is a private matter. This especially is true when speaking out can bring embarrassment if not financial loss. I personally have doubt whether those reluctant to speak about Jesus publicly are truly born again. Support for this statement is found in the words of Christ about those reluctant to openly acknowledge Him in the presence of others.

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels. Mark 8:38

The early church acknowledged Jesus with great boldness. Many chose death by hungry lions and beheading by refusing to call the Roman emperor 'Lord' because of their devotion to Jesus. It is interesting to note that the Greek *martus* translated in the Bible as "witness" is the word from which martyr is derived. This suggests a need to die to self before Christians are able to witness effectively. More Christians are being martyred today than ever in history for a

witness of faith in Jesus, especially in those countries which are predominantly Muslim and Hindu. People who convert to faith in Jesus Christ in those cultures are usually disowned by their families at the minimum, and persecution frequently includes loss of life.

The Bible tells that persecution increases in the last days and will be a sign of Jesus' return (Matthew 24:3-9). But strong witness for Christ is absent in America where most churches are lukewarm and the gospel is diluted. Many who profess Jesus never experience suffering, despite Scripture telling suffering is to be expected if one is to attain glory (Romans 8:17). The primary concern of many if not most Christians in America is their personal prosperity, comfort, security, and social acceptance.

One rarely hears sermons stress the privilege of suffering for Jesus. How often have you heard the following verses used as the theme in a sermon? *"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for him"* (Philippians 1:29). *"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps"* (1 Peter 2:20,21). Many verses in the scriptures have their emphasis on suffering for Christ, yet most preachers avoid these verses as much as they seek to avoid a diagnosis of AIDS or cancer.

Christians can also fail to acknowledge Jesus by refusing to be identified with those society tends to shun. This ignores a command of Jesus to treat *"the least of these brothers of mine"* as we would treat Jesus Himself (Matthew 25:40). And another way of not acknowledging Jesus is failure to defend His name when it is used profanely. How can we not speak up for the One who died on our behalf? Many of us need to seek forgiveness for a lack of courage in defending the holy name of Jesus!

Besides, great blessing is promised to those who are faithful in acknowledging Jesus. God says, *"I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name"* (Psalm 91:14). Perhaps this explains in part why many Christians today feel so unprotected and

not rescued in time of trouble. I am not suggesting that all adversity results from a failure to publicly identify with Christ. But God does tell us, *“I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed?”* (Isaiah 48:10,11).

Are you defaming Jesus by not acknowledging His name? Is acceptance by others more important to you than God’s approval? Do you back away from witnessing among family and friends for fear of offending them? And what about your work place? Would you risk losing a job if your employer insists on dishonest behavior? If you’re reluctant to witness for Jesus and defend His name as I’ve been at times, confess it! God is aware it is true. Join me in asking God for the grace to stop worrying about how we look to others and to be loyal to His Son in the future.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:14,16

FORGIVENESS

Few things are likely to be so critical on the day of judgment as obeying the command to be forgiving of others. Yet many Christians harbor unforgiveness in their heart. In fact, unforgiveness is so common in the Church that one might suppose Jesus forgot to teach about the subject. But Jesus has a great deal to say about forgiving, and not with suggestions either. He issues warnings so serious that no Christian should ever dare ignore what is said. It is a principle in the kingdom of God that those who follow Jesus must be willing to surrender their rights to be resentful and hold grudges.

The reason is that God's forgiveness of us is conditional. It is possible to forfeit the forgiveness we ourselves receive from God. Now before you throw this book in the garbage because I said this, please first read the next few pages. You see, we hold very tightly to what are called *personal rights*. A personal right is a rule that we expect others to respect. If they don't do so, we often become upset and angry. But Jesus says we are required to forgive endlessly, even when the same right is violated again and again (Matthew 18:22). He doesn't suggest forgiving like this, but demands that we do so!

You may reasonably argue, "It doesn't seem right to keep forgiving again and again. It goes against human nature!" And you are right. Giving up personal rights goes against human nature. But we must realize that personal rights belong to the person who owns the rights. And those who are born from above are no longer their own. Paul says, "*You are not your own; you were bought at a price*" (1 Corinthians 6:20). Jesus has purchased each and every believer with His blood, and their personal rights belong to Him.

The Greek word *kurios* translated in the scriptures as "Lord" means to have complete possession and authority over a person or persons. Yet giving up personal rights is a most difficult part of following Jesus. When our personal rights are violated, we often tend to react instinctively. But God doesn't give permission to retaliate. We're to respond to offense by forgiving...again and again when it is necessary! Anyone with serious difficulty forgiving should pay close attention to a sobering parable. It is a familiar parable, and yet many Christians fail to hide its truth in their hearts.

Jesus tells of a king who is settling accounts with his servants. In the process, the king forgives a certain servant a very large debt [the equivalent of millions of dollars] out of compassion for his plea, "*Be patient with me.*" The same servant was lacking mercy, however, when it came to a fellow servant who owed him a small debt [the equivalent of an average day's wages]. Instead of showing

the compassion he himself had received, he put his fellow servant into prison until the debt could be paid. And when others saw what happened, they reported it to the king.

Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I canceled that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In anger, his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

Matthew 18:21-34

Jesus follows this parable with a warning no one should ever dare forget: *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart"* (Matthew 18:35). This moral is impossible to miss! The king restored the debt that he previously cancelled, a debt so large that it was impossible to repay. The king not only took back forgiveness of the ungrateful servant, but turned him over to torturers. This parable unquestionably shows us that refusal to forgive can forfeit one's own forgiveness.

In addition, there is no better way for a person to invite his own torture than by being unforgiving of others. I've seen a wide variety of medical problems having the cause in a root of bitterness, including high blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes, bleeding ulcers, colitis, severe headaches, and disabling insomnia. Jonah was unforgiving, because he didn't want the Ninevites spared punishment he felt they deserved. As a result, he found himself imprisoned in the belly of a large fish.

We ourselves can easily become imprisoned in the belly of an unforgiving spirit if we're not careful. When sand gets inside an oyster, the irritation produced may lead to the formation of beautiful pearls. But the irritation produced inside people by an offense is not likely to produce much of anything except a lump of bitterness or resentment. Bitterness and resentment is anger which has not been dealt with by forgiveness, and it not only defiles others (Hebrews 12:15). It can even risk losing fellowship with God.

In the model of prayer often referred to as the Lord's Prayer, we find the words "*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*" Only as we forgive others can we be forgiven. Jesus then continues with words that we often do not recall so readily: "*If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins*" (Matthew 6:14,15).

This warning *must* be kept in the front of our memory bank. To not forgive is a dangerous cliff that we must be careful to avoid. There may be no area in daily living with a greater need for a sign that says 'Danger!' Human nature can devise so many excuses as justification for not forgiving. But just as Jesus overcame evil with love, we are commanded to follow His example. It means to love those who treat us wrongly and spitefully. This is especially true if the person who causes offense is close to us, because that's exactly where many deep-seated hurts are birthed.

To forgive doesn't mean a hurtful offense never took place, or that we must ignore pain we feel. Neither does forgiving make an excuse for what took place, or mean we must forget what happened. Forgiving does not even require reconciliation if the other party is unwilling to mend fences. Forgiving is what we deliberately do to heal ourselves of resentment. We forgive to avoid being imprisoned by bitterness. As Corrie ten Boom once said, "*To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and then realize the prisoner is you.*"

Under some circumstances, it may only be through Christ who gives us the needed strength and comfort that forgiving is even possible. This is true in particular after being wounded deeply by a close friend or family member such as a spouse. But despite how difficult it may seem at the onset, we must determine to forgive, and to do so completely from the heart. Forgiving is not something that happens by itself. To forgive is a choice and it's critical to make the right choice. The wrong choice can result in serious consequences that may even be eternal.

SEXUAL MORALITY

The story of Adam and Eve tells that God ordained marriage with a plan for one man to be united with one woman. *“For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh”* (Genesis 2:24). This implies that any other relationship like living together outside of a marriage, polygamy, adultery, fornication, or a homosexual/lesbian coupling are all perversions of God’s intended moral order for mankind.

To ‘adulterate’ is literally to make something impure by the addition of what is less valuable. That’s exactly what happens in all relationships other than marriage between one man and one woman. The *“one flesh”* God ordained is made impure, and the will of God is violated. And never be deceived about the attitude of God toward sexual immorality. Recall the punishment set forth in the OT law: *“Both adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death”* (Leviticus 20:10). And God ordained the same punishment for homosexuality and lesbianism: *“If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them...must be put to death”* (Leviticus 20:13).

Furthermore, do not be deceived that God changed His mind toward sex outside heterosexual marriage under the new covenant. God doesn’t wink at sexual sin today any more than He did yesterday. Jesus’ teaching is actually stricter than OT law, because Jesus makes inner desires just as important as outward behavior.

You have heard that it was said, “Do not commit adultery.” But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. Matthew 5:27-29

It is incredible how some claim the scriptures to be inspired and infallible, yet compromise what Jesus teaches about morality. There’s no area where dilution of the gospel leads to more pollution

in the Church than with regard to sexuality. The number who lose not only marriages but positions in the ministry due to moral failure in these last days is tragic.

God is aware of impure thoughts. And He is fully aware of lustful eyes that dwell on pornography, ungodly movies, television “soaps” with plots of seduction, and of computer sex. All are totally disgusting to our holy God. When a believer is feasting his eyes on moral trash, Jesus who lives in his heart is being invited to watch. The same is true when a believer fornicates or commits adultery.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20

Let us not be deceived about impurity, of having thoughts that would be carried out if opportunity arose. Scripture says man is as he thinks in his heart (Proverbs 23:7, KJV). Whether it is temptation viewed on TV, the internet, or in porn magazines, they pose as serious a threat to moral integrity as adultery. Only the pure in heart have a promise to see God (Matthew 5:8).

The scriptures speaks of a highway to heaven, saying, “*it will be called the Way of Holiness*” (Isaiah 35:8). The prophet goes on to say the unclean will not journey on this highway. Paul is very specific about this, warning transgressors will not inherit the kingdom of God if they fail to repent and overcome their wickedness.

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God. Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders....will inherit the kingdom of God. 1 Corinthians 6:9,10

It hardly seems coincidental that Paul lists sexual immorality first when he describes acts of the sinful nature, not only in this letter to the Corinthians, but to the Galatians (5:21) and Ephesians (5:5). He warns that those having sexually immoral lives will not inherit the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, teaching about morality often sounds more like a whimper than like thunder in recent days. If strong teaching is needed about any particular subject, it may well have to do with sexual morality. Even immodest dress is rarely rebuked from the pulpit. It seems fear of offending people is greater than fear of offending God who commands that we not be a cause of stumbling to others.

Let us be diligent to walk in the light of God's truth by the power of the Spirit (1 John 1:6,7). Grace available through the Holy Spirit is more than sufficient for us to be victorious over sexual sin. Let us have godly fear over the coming wrath. Sexual immorality will certainly bring the wrath of God upon men (Ephesians 5:5,6). Do not deceive yourself that this warning is only for the unsaved. What Paul writes to brothers in Christ is also meant for us today.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. Colossians 3:5,6

IDOLATRY

The Israelites were greatly affected by the idolatry of their neighbors. Pagan worship was especially tempting as it included sexual acts with temple prostitutes. The idolatry of today is more subtle than the worship of gold and bronze statues associated with prostitution. To understand the true character of idolatry, we need to examine the commandments given by God. The first prohibits the worship or serving of any god except the LORD, and the second forbids worshipping a form of anything. Thus anything with excess importance in our lives becomes an idol from God's perspective.

Idols include money, anything money can buy, and many of the so-called pleasures in life including illicit sex, alcohol, drugs, or other indulgences including gluttony. Desire for fame or popularity can become an idol, and relationships can interfere with the priority God demands and become a form of idolatry.

Greed is described as idolatry in the Bible (Colossians 3:5), and the world constantly tries to convince us that the one having the most toys is a winner. But from heaven's viewpoint the one with the most toys loses. Jesus says our heart is where treasures are located, so having treasures in the wrong place can be spiritually fatal.

Despite the fact idolatry is a sin that excludes a person from heaven, coveting is rarely condemned from a pulpit. To Jews in the time of Jesus, wealth was considered a sign of favor by God. They sneered at Jesus when He said people can't serve both God and money, and for saying that life does not consist in the abundance of a person's possessions (Luke 12:15). But despite rejection that His teaching received, Jesus continued to warn about a danger of riches. Few people rid themselves of loving wealth once they are caught firmly in its grasp.

Nonetheless, prosperity teaching is epidemic today, as it was before God brought judgment on the Israelites by sending them into captivity. False prophets teach that God desires everyone to enjoy a lifestyle of luxury. Certainly it is not God's desire for people to live in poverty and disease. But those who claim God wants everyone to abundantly prosper in the sense of luxury are trying to justify their own self-indulgence, and are pandering to what people love to hear.

Scandals involving teachers of prosperity repeatedly bring shame and disgrace to the body of Christ. Not long ago, I listened to a television personality well-known for teaching prosperity when he shockingly said, "Who ever heard of the apostles being poor!" This man is totally deceived. Paul describes himself "*poor, yet making many rich; having nothing and yet possessing everything*" (2 Corinthians 6:10). The apostle clearly understood there is a vast difference between making a living and making a life.

The Bible repeatedly makes it clear that covetous (greedy) people will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Wishing for riches is a cause of men falling into desires that plunge them into destruction (Ephesians 5:5,6; 1 Timothy 6:9). Lot learned this truth by longing for the rich plains near Sodom. Achan yearned for “*devoted things*” and was destroyed because of greed. Gehazi’s greed gained him more than clothing and silver; he also received Naaman’s leprosy. The rich fool in Jesus’ parable who wanted a bigger barn to hold his blessing of abundant crops had his life taken away the same night.

A wide gulf separates the rich man and Lazarus in a parable told by Jesus. It was a gulf so wide that it was impossible to cross over (Luke 16:19-31). Yet many Christians try to live in that gulf today, while God wants us to separate from the priorities and ways of the world. Jesus teaches that godly people will not dance to the music of the world, just as He spoke to Pharisees about their greed:

You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight.

Luke 16:15

It is critical to take a periodic inventory to be certain that our priorities remain in the proper order. Even activities can develop an excessive importance and be idolatrous. It is possible to become so absorbed with church work that Jesus in whose name work is done is being ignored. Our heavenly Father is more concerned with *who we are* than with *what we do*. Only if we become what He desires will our labor be His will for our lives.

Let us hold fast to the kingdom principle of seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Anything that draws focus away from becoming conformed to Jesus’ likeness can become a potential form of idolatry. This is why Jesus warns about trying to serve two masters. It cannot be done successfully (Luke 16:13). So be watchful that innocent things do not distract us from seeking the face of God before anything else.

.....Don't let a morning newspaper replace morning devotions.
.....Don't let computers or televisions replace daily Bible study.
.....Don't let a golf handicap replace helping the handicapped.
.....Don't let time with your children lead you to ignore orphans.
.....Don't let a fishing pole replace being a "fisher of men."
.....And don't let anything get in the way of time spent daily with God in prayer.

Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal greed, distracting activities, or any other idolatry in your heart. We are to love the Lord with all our heart, and not let anything interfere with His will in our lives. It is well to remember that rockslides can begin with small pebbles. And spiritual backsliding can begin with what seems to be a very minor distraction. Lest we remain alert, deception can lead to almost anything becoming an idol without our being aware such is happening.

TRUTHFULNESS

Like unforgiveness, lack of honesty is common in the body of Christ. Again one might question whether the scriptures address this subject. But God *is* concerned about honesty and speaks on the subject with stern language. Proverbs tells us the Lord is detesting of lying lips (12:22). The psalmist states that the Lord abhors men who are deceitful (Psalm 5:6). We are warned that all liars will find a place in the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Revelation 21:8). In fact, the last sin condemned in the Bible is falsehood (Revelation 22:15).

Yet we're tempted to take such warnings lightly, especially as they concern exaggerating. But if you minimize the importance of telling truth, read the story of Ananias and Sapphira. The Holy Spirit includes this story in the NT to stress that God doesn't look at falsehood as being of little significance. This couple announced that they would donate the proceeds from sale of property to the church. This follows a similar act by a Levite named Joseph (Acts 4:36,37).

No doubt Joseph received recognition for his generosity, and it is likely Ananias and Sapphira might have envied their praise. But

they withheld part of the money after pretending to have given it all. The deceit did not pass unnoticed however. Peter was given supernatural knowledge as to what actually took place.

It is interesting Peter that did not accuse this couple of trying to deceive others. *“How is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you lied to the Holy Spirit. You have not lied to men but to God”* (Acts 5:1-11). To their misfortune, Ananias and Sapphira desired the praise of men more than they feared the Lord, and both of them were struck dead immediately by God.

It might appear rather extreme for lying to be dealt with so severely. But insight is given by Peter’s words about lying not to men but to God. The story stresses a principle often ignored. God considers those who make it a practice to deceive and lie as being the children of the devil and not His children. Jesus describes Satan as a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). This is why Peter asked Ananias, *“How is it that Satan has so filled your heart?”*

Deceit and lying are forms of hypocrisy, and Jesus confronts hypocrisy with severe rebuke. He tells Pharisees and teachers of the law, *“You are like white-washed tombs...on the outside you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness”* (Matthew 23:27). Burial tombs in Jesus’ day were coated with whitewash as public notice that a dead body had been placed inside. Jesus was telling Pharisees their self-righteousness was a lie, and that they were spiritually dead inside.

Those who violate truth to deceive others tread on very thin ice. Yet hypocrisy is so epidemic in the Church today. Half-truths, exaggeration, lying, and deceitful behavior are commonplace. It is time for believers to diligently practice what the Word of God says: *“Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self”* (Colossians 3:9,10). Christians should have an attitude of humility, and be honest about weaknesses and failings. Let us gladly accept correction in times of error, rather than trying to deceive others in a spirit of pride.

God warns us to not mock Him, and says we'll reap what we sow. Let us ask Him to forgive any falsehoods not under the blood of Jesus, and strive to cast aside all deceit in the future. If apology is due anyone, let us be humble before those we've deceived and seek forgiveness. And from now on, let us determine to seek God's grace and be truthful in all that we say and do. This is a decision we're all called to make for the sake of Christ.

SELF-CONTROL

If anything seems perfectly natural, it is letting our behavior be guided by feelings and emotions. The world constantly screams, "Do what feels good!" This is where the rubber meets the road, and trouble often starts. As Proverbs 14:12 warns, *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death."*

When a person receives Jesus as his Lord, a spiritual conflict immediately begins between the sinful nature and the Holy Spirit. It's a conflict in which each will eventually have victory or defeat. As Paul writes his fellow Christians, *"If you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live"* (Romans 8:13). The apostle is telling us that failure to live by the Spirit and put to death sins of the flesh can result in spiritual death, a theme repeated in other letters to believers (e.g., Galatians 5:16-21; Ephesians 5:5,6)

Jude speaks of believers who continued to live habitually in accord with the sinful nature as *"twice dead"* (Jude 12). They had escaped from spiritual death when born again but failed to endure in union with Christ. Having returned again to the kingdom of darkness in their sinful behavior, they became spiritually dead for the second time, and therefore are referred to as twice dead.

Paul explains how we are able to gain victory over the sinful nature: *"So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature"* (Galatians 5:16). What a powerful statement! Live by the Spirit and you'll not gratify the desires of the

sinful nature! It holds promise to everyone for breaking the yoke of lust, drug abuse, alcoholism, pornography, anger, greed, and every other form of sinful behavior. It says we can recapture the land that Satan has claimed in our lives. It tells us that even though temptation continues, overcoming is possible by empowering of the Spirit. Some hold to a mistaken belief that living by the Spirit means grace will excuse a person who deliberately continues to gratify desires of the sinful nature. But Paul is saying we can live lives of self-control by the power of the Spirit.

Living by the Spirit is the provision of God through grace so our lives can change! It requires only that we stop depending on our own willpower (something most of us greatly overestimate anyway) and submit our lives to control by the Holy Spirit.

Living by the Spirit means accepting the lordship of Jesus by getting “self” off the throne in our hearts so that Jesus can reign. Victory comes as we learn to depend on the Holy Spirit to do what He’s sent to do: empower, teach, convict, correct, and comfort.

Living by the Spirit meets resistance when we refuse to put up our spiritual sails and allow the wind of God to propel us. When we do surrender control, we so often take back control again and go against God’s will in the final analysis.

Only when we truly surrender to God can we live by the Spirit. This requires a conscious decision to die to self, to rebuke the self-confidence that plagues natural man. Only then are we able to live by the Spirit, put to death acts of the sinful nature, and in so doing inherit the kingdom of God.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. Galatians 5:19-21

Each of these acts of the sinful nature reflects a lack of self-control. It's time to stop excusing such behavior. The body of Christ needs to learn that failure to live by the Spirit keeps a person from his heavenly inheritance. There is no option when it comes to self-control. Scripture doesn't *suggest* we conquer immorality, greed, anger and so forth. It commands to do so. *"Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness"* (2 Timothy 2:19). Yet so many professing believers resist the Spirit instead of taking delight in God's revealed will for our lives.

Self-control involves a battle for control of the mind. We so often focus attention on an area of struggle such as a marriage or an addiction. But the struggle is more often against the spiritual forces of evil (Ephesians 6:12). Problems with self-control are really spiritual problems, and we must learn to rely on weapons having divine power to demolish strongholds when self-control is lacking. Strongholds are sinful habits of thinking, feeling, and behaving that can be so difficult to change.

We may earnestly want to change but can't do so in our own strength. At times, our failure is because we lack a sincere desire for holiness. At other times, failure results from teaching that holiness isn't required to inherit the kingdom of God, contrary to everything the scriptures teach (Hebrews 12:14). At still other times, failure to overcome results from a failure to use weapons that God provides: prayer, fasting, study of the Word, worship, and the armor of God.

The Lord never promises to make us into overcomers without effort on our part. We're responsible to submit to Him, and to use spiritual weapons faithfully if we expect to gain self-control. I have found the response to the Word of God very useful in revealing rebellion in my heart. Do I resist godly rebuke, or do I react to correction as one whose delight is in God's Word? Do I meditate day and night on Scripture as the psalmist tells of the blessed? Or do I love worldly things, and fellowship with those who are worldly in their values and priorities.

It's our personal decision whether or not to use spiritual weapons in a consistent fashion. If you've tried to gain self-control over acts of the sinful nature, and failed despite giving it your best shot, don't give up! It only frustrates a person to try finding self-control in the flesh. Self-control isn't in our flesh to be found.

Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, never a fruit of the flesh. Self-control is gained as God tells: "*Not by [your] might nor by [your] power, but by my Spirit*" (Zechariah 4:6). We must be willing to surrender ourselves to control of the Spirit. So instead of giving up, be encouraged by the words of Paul as he exhorts us to keep in step with the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:24,25).

You may ask, "How can I keep in step with the Spirit?" It is a valid question. And the answer is the same way that Jesus did at Gethsemane. Stay on your knees until you receive the grace to say in genuine sincerity what Jesus said: "*Not my will but Thine be done.*" Only at that point will the Holy Spirit work in your life. And self-control will be produced where none existed before.

LOVING OTHERS

Nothing is quite as incredible as the depth and the breadth of God's love. It is far beyond human comprehension that a God so majestic and powerful can be so loving that He would have allowed Calvary to happen. That Jesus should exchange His glory in heaven for poverty on earth so we might become rich cannot be fully understood. It's amazing that Jesus would come to serve rather than to be served. But being a burden-bearer by taking my sin on Himself and suffering the wages of sin as my substitute is too much to grasp.

Human thinking is so limited that Jesus resorted to simple parables that we might glimpse His love for us. A shepherd leaves the entire flock to search for one lost sheep, and then such rejoicing. A woman sweeps and searches an entire house for a single lost coin while still having nine others. A father runs to greet a wayward son who'd betrayed his trust, and not only forgives but restores all his rights. So it is Jesus gave us an important principle of His kingdom:

A new command I give you: As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

John 13:34,35

Let us take a moment to examine what Jesus is telling us in this passage. First we see that word *must* again. Jesus isn't making a simple suggestion. It is a *command I give you*. What He is saying has absolutely nothing to do with sentimental feelings. Feelings can't be demanded. Jesus is speaking here of a conscious, deliberate decision to help others who are in need.

There's a famine of hearing strong teaching about loving in this way. Many don't want to hear anything about sacrificial living, especially many in the upper income levels. They covet their second homes in the mountains and at ski resorts, as well as memberships in exclusive yacht and country clubs. But the scriptures require that true faith expresses itself in love-motivated deeds on behalf of the poor and needy. This means sacrificing to help the less fortunate.

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need, but has not pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. 1 John 3:17,18

These words need to be trumpeted loudly from every pulpit. They are similar to those of Paul who teaches, "*The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love*" (Galatians 5:6). Jesus Himself is specific about helping those He refers to as "*the least of these brothers of mine*" (Matthew 25:31-46). The parable about the sheep and goats tells that obedient faith as expressed through loving acts will determine who inherits heaven. Some put a false spin on the parable, saying it doesn't refer to Christians. But were such the case, sheep couldn't be invited into their eternal inheritance.

Moreover, Jesus commands that we love others in a special way... "*as I have loved you.*" The Greek translated here as love is a

“Come, Follow Me”

word that is neither sexual or brotherly love. It is the word *agape*, a love that does not depend on another person being either worthy or deserving of love. Agape is the unconditional, selfless love shown by Jesus when He died for us while we were sinners. Agape we are commanded to show others is a

- ...love which involves giving of self for the sake of others;
- ...love wherein we think more highly of others than ourselves;
- ...love without conditions, not demanding thanks or gratefulness;
- ...love that doesn't mind being put to a great deal of inconvenience;
- ...love which even gives others a right to treat us spitefully in return.

If love shown others depends on how we're treated in return, it becomes conditional love and isn't agape. If a person is genuinely filled with the love of Christ, he becomes grateful for opportunities to sacrifice and help others in need. He is aware God that doesn't bless us because we're deserving of being blessed, but because He wants us to comfort others in trouble with the same comfort that we ourselves have received (2 Corinthians 1:4).

In many situations, this means we must be willing to do with much less in order to help others. Again we are given the chance to make a conscious, deliberate choice! And wonderful words will be waiting for those who have an obedient faith.

Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.

Matthew 25:34-36,40

Chapter 4. *Counting the Cost*

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it/ For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. Luke 14:28,29,33

The movie Titanic was a reminder of what can happen as a result of failing to count the cost of decisions. A ship captain chose to proceed full speed across the north Atlantic, ignoring the icebergs known to be in the vicinity. History records the tragic consequence of the captain's failure to be thoughtful, just as many of us suffer for not having counted the cost of our decisions in the past.

Jesus tells the parable of a man building a tower to illustrate that we're to count the cost before we decide to follow Him. We are being told in so many words, *"Do not start to follow me, and find you didn't know there was a cost. I don't want you to decide later that the price is too high for being my disciple. The cost of following me is everything you have. If you don't understand this and fail to endure, only expect to be ridiculed just like the man who failed to finish building the tower"* (Luke 14:28-30, author's paraphrase).

If Satan can't detour a man from turning to Christ, then he wants him to believe the road is easy. But Peter reminds us that it is *hard even for the righteous to be saved* (1 Peter 4:18). And Paul tells that we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). It is deception of Satan, the father of lies, that

salvation is without cost to the believer. It is a lie which, if believed, increases the chance of a person losing his determination to finish a race he has begun.

Because our flesh is weak, Satan finds it easy to masquerade as an angel of light, and for his helpers to masquerade as servants of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:14). However, some helpers of the devil are rather easy to spot. They're busy promoting cheap grace, easy salvation, and doctrines of prosperity. Their teaching is attractive to those who want to avoid hell, yet still have the liberty to live according to the sinful nature and enjoy the ways of the world.

Human nature being what it is, we seek freedom from moral restraint and take pleasure in sin. Knowing this to be the case, Jesus tells us to count the cost of discipleship before deciding to follow Him. Jesus teaches the opposite of the false prophets who promote salvation without cost by saying, "*Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.*" There's a cost to follow Jesus and He never soft-peddles the cost. To help us understand this principle, Jesus uses a very simple parable.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all that he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant look for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. Matthew 13:44-46

The merchant knew exactly what he was looking for. He had purchased many pearls, referring to the pleasures and possessions of the world. But once he found *the* pearl of great value, he knew it wasn't just another way to get high or another toy to own. The pearl of great value was Jesus, and the merchant's delight was so great that no cost was too high. He sold all that he had, meaning he gave up all his old ways, ungodly habits, and sinful relationships.

This pearl wasn't just another quick fix. Not just an escape from the pressures of life, or a temporary peace. It was the King of Peace the merchant found, the One who gave hope of demolishing the strongholds of sin and addiction that had bound him for years. The parable not only teaches the kingdom of heaven is to be desired above all else. It also teaches there is a significant cost to knowing Jesus Christ as the Lord of one's life.

A person is required to give up whatever might hinder close relationship with Jesus. The merchant does so with great joy and the same thing should be true with us. Let us not be misled by false teaching that saviorship is the same as lordship. Nor are we to confuse obedience with legalism as so many are prone to do. One of the greatest religious traps today is teaching that our flesh doesn't need to be crucified in order for us to live according to the will of God.

When Jesus calls Himself *the way and the truth and the life* (John 14:6), the Greek translated as "way" literally means a road. Jesus never apologizes for what it costs to follow this road that He calls narrow. Knowing false teachers would come, Jesus is careful to describe the road which must be traveled by those who'd follow Him. Indeed, it is a road full of glory and joy unspeakable, a road free of life-controlling addictions, a road free of bondage to sin and Satan. Yet at the same time, it is a costly journey.

At times Jesus found Himself deserted by followers because His teachings were hard to accept. At one point, He even questioned the twelve as to whether they might also leave. It cost them dearly to follow Jesus, and most were martyred for their faith. And today there still is considerable cost to follow Jesus, despite what is taught from many pulpits. The Bible refers to times *when* we pass through the waters and through fire, not whether we do (Isaiah 43:2).

As we examine the cost of following Jesus, it is understandable to feel far too weak for what's being required. The Lord is well aware of this, and assures us that we'll never be left or forsaken in our times of trial. He also tells that we do not have to depend on our

own strength and ability. We're promised His *grace* is sufficient and that His *power* will be made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). The One who gave His life for us would never bid us to do something without making more than adequate provision.

However, this promise of provision doesn't mean we can go wherever and whenever we want, and still expect God to do exactly what we ask. Jesus is to be a Lord of commitment, and never seen as a Lord of convenience. His promises apply when we're obedient to follow His guiding. It is not only by grace that we are saved, but also by grace that we are able to work out salvation. And should we stumble, His mercy is everlasting if we repent and allow Him to not only forgive but cleanse us from our unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

PERSECUTION

A principle of God's kingdom is that persecution is a price paid by every believer. The reason is that believers live in a world hostile to God. Lifestyles in the world are so contrary to what Jesus teaches that the world reacts with scorn and rejection to disciples of Christ (John 15:19). Those who love the world resent seeing what they consider valuable being treated so casually. Those who're truly consecrated to Jesus never hold tightly to the things of this world.

But the Church has become saturated with worldly ways in the last days as prophecy describes. Jesus Himself often speaks of a lukewarm church in the days just before His return. He warns that the end-times will see many who once had *agape* turn from the faith and allow love for Him to grow cold (Matthew 24:10-12). People in the Church are failing to validate their faith by not living in a way that reflects true consecration to the will of God.

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of my mouth. Revelation 3:15-17 (NKJV)

One of several things that indicates a lukewarm condition is the lack of persecution. Those who do not separate from the world avoid persecution and many in the Church are like that today. Their witness is so weak that they never offend the God-mockers. They attend churches of compromise where words of Paul are ignored: *“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”* (2 Timothy 3:12). Paul says *everyone* is persecuted if they live a godly life, but the lukewarm don’t want to hear this.

Jesus teaches the same thing: *“Remember the words I spoke to you: No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also”* (John 15:20). The gospel taught today is often so dilute that many do not understand about sharing in the sufferings of Jesus so that they may share in glory (Romans 8:17). Pleasant messages that tickle itching ears have become so favored that scriptures which invade our comfort zone are carefully avoided in most of the pulpits in America.

Let us not forget that Jesus identified Himself to disciples after the resurrection by showing them His scars (John 20:27). *“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting and believe!”* We can expect to be examined as well for scars of persecution and rejection to see if we’ve been faithful to Christ. It hardly seems coincidental that three verses in the Beatitudes speak about the persecution of believers, while only a single verse is devoted to the several other principles of kingdom living.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:10-12

Don't fail to understand what is being said here! Christians are not expected to actively look for or seek persecution. No one with a living faith in Jesus needs to look for rejection, criticism, or loss of popularity. It happens naturally to those who are faithful to the commands of Christ. It's a cost of lordship all should expect, because it's a test of loyalty and devotion to the kingdom of God.

If you never experience any persecution, you might examine your commitment to Jesus. Perhaps your life is so worldly that the ungodly people with whom you associate are not offended. Perhaps people do not even recognize what you stand for in the first place. A question we need ask is, "Will the Lord find scars of suffering for His sake on me when He returns?" If you can't answer "Yes," then examine your priorities. Obstacles may be hindering your walk.

Jesus even warns about persecution from within the Church itself. So do not be surprised to find yourself criticized for having a bold witness. In the final days, Jesus says those in the Church will betray and hate each other (Matthew 24:10). So if you find yourself criticized by lukewarm Christians, do not react negatively. Instead, encourage yourself with a precious promise of Jesus: "*Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.*"

FRIENDSHIPS

Psalm One describes two groups of people, each having its own lifestyle and value system. Those who are ungodly continue to fellowship with the world and perish. On the other hand, the godly separate from those who refuse to love the truth. The godly "*do not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers*" (verse 1). Instead the godly delight in the Word of God, on which they meditate day and night (verse 2). Then the psalmist goes on to describe how godly persons have a life that prospers and bears abundant fruit.

It is a biblical principle that those desiring God's blessing do not fellowship with heathens. This doesn't mean any and all contact

must be avoided. Those who follow Jesus are to be a light in the darkness, and certain types of contact are unavoidable. However, fellowship in the usual sense of the word risks temptation to return to old sinful ways. Many with the best of intentions fall into the pit because of hanging with the wrong companions. As Paul cautions us, “*Bad company corrupts good character*” (1 Corinthians 15:33).

God constantly tried to preserve a pure relationship with the Israelites. This was such a serious matter that He ordered them to destroy all Canaanites once they crossed the Jordan: “*Do not leave alive anything that breathes...completely destroy them*” (Deuteronomy 20:16-17). As a new believer, this was very difficult for me to understand.

Now some years later, I fully appreciate the desire of God to protect us from snares of the enemy. With sadness I watch as people are frequently seduced back into their old ways because of a failure to avoid ungodly friendships. God has given us a command that we must take to heart:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and [Satan]? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? “Therefore come out from them and be separate,” says the Lord. “Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,” says the Lord Almighty. 2 Corinthians 6:14-18

This passage contains a warning as well as a promise. The promise is far more valuable than anything we must give up. It is a promise God will be a Father to us, and that we will be His sons and daughters. However the promise is conditional as are all promises of God. The condition is that we separate, and stop fellowship with unbelievers. Despite this command, many in the Church continue to

fellowship with the unsaved. And in doing so, they not only risk having their character corrupted, but also risk missing blessings.

Admittedly, it can be difficult, and even painful, to separate from old friends. Loss of fellowship was not easy during my early walk with Jesus. But getting together for old times' sake just does not exist in the economy of God. Jesus insists we make a choice, as painful as that may be. Jesus even warns the right choice may result in separation from other family members.

Do you think that I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter, and daughter against mother. Luke 12:51-53

Other illustrations regarding the need to separate are readily found in the gospels, and stress two points. The first is that a person must decide whether or not to serve Jesus whole-heartedly. He is either Lord *of all* or not Lord at all. The second is to appreciate that commitment to Jesus may require ending certain friendships, even in a family structure on occasion. This is a cost of lordship about which Jesus is completely honest, lest we be deceived.

DENYING SELF

Being born again creates a new spiritual life, and results in a heartfelt desire to please God. This includes willingness to deny self which means to no longer live in a self-centered way according to the desires of the flesh. Jesus is very explicit in saying relationship with Him requires denial of self. *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me”* (Luke 9:23). No options exist in this regard whatsoever.

There seems reluctance to teach forcefully on the subject of self denial and taking up crosses. Even many who insist the Bible is

without error are often reluctant in this regard. I have listened to pastors share a fear of messages that stress self denial in ‘plain talk.’ They are concerned the weak in faith will be driven away by such teaching. But a spiritual diet limited to milk serves to keep people from maturing into lives that bear lasting fruit (Hebrews 5:13-14).

Denying self and taking up crosses are the same in principle. Denial of self is a decision to die to fleshly appetites and to remove ‘self’ from the throne of one’s heart. It is deciding to allow Jesus to have reign in one’s life. Taking up crosses is a practical application of the decision to deny self by letting rubber meet the road. In other words, taking up the cross is putting an intention into action.

So many profess Christ and want the joy of being saved, but do their very best to avoid crosses. It’s simple to agree with self-denial until the time comes to attach feet to one’s decision. Then the flesh reacts: “Just a minute! I deserve being number one!” And we end up ignoring a prior decision to live in a sacrificial way.

No doubt Jesus received a great deal of unsolicited advice. His own family told Him to leave ministry and return home. The disciples advised against going to Jerusalem, fearful for His safety. But Jesus was committed to the will of God, and wasn’t about to be detoured. In a like manner, we’re sent to do the will of Christ in the world. “*As the Father has sent me, I am sending you*” (John 20:21).

This demands that we deny ourselves and say “No” to many things the world claims are necessary for pleasure and satisfaction in life. But it is a life of humility and self denial that Jesus came to reveal and impart to us. Humility is having dependence on God for everything. It is recognizing that self is of no earthly good except as an empty vessel and channel that God can fill and work through.

This is the example set by Jesus who humbled Himself and was obedient even to death (Philippians 2:8). We are now called to have the same mind as Jesus and live a life that comes only through dying to self. Taking hold of a little child, Jesus told the disciples the following:

I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 18:3,4

The highest standard in heaven is humility, and the greatest position is promised to the most humble. One of the hardest things in the world is to try following Jesus while self continues to reign. The worst conflict can rage between the selfish nature and the Holy Spirit who has come to indwell. Inner turmoil may reach stressful levels until it is finally decided to accept self denial as a necessary cost of following Christ. When a man told Jesus of his desire to be a disciple, Jesus replied, “*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head*” (Luke 9:58). This blunt response contrasts sharply with ear-tickling messages of prosperity teachers who follow the way of Balaam.

Self-denial is a process, and takes place in step-like fashion as the Holy Spirit works the will of God into a believer’s life. In the midst of the process, heaven watches from a perspective of eternity. What we decide is weighed on a scale that measures not only intent of the heart, but obedience in terms of practicing intentions. Do not be deceived. The road to hell is literally paved with good intentions. The Bible is clear that we reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7,8).

We’re called to have hearts that love Jesus more than life itself (Matthew 16:25). And nothing except deep love for Jesus will motivate us to deny self as He asks of us. While it’s fine to live in comfort (unless instructed by God to the contrary), indulgence is always sinful in the eyes of God. Even ability to work and prosper must be seen as a gift from the heavenly Father.

In the economy of God, those fortunate as to be blessed financially are under obligation to share generously with those who are less fortunate (Matthew 25:41-46; James 2:14-17; 1 John 3:17). Today’s world desperately needs to see joy and peace in Christians

that is based on relationship with Jesus rather than being based on financial success and material abundance.

The same can be said of seeking fame and reputation. To be pleasing in the eyes of God is infinitely more important than is the receiving of earthly honors. Approval by God only comes by walking in faith instead of by sight. That implies obedience in denying self, just as Jesus expects us to minister love to others by following His example in washing of the disciples' feet.

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. John 13:15-17

Again we are faced with a choice. A choice between serving or being served, a choice between denying self or indulging self, a choice between acting like Jesus or expecting to be treated like a king. Before making the choice, Jesus says, “*Count the cost!*” But the cost is very small when compared to the reward.

Indeed, the only absolutely proven way to experience **JOY** in any true sense is to make **Jesus** first, **Others** second, and **Yourself** last. Try it! Heaven guarantees complete satisfaction for all eternity. Otherwise, a full refund will be made of the ‘Me First’ attitude that never gave any lasting joy in the first place.

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS DAILY

Paul refers to those who corrupt the gospel as “*enemies of the cross of Christ*” (Philippians 3:18). Their teachings are focused on earthly rewards, prosperity, and gaining success by the standards of the world. Instead, Christ calls us to follow Him in a life outside the camp. “*Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore*” (Hebrews 13:13). Going outside the camp means to leave our comfort zone, to take up crosses and to see ourselves as

strangers on earth who long for a city whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10). This may involve leaving a church where teaching isn't faithful to the gospel. It may be severing relationships that don't edify, or giving up luxury to work on the mission field, or a host of other actions.

Many object to taking Jesus literally when it comes to denial of self and taking up crosses. I've listened to many comments like, "I know we supposed to do these things, but my salvation is secure because it isn't based on works." Such an attitude ignores the call of Jesus to follow Him in faith. It also ignores the warning that faith without works is dead faith, and suggests that Jesus may not really be Lord of a person's life. Refusal to take up crosses usually means "self" is still in control, and speaks loudly against true saving faith.

Taking up one's cross is surrendering of self to death. It is of this that Paul speaks by saying, "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me*" (Galatians 2:20). Once we agree to deny self, taking up crosses is the outward expression of an inward decision. It is putting feet to a declaration that we are willing to lose our life for Jesus.

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. Luke 9:23,24

In his excellent book, *The Jesus Style*, Gayle Erwin gives emphasis to the consistency between the living word Jesus and the written word. Jesus is the Word of God who became flesh and made his dwelling among us (John 1:14). And there is a total consistency between the life of Christ and His teachings. The Bible stresses the need for the same consistency in lives of those who profess Jesus as their Lord. "*Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did*" (1 John 2:6). And Jesus Himself tells us, "*Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple*" (Luke 14:27).

The Son of God does not offer an option when it comes to following Him. It's deny self or not, take up crosses or not, follow or not, be a disciple or not! No permission for fence-sitting is found anywhere in the Word of God. Our greatest obstacle to obedience is lack of faith. We prefer to walk by sight rather than by faith because we do not really believe that God will part waters of the seas in our lives. We do not have faith that walls of our Jerichos will crumble if we actually do submit our lives to walking in His footsteps.

In a very critical sense, however, *the* cross that Jesus carried is His only. He alone is the Lamb slain before the foundations of the earth were set (Revelation 13:8). He alone provides the propitiation for our sins, satisfying the wrath of God over what we have done to offend Him. Jesus' cross alone brings reconciliation between sinful men and a righteous, just God. In fact, Jesus' cross is a theme that runs through the entire fabric of human history. It is the

...sacrifice providing skins used by God to cover Adam and Eve;
...ram replacing Isaac as the sacrifice made by Abraham to God;
...Passover lamb whose blood delivered Israel from Egypt;
...goat's blood sprinkled on the mercy seat for Atonement;
...scarlet thread in Rahab's window which brought deliverance;
...ransom paid by Jesus for your sins and for mine.

It is on *His* cross alone that our hope of eternal life is based. Jesus' mission wasn't just to be a shepherd, but to be *the* shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. By *His* cross alone comes our justification, that we might be declared righteous in the sight of a just God. But Jesus still requires that we take up crosses.

To be a Christian is never escapism. It is always action. It is taking a stand, not hiding. It is putting one's hand to the plow, not looking back. It is never sitting on the sidelines, but following in the steps of Christ. Often the true believer is required to carry the same crosses Jesus carried. There will always be the cross of persecution as mentioned and the cross of sacrificing comfort for sake of others.

There will be crosses of serving others in ways that will not be our personal choice. But it is only through carrying these crosses out of devotion and love for Jesus that lives can ever be pleasing to God (John 14:21). In fact, it is only through obedient faith that we find the peace, joy, and assurance that God desires to give each and every person who looks to Jesus as his personal Lord and Savior.

One additional cross always involves what hinders a person from a closer walk with Jesus. Does something keep coming to mind when you think of greater consecration? Are you aware of an obstacle that keeps getting in the way of becoming more dedicated to Christ? Is there something about which you've long protested, "I just can't give that up. It's impossible to do it!"?

Nothing is impossible if we depend on grace that is ours by working of the Holy Spirit. A committed heart will never complain, saying, "Must I carry *that* cross?" A committed heart instead cries, "Lord, thank You for allowing me to share in Your suffering. Please help me carry this cross, and give me grace to be a good witness for You as I do!"

Jesus promises to help in our weakness. To not help us carry every cross would violate His covenant with us. The new covenant is for believers to be indwelt by the same Spirit who enabled Jesus to live a sinless life and who raised Him from the dead. Because of empowering by the Spirit, we are promised everything is possible for those who believe (Mark 9:23). So prepare for bearing crosses. It's a part of following Jesus, and is to be done joyfully.

LOVING ENEMIES

Few costs of practicing what Jesus teaches demand so much grace as the command to love those who treat us with rejection, if not with harmful spite. But those who are born again must be kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Jesus has a new standard of behavior for those who follow Him (Luke 6:35). It is a standard so unlike the

law of Moses that religious people of His day were totally shocked. And things haven't changed much, if truth be known. The average Christian struggles with loving enemies. In fact, a major problem in the body of Christ is that of brother taking offense against brother. But Jesus has a direct word for us about this.

You have heard it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth." But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

Matthew 5:38; Luke 6:27-28

This is the standard of love called *agape*, to be shown to foe and friend alike. Agape is given freely with nothing asked in return. Jesus illustrates what is meant by agape in a parable about the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). A man we presume to be a proper Jew travels from Jerusalem to Jericho and is assaulted by robbers. Left for dead, he is ignored by those pretending to be religious, including a priest and a Levite. Help only comes from a Samaritan, although he is considered like an enemy by the Jews.

Hearts are often so hard that truths taught in this parable are not recognized. It teaches first of all that whoever needs help is a neighbor in the economy of God. We're not to be prejudiced when we decide about assisting others. Kindness is to be shown all having a legitimate need.

Secondly the parable is an indictment of 'religious' people. Yet it can be read with little stirring of compassion for the poor and needy who surround us. I believe many today would like benefits of salvation, but avoid church because they realize there's a cost they don't want to pay. They're not deceived like hypocrites who claim disobedience to Jesus' teachings is covered by grace.

Finally, the parable teaches that faith without works is dead. The expert in the law had asked Jesus, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Jesus then uses a parable to describe a principle about

inheriting eternal life through obedient faith in loving both God and one's neighbor. After Jesus finished the parable, He tells the expert in the law, "*Do this and you will live.*" The condition for receiving eternal life in this parable is faith that expresses itself through deeds of agape, the same condition repeatedly emphasized by the apostles.

This parable indirectly illustrates that those who neglect the suffering of others will not gain eternal life. This conclusion grates on the nerves of those who have been sold justification by any kind of faith, with or without repentance and with or without obedience. Such people react strongly, "We're not saved by works! We live under grace!" But Jesus and His apostles teach that we are justified by what we do as well as by faith (James 2:24).

A question that may well be discussed in many churches after the rapture is exactly what Jesus meant by this parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus doesn't ask us to exterminate evil in the world as much as He calls us to shed His love by being dispensers of agape. You may ask how to be a Good Samaritan to those who abuse us and the answer is that we can't in our own strength, at least not consistently. Only by grace that comes through the Holy Spirit is it possible to treat our enemies with genuine love and kindness.

This is why we're exhorted to approach the throne of God to find grace in times of need (Hebrews 4:16). To deal lovingly with those who treat us spitefully requires that we utterly depend on the grace of God. Only what is done through us by the Spirit of God will survive on judgment day anyway (1 Corinthians 3:12,13). The works of flesh will burn up like wood, hay, and stubble at that time.

Loving those who cause an offense is never an emotion, nor is it making an excuse for behavior that is hurtful. Rather it's having genuine concern over the fate of those who mock godly people. It is choosing to follow the true gospel instead of accepting the teaching of false prophets. It is attempting to bring those who offend us into a saving relationship with Christ by overcoming evil with good. It is showing Jesus to those who may never have opened a Bible.

Counting the Cost

Do not repay anyone with evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live in peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:17-21

Again, we are given a choice, a choice to follow Jesus or not. While it isn't always an easy choice, it's a choice that must be made. And the answer will reflect the intent of our heart. Our spiritual eyes are either focused on self and today, or on Jesus and eternity. There is no way to live in Egypt and in the promised land at the same time. The price that opens a door to the promised land is already paid, but Jesus says to count the cost before entering...because there is a cost.

The day is coming when we'll be examined for scars to see if we really followed Jesus by denying self and taking up crosses. We will also be examined to see if we showed agape to enemies (1 John 4:20,21). Those who did so will be able to say to Jesus, "By grace, I loved those who treated me badly. It was my privilege to do it!" And to these, Jesus promises the reward will be great.

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Luke 6:35

Chapter 5. *Endurance*

Here is a trustworthy saying: If we endure, we will also reign with him. 2 Timothy 2:11,12

Over the ages, there is a consistent pattern with the downfall of great world civilizations. Mighty empires such as those of Greece and Rome did not lose world domination because of outside forces. It was internal moral decay that led to their downfall. Unfortunately what is learned is that we don't learn from history. Moral decadence is prevalent in America today. Not only is leadership at the highest level lacking self control and godly character. A majority of citizens have little concern about moral issues as long as prosperity exists.

What made our nation unique as a world power has failed to endure. We live in a country where ethical and moral standards are adapted to circumstances. As a result, the foundations of society are visibly cracking. And Scripture is specific that evil will continue to intensify with passage of time. Predictions of moral improvement in the future are telling what is totally contrary to the Word of God.

Spiritual leaders are resigning after moral failure in a record number. Reports increase of homosexuals ordained into positions of ministry in mainline denominations. Holiness teaching is thought of as old fashioned, and so-called tolerance is being promoted. We see unborn babies murdered at a viable stage by late term abortion. Children are killing parents, and parents are killing children.

Greed and violence have become epidemic, and one third of births now occur outside of legal marriage in America. Biblical commandments are considered to be suggestions, and public prayer

is increasingly frowned upon by authorities. So it is that Jesus tells us the following about the end times.

At that time, many will turn from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Matthew 24:10-13

Jesus doesn't say that a few become deceived and have their love grow cold. Instead He says *many* are deceived. The time has come of which Jesus is speaking, and He is asking us, "*Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?*" (Luke 6:46). He is not referring to those who never loved Him in the first place. In the Greek, Jesus speaks of those having *agape* – the love of Christ - grow cold. They fail to stand firm and endure, a warning repeatedly given in the NT.

Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. Revelation 2:4-5

Backsliders are warned by Jesus to repent, lest He remove His presence from their lives. Devotion has dimmed, and now they are in danger of losing relationship with Him. Jesus is emphatic that only those who endure to the end will be saved. The Greek word *hypomeno* translated as stand firm, endure, or persevere, means to endure in all trials we face without losing faith.

Not a single teaching of Jesus gives validity to the claim that those who are lukewarm or backsliders will be saved. Jesus warns, "*Because you are lukewarm...I will spit you out of my mouth*" (Revelation 3:16, NEB). Heaven awaits only those persons who are

striving to follow Jesus along the narrow road that He describes as leading to eternal life (Matthew 7:14; Galatians 6:7,8). Teaching to the contrary is pure deception, and churches that compromise truth stand in danger of condemnation.

It is critical to recognize the importance of enduring in faith because of the great apostasy prophesied to happen (e.g., Matthew 24:12; 2 Timothy 4:3-4; 2 Thessalonians 2:3). In Paul's day, some believers were alarmed that the return of the Lord had taken place. The apostle reassured the Thessalonians that such will happen only after major apostasy occurs. Greek *apostasia* from which apostasy is derived in this passage has been translated in different versions of the Bible as "rebellion" (NIV, RSV, TEV, NEB), a "falling away" (KJV), and as a "Great Revolt" (JB).

Teachers abound who promote the idea that apostasy cannot occur, and that believers are assured of salvation even if they fall back into habitual sin. It is my belief that such teaching sets a stage for this great apostasy. The Lord calls the faithful to leave churches that teach such a doctrine: "*Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes*" (Revelation 18:4).

We must encourage one another as the rapture of the Church approaches. Let us never allow our walk with Jesus to slow or come to a standstill. It is something about which we are urgently warned.

I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete...If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come. Revelation 3:1-3

Many are taking these warnings casually. There is a widespread failure to endure in the Church in the recent years. Hundreds

of churches are closing monthly across America and most mainline denominations have experienced a sharp decrease in membership during the past several decades. Note that Jesus says in letters to the seven churches, “*I know your deeds*” (Revelation 2,3). He doesn’t say that He knows our intentions, but that He knows our deeds.

Believers are warned that despite worship that seems alive, spiritual dying is taking place. People love to sing *Standing on the promises of God*, but all they do is sit on the premises of churches to enjoy fellowship. Filled with complacency, they fail to prepare for the wedding banquet by being clothed in acts of righteousness (Revelation 19:7,8). They ignore a warning of Jesus to complete the deeds God has prepared for them (Ephesians 2:10; Revelation 3:2).

Jesus is telling the Church today, “*Wake up! Complete what my Father prepared for you to do, or my return will be a surprise. Instead of being ready with oil in your lamps, you’ll be like virgins who allowed the oil to burn down. Remember that those who fail to be ready are not allowed into the wedding feast. They’ll learn it is too late when they finally decide to prepare themselves*” (Matthew 25:1-13, paraphrased).

The parable about ten virgins isn’t told about heathens, my friends. It begins with, “*At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like...*” (Matthew 25:1). Jesus is speaking of the Church at the time of His return. It is a Church made up of faithful believers and many who’ve failed to endure by keeping filled with the Spirit.

How true this is today! Priorities are badly out of order. The focus isn’t to know Christ intimately and to be conformed into His image. There is far greater concern about financial and worldly matters. Need to cooperate with the Spirit as He works to sanctify, and a need to obey God’s will, are far from being the top priority in life for many church members in America.

Greek *hypostasia* means to stand under authority. Once used as a military term, its spiritual meaning is to be aligned under God in a proper way so that blessing continues to apply and the power of

God remains effective in the life of a believer. The opposite term is *apostasia* from which the word apostasy is derived. This means to stand away from, and no longer being under, either the authority or promises of God. To be an apostate means a person has abandoned his saving relationship with Christ, and Scripture contains a host of warnings about the danger of apostasy, lest anyone be deceived.

Examples are also found in the OT of those who start out with God's anointing, only to have the Spirit of the Lord depart. As the psalmist tells, the love of God is everlasting but with conditions: *"From everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him...with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts"* (Psalm 103:17,18). Verses like this are ignored by the teachers who'd claim God's love is everlasting for everyone, no matter what their lifestyle is like...and that wrath will not come on those who refuse to fear the Lord and obey His precepts.

To think apostasy can't happen is a pit of deception in which many have fallen. But as Paul tells Timothy, *"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers"* (1 Timothy 4:16). Young Timothy is exhorted both to defend the purity of the gospel and to watch his own spiritual life as concerns salvation. Paul encourages Timothy in like manner somewhat later: *"Here is a trustworthy saying: If we endure, we will also reign with him"* (2 Timothy 2:11,12). Paul is stressing the need to remain loyal to Jesus and endure hardship like a faithful soldier.

Jesus illustrates the need to endure by using parables such as that about the ten virgins, and one about a man who builds a tower but fails to complete what he began (Luke 14:28,29). Such parables warn of failure to endure in the most explicit of terms. Many who occupy church pulpits dance around such parables with a sidestep. They lack the holy boldness to proclaim what Jesus taught. And according to the Word of God, such men will be held accountable for the blood of those they fail to warn about a need to endure. And

they also fail to save themselves (Ezekiel 33:7-9). Paul understood this as he spoke the following words: *“I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God”* (Acts 20:26,27).

The Holy Spirit also includes a warning about apostasy in Hebrews, telling of men who had escaped from darkness into God’s light, only to return to the darkness. The writer speaks of those who repented, came to know Jesus, were indwelt by the Spirit, and yet fell away at a later time.

For how can those who fall away be brought back to repent again? They were once in God’s light...and received their share of the Holy Spirit. They knew from experience that God’s word is good, and they felt the powers of the coming age. And then they fell away! It is impossible to bring them back to repent again, because they are nailing the Son of God to the cross once more and exposing him to public shame. Hebrews 6:4-6(TEV)

These warnings about failure to endure have been placed in the Bible for good reason! It happens! It is heartbreaking to watch prophecy fulfilled as compromise of truth finds so little resistance across the land in these days. As foretold, we see many Christians *“gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear”* (2 Timothy 4:3-4). And nothing is able to scratch itching ears like a doctrine that teaches salvation remains secure if people deliberately sow to please the sinful nature instead of sowing to please the Spirit of God. Such teaching simply opens the door to rebellion against God’s revealed will for our lives.

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

Galatians 6:7,8

Converts to Christ must put to death their fleshly misdeeds: *“For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live”* (Romans 8:13). Nothing is as harmful to teach those who are struggling with addiction, immorality, greed, lust, and fits of rage than that they can continue such acts of the sinful nature and still inherit heaven. Scriptures is specific that *“those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of heaven”* (Galatians 5:21).

Peter also speaks of teachers who bring the way of truth and of righteousness into disrepute. Some of these were redeemed at one time, but then fell away. The apostle tells they’re worse off than if they had never known Christ in the first place.

It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. 2 Peter 2:21

Apostasy in the lives of ex-offenders has often been called ‘jail-house religion’ to imply that they leave religion in the jailhouse. But many find Christ while incarcerated, although they may return with new charges shortly after completing a prior sentence. This can result from not receiving sufficient discipling prior to release, or because of failure to receive adequate spiritual support after release.

Jesus speaks of such persons as seed falling on rocky soil in His parable of the sower and the seed. *“They receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing, they fall away”* (Luke 8:13). This parable teaches several important points. The first is that testing *will* come, and that solid rooting in the Word is critical at such times.

A second point is that apostasy *can* occur. Jesus is explicit that some *believe for a while* but fall away. The Greek used here for *believe* is identical to that used for saving faith elsewhere in the scriptures. To treat this verse as not referring to true apostasy places a spin on the parable that distorts its true meaning.

A third point is that new believers are vulnerable without discipling. They are untrained in the use of spiritual weapons with which to fight temptation, and remain at risk of falling away until they become rooted and gain spiritual muscle. In the meantime, any fellowship with old unsaved friends or exposure to old temptations pose a great danger.

Earth's landscape is filled with spiritual land mines that are designed to destroy every good intention of a believer. If these booby traps do not kill faith, they can severely cripple one's walk. And complacency is another deadly foe, not only for new believers but for mature saints as well. It springs to life with ease, birthed by spiritual pride and deception to which man is so prone in these days.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled by men. Matthew 5:13

Don't be deceived! The consequences for complacency are severe. A born again person should tremble at the thought of being like salt which has lost its saltiness. Only spiritual ears deafened by deception fail to understand what Jesus means by saying that such a person is *"no longer good for anything."* Our loving Savior was crucified because He didn't want to return to heaven without us. But He issues a warning about having His life flow through us in a way that preserves our relationship with Him, and also makes others thirsty for the same relationship.

However, God doesn't allow believers to fall away easily. He uses the rod of affliction to discipline those who are failing to persevere, or who are becoming entangled in the ways of the world once again. Discipline is brought by God out of love, with a desire to correct unfaithfulness so believers will not be condemned along with the world (1 Corinthians 11:32). *"My son, do not make light of*

the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (Hebrews 12:5-6).

The Greek used here for "punishes" is *mastigoo*, a word that is found only seven times in the NT. In all other instances, the word refers to flogging with a whip. God's punishment can be painful, although done out of love. If we really understand this principle, we realize that failure to see God discipline us should really be a cause for concern. Hebrews says, *"If you are not disciplined, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons"* (Hebrews 12:8).

Discipline is intended to see we are properly clothed when Jesus returns for His bride. To believe Christ is coming for any kind of bride is foolishness. He is coming for a bride that is eager, ready, and prepared, for overcomers who are refined (Isaiah 48:10; Ephesians 5:17). God refines so we'll not defame His name by acting in a loveless, graceless way instead of manifesting the fruit of the spirit.

Only by a thorn in his side was Paul kept from conceit. Only in failing to acknowledge Christ was Peter aware of spiritual pride. If you're going through the fire, endure. God uses times of affliction to change us and work for the good of those who love Him. We need to remember that His purpose is to change us into the likeness of His Son. So stop complaining about trials in the fire.

God often reveals Himself to us most clearly in the fire anyway. This is true today just as it was for Daniel's friends when a fourth man appeared in their midst in the fiery furnace. God first spoke to Moses from a burning bush as fire, and led the nation of Israel through the wilderness as a pillar of fire. God was present in the Holy of Holies as fire between the cherubim, and Malachi said that Jesus' coming to earth would be *"like a refiner's fire."* And the book of Hebrews tells that *"God is a consuming fire."*

Born again people are actually meant to be children of the fire if we consider fire a symbol of the Holy Spirit's presence in our

lives. Jesus also tells us “*everyone will be salted with fire*” (Mark 9:49). It is only by the fire of the Spirit that we are gradually refined and transformed into the image of Christ. If you don’t like a furnace of affliction, remember that the alternative is far worse. It is being salted in a lake of fire for all eternity for having refused to allow the Holy Spirit to do His sanctifying work in us.

Mountain-moving faith is never birthed on cloudless days. Strong faith is a gift from God, and finds its creation in the storms of life. Building spiritual muscle is a trying experience many seek to avoid. They resist self denial, taking up of crosses, and are not willing to surrender personal rights. They are reluctant to follow in Jesus’ footsteps when the price involves persecution or the loss of comfort. As a result, many are unprepared for the coming storms.

But spiritual muscle doesn’t develop without testing. It is a biblical principle: “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11). We must first accept a role as aliens on earth whose citizenship is in heaven, and then submit to the sanctifying work of the Spirit that will never end until we see Jesus.

However, let us not forget that God promises enough grace to endure in each and every situation. He who began a good work in us promises to complete that work if we depend on grace to endure (Philippians 1:6). We’ll never be given more than we can handle; it is a promise: “*God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it*” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Paul stresses a need to endure with the analogy of running a race. Even the apostle doesn’t want to fall short. “*Forgetting what is behind and straining forward toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ*” (Philippians 3:13,14). If Paul had this attitude, so we must determine to press on when circumstances are difficult.

Endurance

Hebrews uses a similar analogy of running a race. “*Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us*” (Hebrews 12:1). In fact, enduring is such an important biblical principle that Jesus says only those who endure to the end will be saved (e.g., Matthew 10:22; 24:13).

With his typical incisiveness, Oswald Chambers speaks of the need to endure in his classic book, *My Utmost for His Highest*. The daily devotion for April 15th reads as follows: “You no more need a day off from spiritual concentration on matters in your life than your heart needs a day off from beating. As you cannot take a day off morally and remain moral, neither can you take a day off spiritually and remain spiritual. God wants you to be entirely His, and it requires paying close attention to keep yourself fit.”

If you’re undergoing an extremely difficult trial, don’t give up! Do whatever it takes to press on! Every one of us gets into dark tunnels where we can’t see a speck of light ahead. Sooner or later, however, tunnels end! We need to keep going in faith. Dark tunnels are the very places where God is able to draw us closer, and to best work His purpose into our lives. Because of this truth, James writes the following words to encourage us:

My brothers! Consider yourselves fortunate when all kinds of trials come your way, because you know that when your faith succeeds in facing such trials, the result is the ability to endure. Be sure that your endurance carries you all the way, without failing, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. James 1:2-4(TEV)

Reflections on Grace

As this book nears completion, the Christmas holiday season is underway. I find myself reflecting on how many churches are like stores crowded with people seeking discount sales. Many churches present a discounted Jesus, and avoid the full cost version of what it means to be a disciple. Church billboards glitter with advertising about getting saved, but rarely mention lordship. The result is that those who shop for easy salvation get exactly what they pay for!

No cost...stay lost!

The gospel handed down by the apostles tells that redeemed people become the property of God. A genuinely born again person is no longer his own, free to live as he chooses. He has been bought at a price (1 Corinthians 6:20). Those ransomed by Christ belong to Him, and are commanded to walk in righteousness and holiness (Ecclesiastes 12:13; Micah 6:8; Hebrews 12:14). The grace of God is not an excuse for a lifetime of deliberate disobedience to the will of God. Grace *empowers* so that godly living can be a reality.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. Titus 2:11-14

The NT presents two phases of grace. It is by grace that we are saved through faith in Jesus. And grace sustains and empowers a committed believer throughout life. The life of our trail blazer is a role model to understand grace. Jesus did not become human robed in the majesty of the Godhead. He took the nature of a man and was tempted in every way as we are. Yet He was without sin and loved people like us who crucified Him. He even suffered without voicing so much as one complaint.

Something quite remarkable made this possible, for Jesus came to earth not only as God but also fully man. What happened is foretold by Isaiah who prophesied Jesus would receive empowering by the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 42:1). This event took place immediately after Jesus was baptized in the Jordan river.

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. Luke 3:21-22

After this, Jesus is described as full of the Holy Spirit, and is able to resist the temptation of Satan (Luke 4:1). In fact Jesus relies on the power of the Holy Spirit for ministry, and He gives complete credit for His ministry to the Spirit: *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to preach freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* (Luke 4:18-19).

Scripture again tells, *“God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and...he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him”* (Acts 10:38). The Holy Spirit made possible Jesus’ sinless life and doing mighty works to the glory of His heavenly Father. By the same Spirit, we can receive divine power to give us everything that we need for life and godliness in order to escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (2 Peter 1:3-4).

Peter does not say the Holy Spirit will give us some things to live godly lives. Peter tells that we are given everything we need to escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. And it is by the empowering of the Spirit that Jesus says we can do all that He tells us to do. Most references to grace in the scriptures actually concern the empowering needed to follow Jesus, preach the gospel, heal the sick, and take authority over demonic spirits.

A highlight in medicine during the 20th century was the first heart transplant in 1967. This operation was performed in South Africa by the thoracic surgeon, Christian Barnard. It was the most dramatic news when a man at the edge of death received the heart of another person. The world marveled at this breakthrough, and the newspaper headlines around the globe trumpeted, ***“Dying Man Gets New Heart!”***

In Ezekiel, we read of another patient in terminal condition. The patient is the nation of Israel, floundering in a state of rebellion against God. The law given at Mount Sinai did not impart the divine power making it possible to obey the revealed will of God. Prophets warned people of their fatal illness, and only after human efforts had failed did God announced a heart transplant would be necessary to restore His people to spiritual health.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Ezekiel 36:26,27

When organ transplants are performed, a donor is required, and Jesus became that donor for us at Calvary. At His expense, the riches of God we call grace became available to all mankind. These riches include not only a new heart, but reconciliation with God and deliverance from bondage to sin and Satan. The riches of grace also bring new life by indwelling of the Holy Spirit who empowers those

who believe so that they can live in victory over the world, the flesh and the devil.

It is the Holy Spirit who brings grace that Ezekiel says will move man *“to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”* God does not abolish His moral laws under the covenant of grace. To the contrary! The *“Spirit of grace”* is who makes it possible to obey God (Ezekiel 36:27; Hebrews 10:29). How could it profit us to know Jesus as Lord if it did not produce a change of lifestyle? But by the grace available through the Spirit of Christ, men are enabled to live holy and righteous lives.

Where law demands righteousness, grace makes righteous living possible. Where commandments are a burden, grace makes a burden light. Where promises of God involve conditions that seem like a yoke, grace makes the yoke easy. But grace requires something for these blessings to be manifest in our lives. Like Paul, we must get to the point of saying, *“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”* (Galatians 6:14).

The Holy Spirit will not empower us until we reach a point of willingness to surrender our will to His control. This means death of boasting about our own plans, death of trying to look good in the eyes of others, and even death of striving to please God. Only when our faith rests solely on Christ to do what He promises can the Holy Spirit bring fullness of grace. The theology of cheap grace and easy salvation denies the power of the Spirit to produce righteous living.

The idea of ‘sinning Christianity’ where believers sin every day is not biblical. Paul writes that he, Silas and Timothy lived *holy, righteous, and blameless lives* in Thessalonica. Paul even says God was witness to the sanctified nature of their lives (1 Thessalonians 2:10). They had been able to set aside that which hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. It was possible for these men to live holy, righteous, and blameless lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. And by the grace that comes through the work of the Holy Spirit, it is possible for us to live sanctified lives as well.

In the OT, the Holy Spirit empowered only individuals who were selected for special service such as prophets, judges and kings. There was no general outpouring of the Spirit under the old covenant. But under the new covenant God makes the life and the power of the Spirit available to all believers (Acts 2:17-18). Peter said to the crowd gathered at Pentecost, *“The promise [baptism in the Holy Spirit] is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call”* (Acts 2:39).

How then is one baptized in the Holy Spirit? Is it automatic for each person who is born again as some would contend? Does it happen during baptism in water? Or is baptism in the Holy Spirit a work of God totally apart from regeneration and water baptism. To answer these questions, one must look to the scriptures. Satan does not want Christians empowered by the Holy Spirit, and has planted doctrines within denominations to greatly confuse this issue. As a result, many never experience the victorious living that could be theirs by grace through the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

First of all, baptism in the Holy Spirit is not a term invented by man. It is not uncommon to meet those who express a dislike for the term “baptism in the Holy Spirit.” But that’s the name given by Jesus to empowering by the Spirit (Acts 1:5). It is not the same as indwelling by the Holy Spirit that takes place when a person is born again. When Jesus appeared to the disciples on the eve of His resurrection, He breathed on them and said, *“Receive the Holy Spirit”* (John 20:22). At this point, they were indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Then forty days later, Jesus gave the following instructions to these same disciples who were already indwelt by the Spirit:

Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. Acts 1:4,5,8

These instructions are essentially the same as recorded in the gospel of Luke: *“I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high”* (Luke 24:49). This clothing with power is the same baptism with [or in] the Holy Spirit spoken of in Acts 1:4,5,8. And it took place fifty days after the disciples were first indwelt by the Spirit, and after Jesus returned to the Father in heaven.

A pattern of baptism with the Holy Spirit being separate in time and place from the indwelling with the Spirit at regeneration is seen to continue through in the book of Acts. For example, Philip evangelized in Samaria, and many who received the gospel. These converts were baptized in water after believing in Jesus (Acts 8:12). Later the Church in Jerusalem heard the Samaritans accepted Christ and Peter and John were sent to Samaria. Note what the scriptures record about their visit to see these new Christians.

When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon [epi] any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

Acts 8:15-16

None of these new believers had received the baptism in the Holy Spirit which gives the *power from on high!* They had received Christ, been baptized into His name, and the Holy Spirit was in [*en*] them. But the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon [*epi*] any of them with power. *“Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 8:17). Again we see that the empowering by the Spirit is distinct from both being born again and undergoing baptism in water.

In his excellent book **Living Water**, Chuck Smith discusses the use of the Greek word *epi* to signify the anointing with power *upon* believers. This contrasts with consistent use of the Greek *en* to signify the *indwelling* by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit descended

epi Jesus in bodily form like a dove. The Holy Spirit had not yet come *epi* any of the Samaritans at conversion or water baptism. The history of the early Church in the book of Acts makes it very clear that baptism in the Holy Spirit is a distinct work of God totally apart and separate from the indwelling by the Spirit at time of conversion.

One might ask, “Why is baptism in the Holy Spirit so very important?” The answer is crucial for all believers. Jesus provides the answer in saying, “*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses*” (Acts 1:8). Recall that the word witness translated from Greek *martus* literally means martyr. The primary meaning of witness concerns a dying to self so that Christ can live within in such fullness that our lives become a living witness of His presence. Our flesh resists becoming this kind of living sacrifice unless we’re divinely empowered by baptism in the Holy Spirit.

It is by *power from on high* that the character of Jesus Christ is produced in a believer.

It is by *power from on high* that one gains victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil.

It is by *power from on high* that one can share in the sufferings of Christ in order to share in His glory.

It is by *power from on high* that God does through us what Jesus did in healing the sick and rebuking demonic spirits.

It is by *power from on high* that our witnessing will convict sinners and reveal Jesus as the only hope for salvation.

The *power from on high* that comes by baptism in the Holy Spirit is not intended to impart spiritual gifts as a primary focus or priority. Should that be the reason for seeking this power, there’ll be little blessing. Baptism with the Holy Spirit accompanies a broken and contrite spirit, and a heart that yearns to be sanctified. We seek power from on high so that the character of Jesus might be created in us. We should seek power that will produce holiness and result in

a total consecration of our mind and thoughts, tongue and speaking, heart and affections. To become more conformed to the likeness of Jesus is infinitely more important than receiving spiritual gifts.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit usually takes place when one seeks a closer walk with Jesus, and desires to commit more fully to His lordship. Until such a time as this empowering occurs, efforts to change and follow Jesus are often marked by great frustration. The famous preacher Charles Spurgeon said, “Some Christians sail their boat in such low spiritual waters that the keel scrapes the bottom all the way to heaven instead of being carried along on a floodtide.” That is what happens if people try to live a godly and fruit-bearing life without staying filled with the Spirit. And the first step of being Spirit-filled is to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

The one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit is Jesus Himself (Luke 3:16). But the manner in which baptism occurs is not fixed. At times, Jesus sends a person to lay hands on those He wants to baptize with the Holy Spirit. This happened both in Samaria and when Ananias was sent to place his hands on Paul several days following his conversion on the road to Damascus.

Placing hands on Paul, he said, ‘Brother Paul, the Lord...has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Acts 9:17

Baptism in the Spirit also occurs *without* laying on of hands. This happened at Pentecost when the baptism with the Holy Spirit took place spontaneously as disciples waited in prayer. The baptism in the Holy Spirit again took place without laying on hands as Peter taught Gentiles in Caesarea about Jesus. “*The Holy Spirit came on [epi] all who heard the message.....for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God*” (Acts 10:44-46).

So imparting of the baptism with the Holy Spirit can vary according to the will of God. However guidelines are given to us by

Jesus. He tells only those who hunger and thirst after righteousness can expect to be filled (Matthew 5:6). Nothing in Scripture indicates this gift is given those lacking inner desire to follow Jesus wholeheartedly. Certainly this is my experience in praying with hundreds of saints to receive the baptism. And Jesus also exhorts the believer to seek diligently after the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

Luke 11:9-13

The Greek verbs “ask...seek...knock” are all in a continuing tense. This means to persist in seeking baptism in the Spirit in confidence that Jesus will reward earnestness (Hebrews 11:6). In addition, the baptism is only the initial experience. Keeping filled with the Spirit is to be our lifestyle (Ephesians 5:18). Those filled with the Spirit are persons in whom the likeness of Christ is seen by manifesting the *fruit of the Spirit* (Galatians 5:22).

A soaked sponge exudes water when squeezed, and a Spirit-filled person exudes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This will especially be true during times of pressure in the midst of trials and affliction that are certain to happen unexpectedly in all our lives from time to time.

In closing, I’d like to challenge three groups. The first are those sold saviorship instead of lordship by peddlers of cheap grace. It’s not too late if you were misled like this. Leave behind teaching that offers no cost, no crosses to bear, no hardships, and certainly no persecution. It is false Christianity! Lifeboats saved many people on

the ill-fated Titanic. And Jesus is our spiritual lifeboat. Receive Him as Lord of your life, and you can rest assured He will be your Savior. Then seek power from on high that comes through baptism in the Holy Spirit. Do not neglect grace available through such a precious gift as promised by the Father in heaven.

The second group are those who were taught baptism in the Spirit is not a work of grace distinct from salvation. I pray you will recognize that your prior teaching was not scriptural. Baptism in the Spirit is a distinct work of grace, and is intended for all whom the Lord calls. Let Jesus know you desire a closer walk with Him, and then pray diligently for the baptism.

You might consider asking someone who is used by God in this way to lay on hands and pray for Jesus to baptize you with His Spirit. And be certain to seek this baptism with the correct motive in your heart, lest there be any kind of hindrance to Jesus pouring His grace into your life. It should be an inner desire to know Jesus more intimately, to be changed into His image, and to be strengthened for sharing in His sufferings (Philippians 3:10).

Do not focus on gaining spiritual gifts such as healing or tongues. Any self-serving motive can result in the baptism with the Holy Spirit being withheld. I have seen this occur on occasion, and we have the biblical example of a man named Simon. He wanted to receive the baptism in the Spirit for his own recognition, and did not receive this gift despite the fact he believed in Jesus and already had been water baptized (Acts 8:13,18-21).

The final group is those needing a fresh spiritual touch. At one time, you may have had zeal for the Lord. Times of worship were filled with genuine heartfelt praise. Sacrifices were made to help others, and your witness for Christ was touching the lives of others. Gradually however, your walk with Jesus lost its enthusiasm and now you are lukewarm. In truth, you are not alone. Many converts have little spiritual growth after being born again, and this can even be true after receiving the baptism in the Spirit.

The way to receive a fresh touch is always to repent, asking God's forgiveness, and making a heartfelt determination to give the Holy Spirit renewed control of your life. Often we pray for more of the Spirit when the real problem is reluctance to surrender more of self to the Spirit. Human nature hates to have impulses restrained, so yielding self to the Spirit must be a conscious decision. Only as we become emptied of self can filling with the Spirit occur.

God wants to pour new wine into our lives, but frequently we insist on it being poured into the old wineskins of our past. We are not willing to lay aside our own plans, desires, and ambitions to fulfill the will of God for our lives. The humility is lacking that God requires for His grace to abound in us as a vessel of honor.

As a grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die in order to produce a harvest, so also we must die to self to bear a harvest for Christ. This means allowing God to do the spiritual surgery that only He can do. And often this surgery needs to be radical. Our cry should be that of David: *"Search me, O God, and know my heart...see if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting"* (Psalm 139:23,24).

Jesus died to deliver us from bondage. How much more will He provide grace for us to live in victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil (Titus 2:14; Romans 5:9-11). Christians in America have no lack of sermons, teaching tapes, and videos, not to mention the Bible for daily study. It's not for lack of information that we fail to draw others out of darkness into light. The problem is a matter of deception. Many do not know what it really means to follow Jesus.

Untold numbers profess to be Christians, yet are not truly "in Christ." They have never really made a genuine decision, *"Not my will, but Thine be done."* Surrender to the lordship of Jesus if you haven't made this decision. Leave every crooked path behind! You have spent enough time doing what the pagans do – living in self-indulgence, debauchery, lust, drunkenness, greed, and idolatry (1 Peter 4:3).

“Come, Follow Me”

When Jesus knocks on the door of a heart, there is no handle on the outside. The door must be opened from the inside by you. If you are willing to open the door, by grace through faith in Jesus you will be able to conquer everything that brings defeat into your life. Don't miss *your* chance to do this today! Heaven is waiting on *your* decision...a decision that will affect your life forever.

Jesus calls each and every man, woman, and child on earth to “***Come, follow me!***” And we can be absolutely certain that **grace** is more than sufficient to help us do exactly what He asks. The Lord Jesus would never ask us to carry out a mission that is impossible. If we will trust Him and obey, then we can look forward to hearing the most precious of words when the time finally comes to see Him face to face:

*“Well done, my good and faithful servant.
Enter now into the joy of the Lord.”*

"Come, Follow Me" had its birth in a dream. After forty years of practice as an oncologist, Ralph Johnson answered a call of God to treat cancer of the soul in the jail and prison system. A common obstacle to evangelism was the free-of-cost salvation and cheap grace believed by many of the inmates. Then came a dream that gave five steps telling what it really means to follow Jesus.

The first initials of the steps formed an acronym that spelled **GRACE**. This book discusses each step: Godly sorrow, Repentance, Accountability, Counting the cost, and Endurance, together with personal experiences of the author. Himself now recovered from alcoholism and substance abuse, this former physician calls those bound by life-controlling behaviors to follow the one person who can truly set the captives free...Jesus.

"His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness... so that through them, you may escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." 2Peter 1:3,4

