

God is

NOT

a God of Second Chances

and other good news from the Gospel

AARON WILSON



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100% of the royalties from this book will be given to church planting efforts, that more people might know about the good news of Jesus' gospel.

*For more information, please visit
www.godisnotagodofsecondchances.com*

To my wife Jennifer
a gentle spirit and a feisty theologian,
my best friend

and to our children, Abel and Belle
you are the beautiful answers to many prayers!

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Preface: What's All This "Devoting" About?

For the past 14 years, I've worked as a Christian resource supplier. The bookstores I've served during this tenure have a wonderful tradition of reading morning devotions with their staff members. It's a great practice, one I've been privileged to be a part of for the past 728 straight weeks.

As you can imagine, this has afforded me the opportunity to see just about every kind of devotional book that exists. Believe me there are a lot to choose from! No matter what stage of life you're in, there's a devotional written just for you. For example, you can pick up one addressed to families, to couples, to singles, to teens or to children. Have a celebrity you admire? You might enjoy a devotional written by a well-known pastor, an actor, a musician or your favorite Christian athlete.

If you work for a living, there's also a book to assist you during your quiet time. Just check out the titles for teachers, for cops, for stay-at-home-moms or for office workers. Have a personal interest or a favorite vacation spot? Then I'm sure you'd prefer devotions for the outdoorsman, for the pet lover, for the golf enthusiast or maybe one written specifically for beach lounging.

Make no mistake about it; there's a surplus of material available for today's Christian to assist them in their Bible reading and prayer life. Sadly though, buried within this

great mound of meditation material, we tend to find little gospel.

The traditional variety of today's popular devotional features a Bible verse, a few paragraphs about how to feel good about your life, a challenge for the day and a brief prayer to close it out. There's a great emphasis on love, but a lacking presence of the reality of sin and justice. There are many calls to rejoice, but few cries to repent. Self-improvement is subtly elevated over the cross as we spend our time attempting to become better versions of us instead of basking in the finished work of Jesus. "Have a positive thought for the day and try this new technique" is not the gospel. It's one of the many sad byproducts of a second-chance-God worldview.

I wrote this little collection of 31 devotions to aid Christians in their pursuit of Jesus and His gospel. It's not meant to be a substitute for daily Bible reading, but is instead intended to point believers toward the Great Substitute Himself. I've tried to put the gospel or some application of it on each page and make Jesus the star of each day's reading. Yes, there's a Bible verse. Yes, there's a call to action. The format may be familiar, but the Hero of each day is not the person flipping the pages.

If you aren't a Christian, or are unsure of what I mean by the word gospel, I would encourage you to read the last devotion first. If you're currently expressing faith and repentance in response to Jesus' work on the cross, jump right in. If in thirty-one days from now, you walk away with the smallest gain of affection for Christ, I will be a happy man!

God is NOT a God of Second Chances



*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin,
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
2 Corinthians 5:21*

*Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Isaiah 53:11*



“**O**ur God is a God of second chances.” You’ve heard this phrase before right? Perhaps you’ve received it as counsel, seen it on a bumper sticker or sung it in the chorus of a song. In the Bible Belt where I’m from, it almost always makes the top ten list for favorite Bible verses. It’s surprising therefore to discover that this saying isn’t in the Bible at all. Even more shocking is to discover that this idea actually runs counter to the gospel.

To help see why, let me paint a picture of a “second chance” gospel at work: You decide as a Christian who’s been given a second chance, you’re going to stop indulging in a particular sin that’s plagued you. You do alright for a

week or so, but then you fail. You feel you've dirtied the clean slate Jesus gave you and you're discouraged it took so short a time to mess up things.

But wait! A friend shares how God isn't just a God of second chances, but of third and fourth chances also, so you set out again trying not to sin. But guess what happens in another few days? Again you hear, "God is so great and forgiving, He's a God of infinite chances." So more time passes, and you enter into this cycle of asking for forgiveness, trying to be good, failing and shame...asking for forgiveness, trying to be good, failing and shame...

This is where many Christians spend their lives. There's a good chance this is where you're living right now. If so, there's little good news for your soul when it comes to Christ. You may hope when you die you'll make it to Heaven, but for right now, you still feel dirty, weak and frustrated. At best you're asking, "Is this the life Jesus died for?" At worst you're questioning, "Am I really saved?"

The reason this is frustrating is because it's a half-hearted gospel. It's the half that believes Christ can forgive your sin, but it leaves out another extremely important work of Christ - crediting you with His very righteousness. When the Bible talks about Jesus' righteousness it means His moral perfection, His unstained goodness. We need this moral perfection to get into Heaven and stand before God.

To put this into perspective, imagine you're standing at the Olympic aquatic center. All the best swimmers in the world are present, and you're told if you can win gold against these competitors, you can get into Heaven and be with Jesus. Your heart sinks. If you're like me, you can't even swim four lengths of the pool, so you know you'll never

be able to beat these conditioned and gifted athletes. But wait, God is a God of second chances right? Maybe with enough chances, with enough training, with enough time, one day way in the future, you'll be able to win that gold medal. Well, I haven't told you the worst news yet. You're an amputee with no arms and no legs. You can't even swim. You won't only lose every time, thirty seconds into the pool you won't be breathing anymore. You're literally dead in the water of righteousness.

This is a picture of what we do when we try to be good enough to attain to the righteousness God demands. We strive and fail, and so strive harder and fail grander. All the while it turns out we're just flailing around in water which will soon be the death of us. This is why it's not good news God would be a God of second chances. We don't need a second chance. We'd forfeit that one too. What we need is a Holy Substitute who could get it right the first time! We need someone to step in and win the race for us. We need someone to suffer in our place for sin *and* we also need someone to be perfect in our place before God. This is who Jesus is and what He does. This is the full picture of the gospel.

The cross is a two-way transaction between Jesus and Christians. On the cross, our sin leaves us and goes to Christ where He suffered for it and buried it with His death. But also on the cross, Jesus' righteousness is given to us, credited to us as our very own. The Christian is always as righteous as Jesus because, through the cross, Jesus gives us His own righteousness. There is so much more to marvel at in the gospel, but this dual truth – that on the cross Jesus got our sin and we got His righteousness - is paramount to

living joyfully as a Christian. It's the powerful core of the Good News.

Take time today to ponder the glory of the crucified and resurrected Savior. As you do, leave any "second chance" theology buried in the tomb and thank God a rolled away stone declares that Jesus, our only chance, got it right the first time for us!

Responding to the Reality of Sin



For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Matthew 23:27b-28

He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.

Titus 3:5-6



The front lawn of our little home in North Carolina features one solitary tree. This centerpiece of our landscape is not overly impressive. In fact, to call any part of our yard landscaped would be doing it a great favor. Nevertheless, this little tree is special to me. It was newly planted when we first bought our home. At that time, the tallest of its thin branches stretched no higher than I did at 5'9". Several years have passed since then, and I often like to steal a glance to see how tall this tree has grown. While

I've remained the same height, our tree has now more than doubled in size. Its growth reminds me of the years our family has spent in our house, the children who have grown within its walls, and the memories we've shared.

A couple of months ago, I noticed a crack forming along the tree's trunk. I didn't pay it much attention at first, but slowly this crack has grown into a large gash. One of my friends is an arborist, so I asked him to take a look at the tree to see if there was anything I could do to help it along. To my surprise, his diagnosis was quite grim. Record rainfall in our area had caused the interior of the tree to grow faster than what the bark could handle. This caused the initial split. After that, wood boring larvae moved in and slowly started eating the tree away from the inside out. My friend had one conclusion: although it would take several years, my little tree would eventually succumb to its internal damage and die.

Although it's not pretty, the fate of my tree is similar to that of our souls. We all have a disease eating away at us from the inside out. This disease is called sin. It consists of both the evil nature we inherited from Adam, and the sins we personally commit. Sin makes us spiritually dead. Much like the tree, the rest of our body inevitably catches up to the condition of our spirit and succumbs to death also. Every life insurance policy and gravestone marker testifies to this sad reality.

Despite the obviousness of our condition, we are quite good at hiding our sin when the cracks in our lives reveal our true nature. We do this in two ways. First, we excuse and minimize sin. This is simple enough to see through. Pretending sin isn't real while our cracks are showing is

only lying to ourselves. It would be like asking my friend to diagnosis a photo-shopped picture of my tree.

It's the second way we deal with sin which is much harder to put a finger on. It consists of trying to cover up our depravity with good works, thinking that having enough perceived goodness will fix our condition. This would be the equivalent of trying to hot-glue leaves onto the branches of my dying tree in order to convince myself of just how healthy it is. Jesus had this futile approach in mind when He said, "For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Matthew 23:27b-28)

The only way to fix my front lawn is to replace it with a living tree. Likewise, the only hope for my soul is to be given a new heart. This is why Jesus is so insistent that one must be born again to see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3). No amount of good works can produce this new birth. Only faith and repentance in Jesus' gospel can. Do you trust in the finished work of Christ today or does your hope teeter on how good you feel about yourself? Are you letting the Gardner sow you a new heart, or are you trying to tape bark onto a dying tree? One of these is life-giving, the other is vain. If you've never received Jesus' gift, repent and believe. If you are following Jesus, take time to reflect on the cross today. Thank Jesus that His life, death and resurrection have given new life to a once-dead heart.

The Intentional Steward



And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

Matthew 5:40-41

Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

Matthew 7:6



Jesus says to let people sue you. In fact, in Matthew 5:40-41, He says when you find yourself in a legal battle, you should give the other party more than they ask for. Then He addresses our time and energy. Is someone forcing you to walk a mile? Make it two. It seems Jesus is telling us to give ourselves away and to be willing to write off our possessions, time and energy at the drop of a hat.

That is until two chapters later. In Matthew 7:6, Jesus appears to have reversed His position and is now telling people to not readily give away their precious commodities. “Dogs don’t get what’s holy and pigs don’t deserve pearls,” He says. Jesus’ reasoning appears to be self preservation. In order not to get run over, we should watch out for how

people might take advantage of us. This command seems more aligned with our cultural preference, but which one is it? Did Jesus really have a change of heart? Is He really teaching conflicting lessons? Of course not! God doesn't change His mind and never contradicts Himself. When we take time to really consider Jesus' teachings, we find these two truths work together to guide us in wisdom as we live a life on mission for Christ.

Believing we're a people on mission is key to rightly understanding these passages. They make no sense if we approach them from an individualistic standpoint, asking "What serves me best?" However, when we come to these Scriptures with the attitude of, "What serves the mission best?" we can rightly discern God's will when it comes to this idea of giving ourselves away.

On this mission of loving Jesus and representing Him to the world, we have limited resources. Our time, money and energy all have restrictions, so we must rightly determine how to best invest these commodities for Kingdom purposes. The goal is not to hoard or to give away resources, it's to steward them for a greater purpose.

I saw this principle illustrated when I was working one of my first jobs. I was tasked with delivering some supplies to an unfamiliar area. My directions had taken me off the beaten path, and the fuel gauge, which showed a quarter tank before I left, was now creeping closer and closer towards empty. I traveled mile after mile with no hint of a gas station. Frantically, I turned the air conditioning off to conserve the little fuel which remained. I made sure each pump of the accelerator was intentional. Finally, I spotted a lone and rather shady looking fill-up station. My car literally

ran out of gas as I coasted towards the pump. I had never been so happy to purchase a tank of gasoline before.

During this journey, the realization that my resources were limited affected my actions. No longer did I weigh the option of taking a joy ride or consider needlessly running the engine while consulting a map. I knew every last drop of fuel I had was crucial to getting my delivery to its destination. The success of my mission became my singular goal. This same mentality, when applied to our call as followers of Christ, is what allows us to know when to give ourselves away and when to hold back, when to pass on our tunics and when to hold back our pearls.

As you wrestle with Christ's commands to give and withhold, ask yourself, "What does being a good steward look like in today's situation?" In some cases, allowing yourself to be taken advantage of for the sake of Christ is the best way to advance the gospel. Your selflessness and patient forbearance may pave the road for others to "see your good deeds and glorify God." (1 Peter 2:12). In other situations, pouring out your gifts, time and money to those who have repeatedly mistreated and rejected you, only hinders your ability to serve others for Christ. You must use discernment to decide which action is right in each individual circumstance, always remembering the mission of the gospel isn't about your preferences, but about faithful stewardship.

If you're a Christian, you're almost home but the gas gauge is nearing empty. Decide today how you can best use the fuel you have left. When you begin to ration your assets, you'll find the goal of your mission becomes all the more beautiful (Matthew 6:21). And, as your eyes focus in on the glorious finish line, you may just find you have picked up a few thankful hitchhikers along the way.

Choosing Sides



*Whoever is not with me is against me, and
whoever does not gather with me scatters.*

Matthew 12:30

*Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he
will separate people one from another as a shepherd
separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place
the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.*

Matthew 25:32-33



When I was in middle school, one of my teachers took it upon herself to try to teach us debating skills. Her method was quite simple. She would pose a question and present two alternative answers. She would then ask those of us who agreed with the first response to shift to the left of the classroom. Those who favored the second response were told to move to the right. Finally, she grouped those of us who were undecided in the middle. The job of this last group was to listen to the other kids debate and pick a side to join before the end of class.

After we did this a few times, most everyone caught onto the fact that the middle of the classroom was the best place to be. Not only did you not have to talk as much, your indecision gave the subtle impression that you were

aloof to the extreme positions rushed into by others. Also, in the world of middle school politics, waiting to cast your vote provided a sense of power over your other classmates whose grades hinged on your decision. Yep, the middle was the place to be.

Whether it was intentional or not, we were taught this lesson so well, many of us carried our middle-of-the-room worldview through high school and college and into our adulthood. This was especially true when it came to religion. It became unfashionable to think truth was exclusive, and believing that Jesus was the only way to God was labeled intolerant. When the “coexist” bumper stickers first came out, they couldn’t hand them out fast enough. Once again, everyone wanted to sit in the middle.

Staying in the middle sounds quaint and attractive. In many ways it appears to be a noble and respectable position. There’s only one problem: in the real world, a middle-of-the-room stance on God doesn’t exist. I don’t mean it shouldn’t exist, I mean it doesn’t. In Matthew 12:30, Jesus lays out the only two options for a heart. He says, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”

Jesus’ words should challenge our tendency to ask non-Christians to “develop a personal relationship with Jesus.” There are two reasons why this phrase is misleading. First, it can be interpreted to mean just about anything. Mormons and New Age practitioners would affirm they have a relationship with Jesus. So would most of the Western world, in as much as that relationship means thinking Jesus was a great moral teacher and a good example to model one’s life after. Jesus isn’t looking for patronage though; He’s looking for worshipers.

Secondly, this phrase implies people have a non-existent or neutral relationship with Jesus before salvation. Sadly, this is a lie. Every human first relates to God as their Creator, whether they acknowledge Him in that role or not. Secondly, unregenerate souls relate to God as an enemy (Colossians 1:21). Christ makes it clear there isn't a neutral state one can take in spiritual warfare. He divides the human race into two opposing groups - those working with Him and those working against Him. Becoming a Christian means more than just making God your friend and prayer confidant - it means having one's status changed from an enemy of the King to His child.

Without the power of Jesus' gospel applied to your life, you're not right with Him. Jesus could not say it more bluntly, the lack of a vested interest in Him is seen as rebellion (Matthew 25:25-30), and the taste of a lukewarm life makes Him vomit (Revelation 3:15-16). In His classroom, there are no middle seats. You are forgiven and following or else you are forsaken and floundering. The gospel cries out for you to consider your heart. There are no "kind-of" or "trying my best" followers of Christ. As you stand before the only righteous Savior, you have a choice. You can respond in faith and repentance to His sacrifice, or you can war against Him through apathetic interest. Don't believe the lie that you have a lifetime to contemplate passionately following Jesus. You need Him today. Run to Him; repent and follow. The bell will ring soon; which side of the room will you be on?

The Savior with Scars



Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."

John 20:27

*And they sang a new song, saying,
"Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood
you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation."*

Revelation 5:9



On my right forearm I have three small scars, reminiscent of the time I broke my arm as a child. No amount of scrubbing or washing can take these marks away. Even though twenty years have passed since the accident, I'm reminded of the event every day. Scars are permanent.

Likewise, when police are asking someone to describe a suspect, they always inquire if the witness observed any noticeable scars. This is because people can easily change their clothes and dye their hair, but it is much more difficult to hide scar marks. Scars are unique identifiers of people, revealing signs of their history and a part of their life story.

It's telling that Jesus chooses to keep scars on His resurrected body. You would think Jesus would show no blemishes as He appears in glory, just as He is the prototype to all believers who will rise again with imperishable bodies. However, Jesus indeed retains physical reminders of His crucifixion and death. Post resurrection, He tells Thomas to put his finger in the scars on His hands and side. I can only imagine the lump in Thomas' throat. After all, what would you do if you were talking to a man and suddenly noticed he had holes in each wrist? You wouldn't toss that aside as a birth mark; you'd immediately think, "This guy has a story!" As we live life with Jesus in Heaven and on the New Earth, we'll constantly be reminded by His physical body that Jesus has a story, and that His story has made ours.

This reminder is so important to our spiritual growth, God even includes it in prophetic imagery. In Revelation 5, we're introduced to Jesus in the form of a lamb. This lamb is worshiped by four mighty angels and a myriad of followers. He's the only one in Heaven or on earth who is worthy enough to open the weighty scroll of judgment the coming chapters describe. Amidst all this glory, and in fact facilitating it, is John's comment that this mighty lamb looks as if He has been slain. Once again, this imagery is intentional. Just as if we were watching a thoroughbred specimen of a horse cross the finish line of the Kentucky Derby with broken legs, we should be asking, "What's the story here?"

The story is of course, the cross. The Old Testament is filled with precursors of the gospel. Story after story exists to prepare the hearts of God's people for Jesus. The tabernacle, the Passover, the temple, the monarchy, the prophecies and

each one of the millions of animals which were sacrificed as part of Israelite culture, had the ultimate goal of pointing to Jesus as the focal point of God's story. And just as every story in the Old Testament looks forward to Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, every story in the New Testament and beyond will look back to remember this great act. This is why we celebrate communion and why we observe baptism. It's why the heavenly hosts praise Jesus as worthy "to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God" (Revelation 5:9). It's why Jesus has scars.

Take a moment right now to thank Jesus for the story His scars tell. If you're a Christian, this has become your story. As you look at the absence of holes in your wrists and side today, reflect on the fact that Jesus bore the penalty you deserve and took your place of punishment. He bears scars for remembrance; you bear clean wrists for the same reason. Praise God for the unscathed blessings the cross provides!

Making Straight Paths



For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

Hebrews 12:11-13



We're all lame, and here's the bad news: until you die, you always will be. I know, discouraging right? But it's the truth. As long as you're alive, you'll have a sin nature, a part of you which tugs and pulls at your heart to rebel against God.

No one ever gets to a point of sanctification where they can say, "I think I've got a healthy sin nature now." A healthy sin nature is like an inflatable dartboard; it just doesn't exist. And here's another reality: our positioning towards the gospel is constantly making our condition better or making it worse. We don't have stagnate souls; we're always, at every moment, either moving towards Jesus or away from Him. Those who make "straight paths for their feet" are being healed of their lameness and will one day be completely and forever cured. Those who choose to reject the power

and call of the gospel on their lives treat Jesus' sacrifice as a stumbling block and put out of joint that which was already lame to begin with. The longer they walk in their condition without treatment, the worse off they become.

For the Christian, the ongoing process of being healed of sin and growing stronger in Christ is called sanctification. This is different than justification, the one-time event when we're forgiven of sin and credited with Christ's righteousness. Justification happens the moment we're saved. Sanctification extends throughout the life of the Christian. During the process of sanctification, we learn our old sin nature likes to hang around, calling us back into rebellion against God. This is something the child who's saved at five and the senior citizen walking with Christ at 90 have in common. Their sin nature is still a part of them.

In recognition of this, the writer of Hebrews implores Christians to lift their hands, strengthen their knees and make straight paths for their life. He knows if we don't take these actions, our lameness (our sin nature) will start to take a hold of us.

I see this principle illustrated in how I drive my car. I own a bright yellow Ford hatchback. I love my little car, but 12 years of driving and a two-hour commute have taken its toll on the little guy. My car squeaks and groans; it is lame. Because I know of its condition, I make sure to drive it carefully and service it regularly. I intentionally don't take it off-roading because I know that would only damage it further. I choose straight, level paths for my car whenever I can.

It's easy to identify this need in a car, but much harder to recognize the same principle at work in our souls. This is because Satan wants to convince us that we're not lame,

but that we are strong enough to handle temptation. A little taste of the world here, a tiny flirt with the flesh there, and we feel we're ok. As long as we don't hit the "big sins," we think our soul can take it. The Devil and his kingdom have the brilliant strategy of feeding us "small temptations" and coaxing us into "little sins" while giving us the false conviction we're strong. Then, when we do commit a more noticeable sin, Satan pulls a bait and switch and works to convict us of our weakness. As it turns out, Satan doesn't care whether we think much or little of ourselves, as long as we're thinking about *us* and keeping our eyes off Jesus.

Actively believing in Jesus and His gospel are the keys to living a victorious life as a Christian. Because we know Jesus was perfectly strong, we can rest in our weakness and trust in His finished work on our behalf. However, knowing this truth doesn't make us complacent about indwelling sin. It motivates us to fight against it (1 Timothy 6:12), to starve the flesh (Romans 13:14), to gird the loins of our mind (1 Peter 1:13) and to make our body a slave (1 Corinthians 9:27). We lift up drooping hands, strengthen weak knees and make straight paths for our feet because we want to follow this great God who has saved us.

Ask God to reveal your lameness to you today - not to beat you down, but to protect your soul and make much of Jesus. It's only when a patient admits his sickness that the physician is able to strengthen his body. Come to Jesus today with a repentant heart and a willing spirit to engage His plan for your life. As you do, you'll join the ranks of followers who walk with limps, but behind the great Healer.

Better to be at a _____ Than a Party



*So teach us to number our days that
we may get a heart of wisdom.
Psalms 90:12*

*O LORD, make me know my end and what is the
measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!
Psalms 39:4*



How would you complete the above fill-in-the-blank from Scripture? Where's it better to be at than a party? A Bible study session? A church service? A mission trip? Solomon's answer in Ecclesiastes 7:2 is much more somber. He writes, "Better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all, everyone dies - so the living should take this to heart" (NLT).

It's easy to read this verse and think it was written by a stoic monk, the kind whose idea of a party consists of changing his bed sheets. Solomon, the author of this book, was no monk though. He was an experienced partier, the best of his craft at the time. His picture would have graced the cover of Jerusalem GQ. He writes in Ecclesiastes 2:10, "And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them.

I kept my heart from no pleasure.” When Solomon writes there is something better for the soul than a party, we can trust his experience in the matter.

But why prefer a funeral, a house of mourning? After all, have you ever heard of anyone who chooses to hit up a grave-side service to start a weekend? Do you know of any child who says he wants to be a mortician when he grows up? Probably not. We tend to avoid death and only pay it attention when we are forced to do so.

It’s almost funny when you think about the lengths we take to avoid something so universal. Go to any bookstore and browse their health and fitness section. You’ll find many bestsellers that tell you how to have “perfect health.” I can guarantee though that you won’t find any literature that tells you what to eat or how to exercise to ultimately keep you from dying. It turns out perfect health has some serious limitations. There’s also my favorite - television survival experts. I love survival programs, but the fact of the matter is, the most Bear-Grylls-esque man will ultimately have to surrender all his strength, skill and knowledge to a grave marker. Apparently, “survivor man” is a just an oxymoron.

Before you think I’m making light of such a serious matter, know that is not the case. My wife and I lost several children before our twins were born. A couple months ago, I stood by a hospital bed and watched my grandfather struggle to hold onto life. He passed away the following week. My church and the community group I lead have experienced the loss of loved ones and have walked through grief together. Death is not a matter of levity; it’s a matter of reality. This of course has major implications for non-Christians. This verse is partly intended to cause those not

saved to consider their standing before God and point them to the cross. However, it's for Christians that this verse carries the most weight. Why? Because it puts a ticking clock on a missional life.

Consider these two verses from Psalms:

“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Psalms 90:12).

“O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!” (Psalms 39:4).

Since God implores us to number our days, what might Satan be countering with? The enemy is telling us, “You’ve got time, there’s no need to rush your sanctification. Sure, you can share the gospel, just don’t share it *today*. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you to do what pleases God and to live on mission. Pace yourself. Oh, and by the way, have you seen tonight’s TV lineup?”

There’s nothing wrong with watching TV or attending parties (providing you bring wisdom to both). There is a mistake however, when these moments become the highlights of a life and the pleasures we’re living for instead of treating them like short breaks in a war. 1 Corinthians 9:24 helps frame this view:

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.”

What’s the best way to derail a runner from competing for a prize? Convince them time doesn’t matter. Tell them as long as they eventually cross the finish line, it doesn’t matter how quickly they do. Remove the clock and you kill the motivation.

Christian, this is Satan’s strategy! When we’re tempted to stroll along the straight and narrow path, smelling the

sweet flowers of our salvation and keeping the gospel to ourselves, Scripture tells us to get up and run! Run fast! Run hard! Run to win! Don't run to win your salvation. Redemption has been secured by Jesus on the cross. Run that others might hear and see and taste that Jesus is good! Run because the clock is ticking.

As you run, use Ephesians 5:15-16 as motivation, "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil." Make the best use of your time because you've got your eyes on the finish line. And whether a funeral is in your plans or not, take time to consider your impending death through the lenses of the gospel. It may be the healthiest action you take today.

Crowned with the Curse



*Cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.*

Genesis 3:17b-18a

*And twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his
head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before
him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"*

Matthew 27:29



When Adam and Eve first disobeyed their Creator, disastrous events for humanity were set into motion. God's natural favor towards mankind dissipated. The joyous relationship God and His image bearers shared was fractured. The command to be fruitful and multiply stung with the knowledge that all future generations would be cursed with the deathly inheritance of God's wrath.

As horrific as this was, the effects of Adam and Eve's sin weren't confined to the human race. Every plant, every animal and every square inch of the physical universe was also grievously affected. The home that had been created to perfectly serve and satisfy humans was transformed into a world of danger, frustration and pain. Christians call this event the fall and its result on humans and the

world, the curse. God describes aspects of this curse in Genesis 3:17-19:

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

It’s interesting God speaks of thorns and thistles when He’s describing the curse to Adam. God could have chosen to reveal the damaging effect hurricanes and earthquakes would now have on the world. He could have foretold droughts and plagues. God could also have warned Adam about genocides, child sacrifices, torture chambers, human trafficking and any untold number of evils his sin had put into motion. Instead, God decides to focus on three things: thorns, thistles and sweat.

God may have simply been showing mercy to Adam by not disclosing the full weight of his sin at one time. Understandably, Adam’s now-frail heart could probably not have handled the heaviness. But what if God had a second agenda for emphasizing the particular pains He did? What if He were planting another precursor of the gospel into humanity’s story?

As you think about God’s pronouncement of the curse using the imagery of sweat, thorns and thistles, consider the Scripture’s account of Jesus’ crucifixion. After Matthew records a night in which Jesus sweated so intensely it was like drops of blood hitting the ground (Luke 22:44), he writes,

“and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’” (Matthew 27:29).

Notice again what Jesus is forced to wear on His way to the cross - a crown of thorns! Jesus literally wears the curse on His head. A crown is normally a sign of authority and honor, but Jesus’ murderers use this one as a cheap and painful prop to mock him. As they “hail” Him with thorns, they are essentially calling Him, “the king of garbage, carrying the authority of a compost pile.” Do you get the weight of this image? Before Jesus hangs on a cross to absorb the wrath of God, the curse literally hangs on His head and drips from His body. The people God came to save see this as literal slapstick comedy.

As the mangled crown of thorns was pushed into Jesus’ skull, I wonder if He reflected on the day He first heard the curse pronouncement given to Adam. As Jesus stood silent before His mockers, the imbedded points of each thorn would have been sharp reminders of His mission. They would have also foreshadowed His glorious future. Thankfully, we now live on the other side of the cross. Jesus still wears a crown, but this one is no longer a symbol of the curse. Jesus is now “crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Hebrews 2:9).

The next time you wrestle with a result of the curse, whether it’s questioning a natural disaster, an untimely death, or an unexpected diagnosis, remember Jesus bore the weight of sin to ultimately redeem us from such things. Most importantly, He died to free us from the wrath of God.

If you're a Christian, thank God you have been transformed from His enemy into a beloved child. Jesus once wore your curse; you now wear His righteousness. Because of this, a resurrected world, one without thorns, awaits. Take a moment to praise God for His extravagant grace and the depths of His salvation!

Wrestling with God



*Then he said, "Your name shall no longer
be called Jacob, but Israel,
for you have striven with God and with
men, and have prevailed."*

Genesis 32:28

*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but
against the rulers, against the authorities, against
the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against
the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*

Ephesians 6:12



God has a knack for changing people's names. In the Old Testament, He designated Abram would become Abraham and elected that Sarai would become Sarah. Later in the New Testament, God changed Simon to Peter and Saul to Paul. According to Revelation 2:17, God will one day give all believers a new name. When God renames someone, it's usually to mark an important spiritual milestone in their life. One of the most significant name changes in Biblical history is that of Jacob, the third patriarch of God's people.

Jacob's name change occurs in Genesis 32, when he entertains an all-night wrestling session with a mysterious figure. With dawn approaching, this stranger miraculously

throws Jacob's hip out of joint with a simple touch. Realizing his opponent is none other than God Himself, Jacob hangs on, demanding that he receive a blessing. Amazingly, God permits Jacob's request and changes his name to Israel, which means, "one who strives or wrestles with God."

This name change proves to be quite significant as "Israel" later becomes the national title of God's chosen people. The name Israel appears in every major section of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. In fact, Jesus was an Israelite. As His follower, part of your identity as a Christian is tied to the name that means, "he who wrestles with God."

It's interesting God chose this word to represent His people. Wrestling with God is certainly not a title you'd want to boast of, but apparently, God wants His people to recognize that if they have anything in common from one generation to another, it's that they struggle against Him.

When you think about it, God's people share a trait that's quite comical. After all, who could really wrestle with God and live to tell about it? In a lacking analogy, it's the equivalent of sending a paper airplane to war against an aircraft carrier, or riding a tricycle towards an oncoming train hoping it will swerve first. God has no worthy opponent, yet somehow, we all like to pretend we can last a round or two against Him.

The only reason we can survive a wrestling match with God is because of the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. Jesus, the only man to have always obeyed God and to have never wrestled with His Father, stepped into humanity as "an Israelite indeed" (John 1:47). Though perfect, He wore the title of God-contender in our place. The work of Jesus purchased a new name for those who believe in Him. That

name is Christian, meaning one who follows Christ. Jesus is in the business of turning God-wrestlers into God-followers.

Following Jesus means walking in His footsteps, recognizing that because Jesus wore our sin and animosity towards God, we are now free to submit to Him. We still wrestle, but now “with the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Repentance is the shifting needle in the compass of our heart. It redirects our rebellious nature away from God and reinvests that energy into a war against Satan and his kingdom.

It’s worth considering today what name you’re wearing, and I don’t mean what you bubble in for religion on a census. You’re either wrestling with God and about to lose, or wrestling with the world, having already won through Christ. Few people can strive with God and prevail. Those that do, enter the Kingdom of God at the cross, trading closed fists and bloody knuckles for holy hands (1 Timothy 2:8). Have you let God change your name? If so, how are you living up to its meaning? For the Christian, every day starts at the cross, remembering the gospel and imitating Christ by dying to self and living for Him. Take time today to remember this Jesus who victoriously wrestled with sin in your place and who redeems former God-fighters like yourself.

The Command to be Happy



*Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will
give you the desires of your heart.*

Psalms 37:4

*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

Psalms 90:14



My grandfather and the home town I grew up in taught me to be a fan of the University of South Carolina. Living in a southern culture that treats college sports statistics like a second language, I developed a strong affection for USC athletics. No one ever needed to tell me to delight in one of their football games. Instead, my interest always seemed to come quite naturally. It still does today. Similarly, there are a couple of television shows I like to watch each week. I find enjoying these programs also comes effortlessly. I've never had to pray that God would fan the flame of my heart towards an upcoming episode.

A natural fondness towards recreational activities appears to be programmed into us. This begs the question, if affection for lesser things comes naturally, why does God have to command us to delight in Him? Can one really

manufacture a liking to something? Is pulling your heart up by its boot straps and saying, “Hey, delight in this!” really a way to please God?

I struggled with this question until I began to examine my “natural” interests more closely. Take football for example. Even though I was raised in a culture that valued sports, I didn’t come out of the womb wearing my team’s colors (my grandfather would argue otherwise). Instead, I gravitated towards this interest because I was surrounded by other people who did the same. I still find myself doing this. If I’m in a crowded room and spot someone wearing a South Carolina hat, guess who I’m going to strike up a conversation with first? And those television shows? I seldom view them alone. My wife and I usually watch them together. We discuss the plot and talk about upcoming episodes. As it turns out, my so-called natural affection is nurtured by whom I spend my time with.

I also find my affection is cultivated by what I spend my time doing. When it comes to my football team, I have a daily routine of checking a website which updates me on recruiting news, practice updates and player injuries. With television, I make sure to check the listings to ensure I have the right date and time for the next episode. Of course, then there’s the time I actually spend watching a game or program. I don’t sit around and imagine myself basking in these activities; I’m actively involved in enjoying them. I have affection and so I make plans to enjoy. Then, in the very act of enjoying, I cultivate more of an interest. Such is the cycle of affection. It is part natural and part nourishing.

This principle is also true with God. When God regenerates a Christian’s heart, He instills it with affection

for Himself. This affection is natural to our newly redeemed spirit. However, because we still have indwelling sin, our new heart finds itself at war as we are caught between two competing natures. We discover we are like Paul who says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15). If we don't actively nourish a Godly affection, it will quickly become overshadowed by our lust for worldly things.

So how do we cultivate this desire for God? The same way as we do everything else, by making decisions about who we spend our time with and what we spend our time doing. Being around a community of believers, the church body, is essential for nurturing an affection for God. This is one reason why God implores Christians not to forsake assembling together (Hebrews 10:25). Likewise, we must also be studying God's Word daily and applying it to our lives. We must be faithful in prayer, in sacrificial giving, and in serving. We should fast, confess, meditate and rest to the glory of God. Most importantly, we must remember and preach the gospel to ourselves and to others. When we're diligent in these activities, we foster a relationship with God which is marked by desire - maybe not always a burning desire, but certainly a steady and ever-growing delight in Jesus. As you delight yourself in God, He promises to give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4). See the pattern again? Delight to be delighted.

How is your affection towards God today? Are you waiting to be swept over by emotion for Jesus or are you actively investing your time and energy by nurturing a joy centered around Him? True happiness is not for wimps.

If you truly want to delight in and be satisfied with God, chase after Him and pursue His people. It takes a gutsy and determined man or woman to seek true pleasure in the Lord. Are you up for the task of being truly happy today?

Firstfruits and the Gospel



*The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall
bring into the house of the LORD your God.*

Exodus 23:19a

*Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth,
that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*

James 1:18



One afternoon when I was five, I came home from Sunday school and decided it would be a good idea to set up an altar to God in my bedroom. I'm not really sure why I felt the need to do this. Probably, I had been taught a flannel graph story from the Old Testament that morning and came to the conclusion, "If you really love God, you build Him an altar."

I gathered my stuffed animals in a circle and stole a glance at my favorite one. In my five-year-old mind, I figured as soon as I designated the plush sacrificial animal, God would send down a burst of flames from Heaven to engulf it. (I briefly considered mom might not approve of a fire in my bedroom, but figured God would take care of putting it out after we were done.) At the last minute, I replaced my favorite animal with a less-beloved one. I knew

I was supposed to offer my best, but even before starting grade school, my sinful nature was revealing that I treasured stuff over God. I waited, but no fireball ever lit up the room. Slowly, I put the animals back in my toy box, half disappointed, half relieved, and walked down the hall to see about lunch.

Maybe you've never set up an altar in your bedroom (which isn't a good idea by the way), but I bet you've experienced a similar situation in which you were reluctant to offer God your best. Such was the case with the Israelites in the Old Testament. God had initiated a practice called firstfruits in which His people were expected to sacrificially give the first and best of their crops to God. This took a faith which required guts. Crops represented livelihood, both as subsistence and as a commodity for trade. When the Israelites relinquished their rights to their first and best, they were giving up possessions which would provide immediate benefit to them and their families. Since they also had no guarantee a storm or plague wouldn't destroy their crops the next day, you can sense why they would be tempted to offer some of their poorer specimens or withhold their firstfruits altogether.

Even though we're not under the law of firstfruits today, we still owe God, who owns everything, our first and best. Whether it be our money, time, energy, affection or our passion, the earliest and most excellent of each should be directed towards our Creator. Our hesitancy (or refusal) to do this usually stems from a misunderstanding of the gospel.

Many times we wrongly think if we give God our best, we'll earn His favor, and that if we don't, we'll incur His wrath. This is why we feel things are good with God when

our Bible reading is clicking and why we avoid Him when our church attendance has gotten spotty. Our sense of positioning towards God sways with each act of obedience or disobedience. This is another hazard of a second-chance gospel; each day (and every new chance) carries with it the risk of messing things up again. When sin and failures beat us down over and over, we become less and less likely to feel inspired to give God our firstfruits. This is why many Christians fall away from spiritual disciplines. It's why Biblical New Year's resolutions seldom last.

The good news of the gospel is that our obedience is retroactive to the work of Christ. In other words, we give God our best, not to earn our standing before God, but in response to Christ having already given us His best on the cross. Don't be deceived; Jesus' substitutionary death was the best God could offer.

God also gives us the firstfruits of the Spirit, the regeneration or new birth of our souls. Both Christ and Christians are called the firstfruits of God because our new lives (Christ's bodily resurrection and our spiritual resurrections) are promises that God will one day resurrect the entire universe from the curse and from the results of the fall (1 Corinthians 15:23 & James 1:18).

Believing these truths is what enables a Christian to draw the strength to obey God and give Him his or her best. When we're faced with the opportunity to read God's word or watch a sitcom, when we debate whether to gather with God's people or sleep in, it's an appreciation for the gospel, not a grit-your-teeth-mentality, that appropriately fuels the outcome. Just as the Israelites could only eat and enjoy their crop after offering their firstfruits, you now have

the freedom to enjoy and be enjoyed by God because of the ultimate firstfruit found in Jesus' perfect obedience and sacrificial death.

The trench the cross carved as it was dragged up Calvary provides a straight and level path for believers to follow in. As you embark on the mission to take up your own cross today, take time to reflect on the gospel. There's a strange joy found in sacrifice and a mysterious delight that resides in daily dying when a person has his or her eyes on Jesus. Let that joy be yours as you make the sacrifice to give Jesus your best of all things.

A Sodom & Gomorrah Decorating Scheme



For in seven days I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.

Genesis 7:4

The ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 3:20b-21



When I'm not writing, my day job consists of managing a Christian bookstore. Our store has a gift department with one display reserved solely for baby merchandise. One of the perennial product lines in this area is that of Noah's ark. As it turns out, old Noah must have had a great marketing department behind him, because his trademark project turns up on just about every kind of item you can imagine: toys, coloring books, wrapping paper, gift bags and of course, children's books. Just like at my store, nurseries around the world are also decorated with Noah and his two-of-every-kind entourage. It certainly makes

sense; kids love animals after all. There's a danger though, when Noah's ark becomes just a cute story in the Bible. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Noah's story is initially one of judgment and wrath. God didn't assemble the animals together to get a creation class photo. He brought a remnant of life together to save it from the world wide execution which was about to take place. His reasoning is found in Genesis 6:12-13:

“And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth.’”

That last line rings with bitter irony. The earth which had been created to serve as a sanctuary for mankind, would now serve as the agent of man's destruction. Water, usually a life-giving blessing, would usher in the largest execution the world had ever known. Consider Genesis 7:21-23 to get a feel for this total annihilation of life:

“And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, livestock, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all mankind. Everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark.”

Not surprisingly, this Scripture never makes its way to nursery walls. However, when we remember the ark is a judgment story, we might as well be decorating our kids' rooms with a Sodom and Gomorrah theme. Sulfur and

ashes bed sheets anyone? This story of God's wrath should humble us when we consider the weight of our sin.

Thankfully, this story is also one of redemption. The ark is a means of deliverance which allowed judgment to pass under those God would save. It's a complementary image to the Jewish Passover, which celebrates God's wrath passing over sinners. In this story, Noah's family and the entire animal kingdom are literally floating safely atop God's wrath. This is an Old Testament picture of Jesus. The ark is ultimately His story of salvation.

Before you think I'm making this up, take a moment to read 1 Peter 3:21. It's a little bit of a tricky passage, so get a commentary out and wrestle with it, but Peter clearly states that New Testament baptism corresponds to the ark story. Baptism symbolizes the spiritual reality in which one's sinful nature has been buried with Christ, resulting in the sinner being spiritually raised to new life. The hero of each baptism is Jesus; we are the recipients of His grace. The hero in the ark story isn't Noah, it's Jesus. According to 1 Peter, the ark is a picture of Him. Jesus is the ultimate means of salvation in a world of destruction.

If you have been saved, take time to thank Jesus that you float safely atop God's wrath because of the cross. And instead of thinking, "Aww that's cute!" the next time you see Noah's ark, spend time reflecting on the weight of sin and the goodness of our great God who saves.

The Most-Said Word in the Church



*And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write:
“The words of the Amen, the faithful and true
witness, the beginning of God’s creation.”
Revelation 3:14*

*For all the promises of God find their Yes in
him. That is why it is through him that we
utter our Amen to God for his glory.
2 Corinthians 1:20*



Do you know what the most frequently used word is in a Christian’s vocabulary? It’s not what you’d first guess, a word like faith, hope or love. In fact, even though it’s a word you’ll likely recite over 74,000 times in your life, there’s a good chance you’re not sure what it means. Ready for it? The word we’re all saying, and are all confused by, is “Amen.”

Most of us understand “Amen” usually closes out a prayer, that it’s like a prayer punctuation mark of sorts. It’s our wake-up call when someone else is praying, has gotten a little long-winded, and we feel ourselves dozing off. You might have also heard the word literally means “so

be it.” In that sense, we use it similar to the “like” button on Facebook: “The preacher got five “Amens!” after he said such-and-such; therefore it must have really resonated with the congregation.”

Now neither of those uses is wrong. However it can be dangerous, blasphemous even, if we’re just haphazardly throwing this term around. The reason for this is because “Amen” is actually a name of God. Check out Revelation 3:14 where Jesus is speaking to John. Jesus calls Himself, “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.” So what does Jesus mean by referring to Himself as The Amen? A clue to this is found in 2 Corinthians 1:20. Here Paul writes, “For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him. That is why it is through Him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory.”

Jesus is the “Yes,” the “Amen.” He’s the “So be it,” and the confirmation of everything God promises in both the Old and New Testaments. Did God promise wrath for disobedience? Yes, and because Jesus suffered for wrath in our place, He fulfilled that promise. Did God promise blessings for obedience? Yes, and because Jesus was perfect in our place, His bestowal of mercy and grace fulfill that promise. Jesus’ sacrifice is, as the psalmist states, “[Where] righteousness and peace kiss each other” (85:10). Apart from Jesus, God’s righteousness would be a kiss of death. Because of Jesus, God’s righteousness now brings peace to the Christian.

When we remember this truth, we can utter our Amen to the glory of God. If we aren’t uttering to the glory of God, we’re just wasting breath and profaning the name of Jesus. So how do we live out 2 Corinthians 1:20 and utter

to the glory of God in a practical way? Here are a few simple suggestions:

- 1) When you pray with thanksgiving, such as when you say a blessing before a meal, use your Amen as a reminder that Jesus' sacrifice provides this grace. You could not enjoy good food were it not for Jesus' sacrifice holding back the wrath you deserve and purchasing this gift for you. This is how you eat pepperoni pizza to the glory of God.
- 2) When you pray for intercession, use your Amen as a time to remember that Jesus' sacrifice allows you to have access to God through prayer. Your prayers enter the courts of God only because of the shed blood of God.
- 3) When you say Amen as an affirmation of truth, let this name of Jesus remind you that your ability to know and agree with truth is due to the righteousness of Jesus being given to you through the cross.

Of course, these are big truths to try to remember in the length of time it takes to say a two-syllable word. Let me suggest you simply recite the following phrase in your mind each time you say Amen: "Jesus, thank you for the cross." Doing this brings glory to God.

Do you know what the last word of the Bible is? Look it up, but don't be surprised if the final word of Scripture isn't also a name of Jesus. He's the Alpha and Omega. A book which begins with "In the beginning God..." ends with Him as well. Amen to that!

The Rhythm of Trust



Give us this day our daily bread.

Matthew 6:11

And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

Luke 9:23



As a Christian, I believe every word from Scripture is inspired and intentional. Because of this, I find it's sometimes helpful to imagine how a verse would read differently if a certain word were excluded. In a culture where talk is cheap and words are many, this exercise can elevate the importance of Biblical verbiage and give a greater emphasis to words which would otherwise get brushed aside.

I find this practice makes my spiritual senses react to truth in the same way my taste buds process a delicacy which is missing a key ingredient. The Spirit inside me cries out, "That's not right!" and suddenly, what was once a small and seemingly insignificant word is revealed to play a much more important part in a powerful and life-changing truth.

Recently, I used this practice with two familiar sayings of Jesus found in Matthew 6:11 and Luke 9:23. They're listed here with the same word removed from each verse:

- 1) Give us this day our bread.
- 2) If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Did you catch the omission? It's the word, "daily." As Christians, we are to trust God for *daily* bread and take up our cross *every* morning. This is much more of an intentional call than say, taking up our cross when we feel like it. Apparently, even six out of seven days of the week doesn't cut it.

The theme of daily rhythm isn't just isolated to bread-praying and cross-bearing though. It's an echoing pattern found throughout Scripture. It begins just five verses into the Bible, with God creating the first morning and evening (Genesis 1:5). We find it in the Old Testament when God required the priests to sacrifice a burnt offering *each* morning and *every* evening to remind them of their sins and of their daily need for cleansing (Numbers 28:3-4). We also see it every day in the created order, where all of humanity spends its life in a cycle of working and being unconscious. No one, as hard as they try, can escape this forced pacing of life. The leaders of the world superpowers and the beggars on the street have one thing in common - eventually they must sleep; they cannot live without submitting to the fact they were created to function in 24-hour intervals.

So, why does God design us to operate in daily routines? Why does He command obedience on a daily basis?

The first reason is because the here-and-now is all we're ever promised. We're to live each day on our daily allotment of grace. It showcases faith and trust in God when we thank Him for the present and trust Him for the future. In thanking God in advance for daily bread, Jesus demonstrates an active faith. Jesus is so sure of receiving daily bread, so trusting of His Father, He refers to the provision as if it's already in the possession of the pray-er (*our* daily bread). We can't extend this faith to asking for new cars and perfect health, but we can aggressively trust God for things within His will, which certainly includes daily provisions of grace and mercy.

The second reason God wants daily obedience is because there's a pacing about faith, a rhythm to trust. God knows we can't present lifelong sacrifice or trust in a lump sum, so He asks for it in daily deposits. It showcases the kindness of God that He doesn't ask for more than we can, through grace, provide.

Ultimately, these things (faith and a gentle burden) are what Jesus purchased for us on Calvary. The cross humbles us by allowing us to see the horror of our sins, empowers us to receive salvation through faith, and enables us to trade an impossible debt for a gentle and protective yoke. As you *daily* submit to imitating Christ, find peace in the fact that the completed work of Christ is *eternal*. Above all, don't let the routine nature of life become mundane in your mind. Let the cycles of living and obeying point you to Jesus' wonderful work on the cross!

Why the Incarnation Didn't Happen on Christmas Morning



Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 1:18

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:16-17



It's common yuletide sentiment to say, "In a moment in time, Jesus left His throne for a manger." Perhaps you've recited this line during a Christmas play at church, or maybe you've sent out cards which have this saying artistically framed around a nativity scene. It is after all, a beautiful saying which illustrates the lengths God went through to demonstrate His love for humanity. There's only one problem with this statement. It isn't true.

Now if you're a sentence away from writing this book off as heretical, let me ask you to track with me for just

a moment longer as we look at what Scripture really says about the manifestation of our Savior. By the end of today's devotion, I hope you'll not only have a stronger Biblical view of the incarnation, but a greater appreciation of Jesus, this God who became man.

When we talk about the incarnation, we're referring to an act of God the Son in which He took on a human nature. This didn't happen on the day we celebrate on December 25th. God didn't enter into humanity on Christmas morning as a baby. He entered it nine months earlier. He entered it inside a womb as a human embryo.

We learn this in Matthew 1:18. This Gospel records that before Mary and Joseph came together, she was "found to be *with child* through the Holy Spirit." Two verses later, God also tells Joseph that "*what is conceived in her* is from the Holy Spirit." That's Biblical grounds for the existence of life at conception right there, that God equates "what is conceived" to being a child.

At conception an egg and sperm join to form a human embryo, a pronuclear single celled person created in the image of God. God designs these cells to divide so that in just a few days, four to twelve cells are present. Five to six days after conception, the embryo is deemed a blastocyst and has amazingly grown into more cells than can be counted. At this stage, the embryo is still imperceptible to the naked eye, only able to be viewed through a high powered microscope. Even though Joseph wasn't Jesus' biological father, the Scripture above is specific that Jesus was conceived. Even without knowing all the details of how God did this - it was after all, a miracle - we can still believe Scripture and know Jesus grew in a womb just like every other human does.

Stop and think about that for a moment. Jesus goes from ruling the world in Heaven with His Father and the Holy Spirit, and enters into the smallest, most dependent, most microscopic form of human life. The God who authors a universe which can't be measured, humbles Himself into a form that can't be seen. It's a staggering thought!

As you're pondering this, consider Colossians 1:16 & 17 as it speaks of Jesus, "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Doesn't this truth make the incarnation all the more amazing? For a moment in time, the entire universe was being held together in the form of a two cell human embryo named Jesus. Jesus has a heart for all unborn children, including those in their embryonic state. How much more do we know that now, realizing that the same Savior who submitted Himself to death on a cross for our sake, first submitted Himself to a womb.

As you end today's devotion, take a moment to examine the size of the period which ends this sentence. Imagine Jesus in a form so small He could rest on that tiny speck of ink and not be seen. Let thanksgiving flow from your heart today as you consider that on Jesus' way to the cross, He humbled Himself in such an unbelievable fashion. And the next time you see a manger scene, backtrack even further in the Christmas story to consider the depth of the love of Christ found in the incarnation.

One Goat Shy of Knowing Jesus



*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O
Lord, who could stand? But with you there
is forgiveness, that you may be feared.
Psalm 130:3-4*



Soon after the exodus, God set up a yearly ritual for the Israelites called the Day of Atonement. On this important day, two goats were presented to the high priest. Chosen by lot, one was sacrificed. The blood of this first goat was sprinkled in the Holy of Holies (the most sacred part of the tabernacle), on the Ark of the Covenant (the unique focal point of God's presence on earth), and on the altar (the place of daily restoration between God and His people). This goat's sacrificial blood was meant to atone for or cleanse the people of their sin. After this somber act, the high priest would then place his hands on the second goat, called the scapegoat. Confessing his nation's sins over this goat, the high priest would then drive it into the wilderness. This illustrated that sins had been sent away and could no longer be associated with God's people. And so it was every year. One goat was killed; another was banished. A perfect perennial picture of the Savior who was to come.

Unfortunately, many people today are one goat shy of understanding the gospel. The role of the first goat and the need for blood atonement sounds outdated and a little too messy for today's society. Believing we are so bad something or someone would have to die in our place sounds a little, well, too insulting for most to believe. It's just not good for our self-esteem.

Instead, many who claim to wear the name of Christ, choose to focus solely on the role of God as a scapegoat. They believe God forgives sin and sends it away, but they talk little about the cross. They reduce God's love towards man as mere apathy towards sin. This is the life of the person who owns a Bible, has been to church, has a cross hanging on their wall, can hum along to hymns, but shows no fruit because they have not been changed by the true message of the cross. It's a view which demands little remorse because it presupposes little action from God. It chooses to believe in the more palatable parts of the gospel, like forgiveness and peace, but ignores the weight of sin and the sobering sacrifice it required. This is the precarious position of many who claim to know the good news.

If this is your sole view of Jesus' atonement, then it's easy to abuse grace. Since a sweep-it-under-the-rug mentality towards sin doesn't cost much, it's easy to think you appreciate grace without truly worshipping Jesus. However, Psalm 130:4 says, "with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared." This reason the one-goat view is incredibly dangerous is because it doesn't produce a fear of God.

A proper view of the gospel, one which invokes a healthy fear of God, involves seeing both goats' roles as a demonstration of Jesus' sacrifice. God does not send sin

away because He's nice and is too big to be bothered by such things. No, it's because He is righteous and is gravely bothered by sin that He had to suffer and die as a perfect substitute. It's Jesus' role as the sacrificial goat which makes His role as the scapegoat possible. It's because our sins are so bad, that a perfect God had to stand in our place of punishment. This alone is why sins can be erased, forgotten and sent away, because God's wrath has been extinguished on Jesus.

Does your view of forgiveness cultivate a healthy fear of God or are you thankful for mercy without being humbled by the cost? If the latter, there is good news from the gospel. Your sacrifice has been made; your day of atonement has come. Jesus is your sacrifice, your scapegoat, your high priest and your meeting place with God. Remember the full picture of what Christ has done for you as you orientate yourself around the cross today.

Finding the Right Door



*Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many,
I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.
Luke 13:24*

*I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be
saved and will go in and out and find pasture.
John 10:9*



While writing this book, I took a short break to shoot a brief promotional video for my website. The video was to be filmed at our church building, which is currently a small converted warehouse behind an old bicycle shop. We planned the shoot weeks in advance. I wrote a 60 second script (which is harder to do than it sounds) and made a sample recording which I sent to my videographer to preview. I reserved use of the building with one of our pastors and secured keys to get into the front door. That afternoon, three of us pulled up to the church and began to unload our weighty equipment: lights, cameras, sound recorders, tripods, extension cords and devices whose purpose I still don't fully understand. We walked up to the building a prepared lot. We were excited, confident and well-equipped. There was just one problem.

That very afternoon, the city had decided to repave the sidewalk which stretches in front of our downtown meeting area. Although the entire sidewalk had been worked on, only one small area was roped off with bright yellow “Do Not Cross” signs. A 12-foot block of fresh cement was positioned directly in front of the door that we needed to enter. We briefly thought about attempting to jump it while holding our equipment, but the thought of missing our mark and making permanent butt prints in front of the church quickly dismissed the idea. So there it was. On one side of the door was a facility cleaned, set in order and waiting for us to film. On the other side stood three helpless men. We were in the right place, looked the part and even had the key to the door, but we showed up at the wrong time and couldn’t get in.

Blocked entryways are a common motif found in Scripture. We find this just six chapters into the Bible, when God gives Noah detailed blueprints for building the ark. Interestingly, God designs this multi-story, football-field-sized ship with only one door. While it might not have passed US Coast Guard regulations, this mammoth of a nautical vessel was specifically planned by God to have only one way in and out. Once shut, this weighty door separated the fate of the eight people on board with the rest of humanity who were trapped on the other side of it.

Using similar imagery in the New Testament, Jesus instructs everyone to “strive to enter through the narrow door” (Luke 13:24). He warns that once this door has been shut by the master, many will beg and plead to enter, but will not be able. To make matters worse, those standing on the outside will be condemned with the words, “I do not know where you come from.”

The rules don't change in Matthew 25. Here, Jesus is again talking about doors, but this time in the context of ten virgins waiting for their bridegroom. The five wise virgins, prepared for his arrival, light their lamps and enter the marriage feast. The remaining five virgins scramble to find fuel for their lamps. Because they arrive late, they discover the door to the feast has been shut. They cry out, "Lord, lord, open to us" (verse 11), but the master's reply is again resolute. He says sternly, "I do not know you."

These three stories make one point clear: God doesn't raise doors frivolously. If you see Him building one, you better be asking what it's for, where it leads, and how you pass through it. Just like my friends and me standing in front of the wet cement, it doesn't matter how much equipment you bring with you or how impressive your spiritual resume is (Luke 13:26 and Philippians 3:4-9). If you don't enter God's door on His terms, you're sunk.

This should prompt us to ask the questions, "What is this door Jesus is talking about?" and "What are His terms for entering?" The answer to the first question is found in John 10:9. Here Jesus states plainly, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture." The impressive door on the ark, the slender door on the narrow road, and the door to the virgins' wedding feast are all pictures of Jesus! Only through Him can we enter into the presence of God in Heaven and on the future New Earth.

But why is this good news? What are the terms for entering God's door? We'll examine this in our next devotion as we look at a person who tried to enter Jesus' door the wrong way and was thrown out by God Himself.

For today though, reflect on the fact that there is only one door, only one chance, to get to Heaven. That door is Christ, and the one chance is His perfect life and sacrificial death. As you stare at the Do Not Cross signs barring your way from entry, thank Jesus a solitary cross now eternally bridges the gap you couldn't jump. Prepare to enter, but make sure you understand the rules for crossing. It would be a shame to know of the door, but not know how it opens.

Wearing the Right Clothes



I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Isaiah 61:10

For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

Romans 10:3



In our last devotion, we identified Christ as the only door which leads to salvation and eternal life. We left off asking, "How then, does one enter the Jesus door?" Before you write this off as a simple Sunday school question, please understand the gravity of what's at stake in the answer.

After all, most people in America have some kind of affinity towards Jesus. They may think He was a great teacher, a good example, perhaps a model of humility. Many people believe Jesus died on a cross and that He offers some type of salvation. Yet Scripture says seriously, of those people who think they are spiritually healthy, more will be locked out of the Kingdom of God than will make it into Heaven

(Luke 13:24-28 and Matthew 22:14). In other words, if you're just playing the odds that you're good with Jesus, you're probably not. Salvation is not a gamble in which we wait till death to see how we fared. It's a surety based on the clothes we're wearing. To see what I mean, let's examine a parable Jesus told about a person who was kicked off of a path towards Heaven because he tried to enter it the wrong way.

In Matthew 22, Jesus tells the story of a king throwing a wedding feast. After his initial invitations are rejected (and his messengers are abused and killed), he sends his servants to gather up anyone and everyone they can find. Once the wedding hall is filled, the king comes in to inspect his guests. He finds one man who is not wearing a wedding garment, clothing the king would have provided. In his anger, the king throws the man into a place where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (verse 13). Do you get the point? This man was near the door, near the bridegroom Jesus, but was rejected because he was wearing the wrong clothes.

I experienced a similar situation when I was on Thanksgiving break in high school. My extended family had gathered at an uncle's house. His property was adjacent to the first tee of a community golf course, and having a membership at the clubhouse, he decided to walk us up to the tee to practice some swings. (I say practice loosely, as I had never held a club at this point.) We spent half an hour hitting balls into trees (if we hit them at all), when we were approached by the clubhouse staff. They informed us there was a dress code for playing on the course and that our jeans and t-shirts didn't cut it. They promptly asked us to leave, even though we were essentially in our own backyard.

Needless to say, we left a little miffed at the stuffiness of the place, but the point was clear; there were rules. How you dressed determined where you could be, and our clothing testified we didn't belong.

In a spiritual sense, we're all wearing something before our Creator. Our clothing consists of either the perfect righteousness of Jesus or some counterfeit morality we attempt to bring before God. The latter has a hundred different looks (it turns out you can get pretty creative with dirty rags), but drastically misses the mark every time.

The reason our aim is so poor is usually because of two weighty mistakes we make about our spiritual coverings. The first is to assume God isn't too particular. When we do this, we disregard the righteousness of Christ and think we can show up to a wedding feast looking like a hobo. This of course, didn't fare well for the man in Jesus' parable.

On the other hand, we're sometimes tempted to think our adornment must be earned, and so we set out to make gold out of straw, a feat useful in fairy tales, but futile before Jesus. As it turns out, God is especially particular about how we dress, but resents the idea of us bringing our own clothes (our own righteousness) before Him. This is why Paul summarizes unbelievers as, "being ignorant of the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own" (Romans 10:3a). No matter which of these mistakes we make, the result is the same: exile from God.

What God truly desires is for His people to admit their own spiritual bankruptcy. His forgiveness (mercy) and righteousness (grace) are the only Heavenly attire He permits. They're the clothing which allows one to enter into the door of salvation. If you are not yet saved - if you have

doubts as to how you look before God - respond to God's gift through faith and repentance. If you have been redeemed, take time to remember what you wear. Strive to act like the person God has already made you to be through Christ. When you succeed, you boast of His enabling strength. When you fail, you fall back on the finished work of your Savior. Either way, you end up at the cross. It's here where praises spring forth for the child of God, here where we echo the prophet saying, "my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness!" (Isaiah 61:10). Take time today to thank God for the new clothes His cross provides!

What Jesus Asked God For



I [Jesus] do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one.

John 17:20-22

But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

1 Corinthians 12:24b-26



If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, how would you spend your last night? Would you fine tune your will, spend time with loved ones, or reach out to estranged family members? Maybe you'd find a church to seek solace in or perhaps, catch a quick flight to Vegas and throw all caution to the wind. When you know you have only hours to live, what you choose to do with that time becomes quite revealing. Jesus had the rare insight of knowing exactly when He was going to die. In His last night, He did something few of us would think of in such a situation. Jesus chose to pray.

The lengthiest parts of Jesus' prayer are recorded in John 17, a portion of Scripture often called the high priestly prayer. During this earnest outpouring, Jesus asked His Father for an identical request four separate times. I learned in grade school when a teacher says something more than once, it means it's significant. If Jesus makes a point of repeating Himself four times over, you better believe what He's saying is important. Are you ready for it? The quadrupled request Jesus makes is that believers in Him would be one.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, we find God fulfilling His Son's request. Paul writes, "God has so composed the body [the church]...that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Corinthians 12:24b-26). Paul goes on to use this bodily metaphor in several of his letters. He presents Jesus as the head of the body and describes believers as the remaining parts.

I find this body part image helpful in understanding how Christians are to rejoice and suffer together. For example, when it comes to rejoicing, I love to eat cherry cobbler. How crazy would I look though if I covered my eyes while eating thinking, "This experience is only for my mouth to enjoy." On the other hand, when I'm not feeling well, my whole body gets labeled as sick. I've never gotten the flu and told my boss, "You know, my head and stomach need to take a day off, but I think my little toes can come into work today." No, whether for good or for bad, my entire body works as one entity.

It's easy to understand this principle at work in our bodies when we're enjoying good food or are under the weather, but how do we apply this same kind of unity to our family, the

church body? For example, within the home group at my local church, there are Christians who are suffering greatly while others are experiencing great joy. Should the entire church act melancholy and downcast in order to grieve with those who are in pain? If we expand this further and consider the world-wide reach of the church and the global suffering it endures, should Christians ever put on a happy face?

The command to suffer and rejoice together is complicated even further by Scripture like Proverbs 14:10 which says, "The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy." If even the Bible says we can't share another's joy, how can we realistically obey 1 Corinthians 12:26 and produce unity by suffering and rejoicing together? Here are three solutions:

- 1) Remember as a Christian, you're not part of a club, a league, a team or a fan base. You're part of a body. Why the distinction? Well for one, its Scriptural terminology, but in addition to that, it's easy to get in or out of a club. It's much harder to be grafted into or be amputated off of a body. Understanding the permanence of our union helps to underscore the effort which goes into empathizing with our brothers and sisters. Even though we may not be able to share the full grief or joy of another heart, we can come close. The elbow doesn't share in the same pain as the foot when it stubs its toe, but it still interacts with the body in the appropriate way to care for its fellow member.
- 2) Remember we are a body which extends globally, but that gathers locally. I believe one of the reasons

God designed His family to experience life together within local churches is to allow His flock to care for one another in a more manageable way. Trying to wear the weight (or joy) of the world is impossible. To do so for a nation - unlikely. A city - taxing. A large church - manageable perhaps. A small group of believers - perfect! If you're not regularly gathering in some type of small group with believers, I wager you'll find it nearly impossible to fulfill 1 Corinthians 12:24-26 in any meaningful way.

- 3) Remember these three goals of Christian unity: imitating the Father and Son, giving glory to Jesus and being a witness to the world (John 17:21-23). These are far greater aspirations for acting like a family than say, mere sentimentality. Anything Hallmark can come up with is just a rip off of the call of the church. As Christians, we need to relish sharing in the joy and pain of other believers, not because we are saps, but because so much eternally weighs in the balance.

All three of these reflections have their foundation in the cross. Without the cross, there is no body of believers, no unifying call on our lives. Take time today to recall the sacrifice of Jesus and the church He purchased for Himself. Jesus didn't die to save ears, eyes, hands or feet only. He died for His body. Ask the Lord what it would practically look like for you to live intentionally for the unity of His people. When you do, you'll be joining in the prayer of Jesus.

Working with God



Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep.

Psalm 127: 1-2



My wife and I are the proud parents of two-year-old twins named Abel and Belle. One of their favorite toys consists of a bag of brightly colored blocks. Currently, they have a fascination with making tall towers out of these blocks. One of their favorite activities is to empty the bag and see how high they can stack a tower before it topples over. But there's a problem; at just over three feet tall, my kids can't stack very high. Throw in their two-year-old architecture skills, and you have a recipe for disaster every time. Even though this is the case, our house is always littered with block towers. The reason these colorful pinnacles lace our house is because of me, their daddy.

My children don't just stack at random. They bring me blocks to add to their little creations. As I add blocks to heights beyond their reach, I also remold their towers to make them stand, putting wider blocks at the base and stacking the

layers in crisscross patterns for support. My kids aren't aware of this. They just know they're giving me blocks and that the tower is going up. When it gets high enough for their liking, I watch them beam with delight as they bask in their accomplishment. They think they've built a masterpiece, but it's their daddy's hands which make each tower stand.

Psalm 127 tells us this kind of synergy is important, not just for building block towers, but for constructing houses, guarding cities and everything else we do in our waking hours. The warning here isn't just that our work will suffer some loss of effectiveness. No, this passage shouts an alarm against something far worse - the pursuit of vanity! Without God behind our actions, we are doing nothing but "chasing the wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:11). Christians rely on their Heavenly Father to infuse purpose into their activities. Since everything you do carries the option of being either purposeful or wasteful, consider this extrapolated advice:

- Unless the Lord raises a child, those who diaper, do so in vain.
- It is purposeless to drive to the office, unless the Lord favors your work.
- Unless the Lord is behind a church, its doors might as well be bolted shut.

"Ok," you think, "So just how do I join with God in what He's doing, or invite Him into what I'm already busy with?" Here are three suggestions:

- 1) Pray always (1 Thessalonians 5:17) – Prayer reminds us our Father is present. It also nurtures a faith that

believes He is sovereign and in control. It forces us to rely on Him and seek His will. If you want to make sure God is with you on a project, or more accurately, if you want to ensure you are working on *His* project, pray.

- 2) Be in community with other believers – God says where two or more are gathered, He is also there (Matthew 18:20). If you truly want to experience Jesus, plan to intentionally spend time with His family. I've seen people who claimed to be Christians crash and burn while attempting to live outside of Biblical community. I've seen many more Christians set on fire for Jesus when plugged into a life-giving church.
- 3) Read, read, read Scripture – If you want to know your Father's heart, you *must* read His Word. And not just read it, you must believe what God teaches and do what He says. A soul being filled and changed by the Word of God will not be scared of a vain existence. Since Jesus is the Word who became flesh (John 1:14), having the Bible working inside of you is a surefire way to know Jesus is present in the work you are doing.

Our work, whether built with blocks or with blood, matters to God. Aware of this, don't be ruled by the same anxious toil which marks the world. Focus on Jesus who lived a life of perfect righteousness and bore a cross so your burden could be light (Matthew 11:30). Make a conscious decision today to reject striving, pride and worry. When you do, you'll notice the former towers of boasting in your life become beautiful testimonies of His grace.

Being Dissatisfied to the Glory of God



Godliness with contentment is great gain.

1 Timothy 6:6

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.

Philippians 4:11b

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar...But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Hebrews 11:13, 16



Perhaps you flipped to this devotion today because the title intrigued you. It certainly does me. The idea we can be, dare I say, should be dissatisfied with life to the glory of God sounds a little heretical. After all, isn't being dissatisfied with God's provision a sin, one of the "big ones" indicative of idolatry? Wasn't it this grumbling that kept the Israelites out of the Promised Land for 40 years? Doesn't a lack of satisfaction equate to a slap-in-the-face to Christ's mercy and grace? Well yes, sometimes it does. However, Scripture teaches there is a right way to be dissatisfied before God.

Learning how to appropriately process this rumbling in our souls leads to greater worship, more passionate evangelism and a genuine happiness.

Before I go any further, it might be a good idea to distinguish between the words dissatisfaction and discontentment. For the sake of this devotion, I'm using dissatisfaction as a positive term and discontentment as a negative one. These words represent different approaches to the same heart issue, but please don't get hung up on the semantics. Simply rephrasing your emotions won't result in change any more than calling a dog a bird will make it sprout wings. We need more than new theological labels; we need Jesus.

So what does Jesus, through the New Testament writers, teach in the above passages? First, He says we should be content in all situations. Another way to say this is that we should be thankful in all situations. When we're tempted to grumble at our lot in life or to covet what someone else has been given, we should reflect on the truth that anything short of being thrown into Hell's lake of fire is a great mercy.

The psalmist writes, "I will magnify God with thanksgiving" (Psalm 69:30). Flip that truth around and you'll see being discontent minimizes God in our life. It's hard to share good news about a minimal God. This is Satan's strategy. He wants to diminish the appearance of the goodness of Jesus, and by extension, neutralize the power of our witness.

At the same time Satan is breeding discontentment, he's also trying to lure you into a false satisfaction. He does this by dangling packages in front of you which promise ultimate happiness. To keep you from catching onto his

plans, he'll often let you open one or two of those packages. However, once we get into them, we discover we still have this gnawing dissatisfaction inside of us. Before we can think too clearly about this, Satan already has another package strung on the line saying, "No, it's really this box. If you just open this one, you'll be happy." This is a fruitless life, one spent on the pursuit of opening empty boxes. It's the American dream and the theme of most every television sitcom. Our souls crave something more.

The something more is Jesus Christ and a resurrected world. For the Christian, knowing a future with Jesus awaits us in Heaven and on the New Earth is enough for us to endure our present state. It allows us to be content in the knowledge that Jesus' sacrifice has saved us from what we deserve and that it's preparing us for a glorious future we couldn't have earned. It's that moment when our car won't turn over and we pray, "Thank you for all the thousands of times you allowed the car to start," instead of "Are you kidding me?" It's a contentment which wars against pride, lust, covetousness, anger, resentment and anxiety.

The Christian life goes much deeper however than just being content with what Christ provides in the here-and-now. Jesus also wants us to look forward to the promise of being with Him and other believers in Heaven. He wants us to be so eager about this, that we embrace dissatisfaction with our present life. In Hebrews 11:16, God says He is proud to be identified with past saints. Pay careful attention to the reason why. It's not because of their resume of good works or the number of souls they've witnessed to. It's because they, "desire a better country, a heavenly one." God is proud of His children because of their dissatisfaction with

this world! We are always to be thankful, remembering God's great mercy towards us, but at the same time, always be longing for more of Him.

Can you spare 15 minutes today? If so, take the first five to thank God for what He has given you. Repent of coveting anything more than what He wills for you at this moment in your life. Preach the truth to yourself that His grace is sufficient for you and that His power is made perfect in weakness. Next, spend five minutes telling God how dissatisfied you are with this world in its present state. Tell your Father how much you long to be with Him and with your brothers and sisters in Heaven and on a New Earth. Speak about how much you look forward to Him wiping away all tears, taking away all pain (Revelation 21:4) and providing glories incomparable to your present state (Romans 8:18). Now, in your remaining five minutes, reflect on what makes this present and future grace possible: Jesus' work on the cross. Thank your Savior that He suffered for you to make you content now and satisfied forever. In this mindset, take up your cross, ready to follow the one who, for the joy set before Him, endured His cross. Endure, wait and hope. This is your call as a child of God.

Fanatical Integrity



*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for
righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

Matthew 5:6

*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds
that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will
never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

Matthew 5:20



At my church, we meet in small groups during the week to discuss that week's sermon and to grow in community. At the end of these weekly sessions, we share prayer requests with one another and send them out via email to those who couldn't make it. Recently, a friend of mine was preparing such an email. He intended to request prayer for, "financial integrity," but due to a slip of his finger, the auto-correct on his phone decided to substitute the words, "fanatical integrity."

Although I gave him a hard time about it, I was struck by the phrase. Fanatical integrity. It brings to mind Jesus' words in Matthew 5:6, when He tells the crowds, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Now, if you're like me, this is an intimidating verse. Craving something comes easily enough, but obedience to God

does not. Perhaps you're like many Christians who read Jesus' words and think, "I want to crave righteousness, but I don't." How do we appropriately respond to the call of this beatitude?

There are at least two ways Matthew 5:6 is meant to point us to the cross. First, it should drive us to a helpless and needy state as we look at our own hearts. Everyone who is truly honest with themselves should hear Jesus' command to hunger and thirst for righteousness and think, "That's not me. I'm nowhere near that place." Christian, that's the point! You are not saved because you grit your teeth and force out the words, "I'm hungry for righteousness!" You may be able to fool your spouse by claiming you love their meatloaf, but God will not be deceived by a false hunger. There's only one person who truly hungers and thirsts for righteousness, only one person who's always fanatic about integrity. His name is Jesus. Your desires are fickle, but Jesus' are faithful. The good news of the gospel is that in our helpless state, through faith and repentance, God credits Jesus' righteousness to us. You don't have to muster up your own craving for God in order to please Him. Through the power of the cross, Jesus' desire for God and His longing for righteousness become yours. Believing this is the key to understanding seemingly contradicting passages in the Bible such as, "you therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48) and "for we all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2). We have no hope in ourselves. We have all hope in the one perfect man, Jesus.

But wait! Don't blow off Matthew 5:6, or any command towards holiness for that matter. Don't think you can ignore the hard parts of Scripture because Jesus has you

covered. The second way this passage points us toward the cross is that it inspires us to interact with the righteousness which has been given to us. We must wear the wedding garments purchased for us (Matthew 22:11-13). Strive for righteousness my friend, not in order to obtain favor with God, but because you are thankful for what He has done for you. This kind of pursuit comes from a person who rightly understands and is applying the gospel.

A passionate endeavor for holiness does not save, but it does testify that we have been saved. This is why Paul pleads the warning, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Corinthians 13:5). There is a holy peace and fear towards God which comes from passages like this: peace to comfort you in your failures, fear to prompt the pretentious follower of Christ to repentance marked by a changed life (Psalms 130:4).

People seldom waste their life in a moment. Likewise, there are few lives which are lived instantaneously for the glory of God. As it turns out, a meaningful life is most often a conglomerate of small, commonplace, seemingly insignificant moments of obedience, repentance and faith in Jesus. This is the life of someone who has been changed by the gospel, someone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, someone who is fanatical about integrity. There is a test in front of you today as to who is Lord of your life. Your actions are writing your heart's answer. What are they saying?

Faith Can Move Mountains. Really?



And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."

Matthew 21:21-22



In Matthew 17:20, Jesus says mountains can be moved with faith the size of a mustard seed. It's a familiar claim which sounds great on greeting cards, but is it really true? Can Christians really change the topography of their environment simply by believing a little harder? Can we really solve all our problems, achieve our dreams, and do whatever else we want just by extending a little more faith? After all, many of us have asked for something, truly believing God would grant our request, only to get an answer we didn't want in return. Was Jesus deceiving us? Is the TV healer correct in that our faith is lacking? Perhaps this whole "mustard seed" idea is just a little overrated.

This type of skepticism was probably running through the disciples' heads in Matthew 17:14-20 when they

were unsuccessful in their attempt to expel a demon. It's understandable why they were confused; after all, they genuinely believed they could perform this miracle. We know this because of verse 19, which records them coming to Jesus asking why they had failed. Did you catch that? The disciples *were surprised* they couldn't drive the demon out. Obviously, they had been expecting positive results and so wanted an answer as to why they had been let down. Jesus' response was that they lacked faith. Just five chapters later, Jesus repeats the same advice, only this time He adds, "and whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith" (Matthew 21:22). Since the disciples did have some belief, the faith Jesus is talking about is apparently more than just positive thinking.

To help make sense of Jesus' hard sayings, consider an object you see each day, your front door. Our doors separate what we know as home from the other 99.9% of space on the planet. Our doors launch us into the world every morning and eagerly receive us back to rest and familiarity after each day is done. Doors stand like trusted sentinels, keeping guard over the people and things we hold most dear. They shield us from thieves, thunderstorms and traveling salesmen, yet usher in friends, family and good fellowship. Think about it; you might go a week or two before replacing a burned out light bulb, but you wouldn't spend one night without replacing a front door that had fallen off its hinges. Although you probably don't think about it often, the three inches of wood which stands in front of your welcome mat is one of the most important fixtures in your home.

As essential as doors are to our livelihood though, they are essentially worthless on their own. To serve any function,

doors need two components to operate: a sturdy wall they can anchor to and a pair of hinges to pivot on. Without these things, doors serve as useless pieces of scrap lumber, sculpted timber inadequate for the role it was created for.

Likewise, our lives and attempted service to God are futile if they're not accompanied by proper spiritual support. Faith acts like a hinge that allows our lives to revolve around the glory of God. Just as a small hinge can cause a large door to open, faith (even that as small as a mustard seed) can move mountains.

However, the door and the hinge are only as effective as the wall they are attached to. If that fortification consists of our self exaltation and self pleasure apart from Christ, it serves as a poor anchor indeed. This is why the disciples failed in their quest to cast out the demon. It wasn't that they lacked faith; It was that they lacked the kind of faith which is Christ submitting and God exalting. Their faith was in their abilities and in the presumption their desire aligned with God's will. True faith, even the mustard seed variety, says the following things:

- 1) I believe in the power of God, but trust in Jesus' sovereignty if His plans are different than mine. (1 John 5:14)
- 2) I believe, not that I be made much of, but that He be glorified. (John 3:30)

Whatever it is today that is driving your need for faith, understand it is not the quantity, nor even the quality of your faith that God is seeking. Pleasing Him is all about hinging your faith to the right source - that of our sovereign

and purposefully-good Savior. Adopt the attitude of Jesus who said, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). The same Jesus who told His disciples they could receive whatever they asked for in prayer, received a “No” from God to His own request for relief.

Some mountains are designed to be moved by faith. Others, like Calvary, are meant to be submitted to. Your job is not to know the difference, but to pray and trust the One who is leading you. Do you have the faith to pursue this call? It only takes a mustard seed if it is planted in the right soil. Make the choice today to sow your faith in the lordship and goodness of Jesus Christ.

Am I “Doing Communion” Right?



And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Luke 22:19

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11:26



Every Sunday, Christian churches around the world observe communion. For some people, it’s enjoyable, a beautiful opportunity to physically remember Jesus’ sacrifice. For many of us though, communion can be a confusing and sometimes awkward part of worship. Depending on your church tradition, you may ask yourself questions like, “I wonder what everyone else is praying right now? How big a piece of bread do I take? Do I pray and then eat, or is it the other way around?” No matter how your church observes communion, all of us at some point have asked the same question, “Am I doing this right?”

As we consider this question, let me start by telling you what this devotion is not about. It’s not about laying

down ground rules for communion. Honestly, there aren't too many of them. We know communion is only for believers to partake in. We know it involves repentance and self-examination and that it shouldn't be an occasion for gluttony or factions (1 Corinthians 11:17–22, 28–29). Other than that, the Bible doesn't get too specific.

Scripture does emphasize one word though when speaking about communion. It's "remember." When we realize communion is more about remembering and less about ceremony, it brings peace to our souls. We can mess up ceremony. We can't mess up remembering unless, well, we forget to do it. Sometimes, obeying Christ just means showing up.

Ok, you think, "I've shown up. I'm at church. I'm ready to take communion. Now, how do I remember Christ any differently than I did 30 seconds ago before I had bread and a cup in front of me?" Here are three suggestions:

- 1) Focus on the bread and juice in front of you. Some years ago, the band Jars of Clay, came out with a hit song in which they asked Jesus, "Flesh and blood? Is it really so elemental?" That question illustrates a common struggle we all have, to believe the enormity of our sins could be forgiven through one man's flesh and blood. After all, doesn't it take more than that? Communion shouts back a resounding, "No! Not as long as it's the flesh and blood of Jesus!" As you look at the communion elements in your hands, remember that real blood and real flesh from a real God-man was shed for you. In that somber moment, you're literally tasting and seeing the Lord is good. Let communion take the gospel off of your

theological bookshelf and put it into your hands and mouth.

- 2) Remember that observing communion doesn't magically enhance your spiritual identity. Taking the Lord's Supper one or one thousand times won't make you "more saved" in the same way that dating your spouse will not make you "more married." You're either one or the other. There is no intermittent state in marriage; there's none in the gospel either. As it turns out, communing with God is all about experiencing a reality that already exists. Date your spouse, not to get them to say, "I do" over and over again, but to experience a marriage that already exists. Likewise, don't observe communion with the intention of doing it to earn favor with God. Reflect on the bread and cup in front of you to remember that the cross has forever given you perfect favor with God.
- 3) Finally, as you eat, recognize the obvious, that food tastes good. This is to remind us of how something as terrible as the crucifixion becomes a sweet and nourishing truth to our souls. If you've ever fasted before communion, this point is made all the more clear. (Try a simple breakfast fast one Sunday to prepare yourself for communion.)

As you settle back into the remainder of your service, allow the goodness of the food, the goodness of the gospel, to lead you into praise. Forget about the peripherals, you've just experienced the depth of the tragedy of sin and the sweetness of Christ's victory. Stay there, my friend, and glorify God by remembering.

Capturing God



And the ark of God was captured...

1 Samuel 4:11a

*Then they seized him [Jesus] and led him
away, bringing him into the high priest's house,
and Peter was following at a distance.*

Luke 22:54



For much of the Old Testament, God's presence on earth was centrally focused over a sacred object known as the Ark of the Covenant. It consisted of a gold chest roughly the size of a car trunk which housed the Ten Commandments. God's presence resided in a special way between the wings of two cherubim angels which formed the lid of the Ark. The hit movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* created something of a film icon out of it, but the Ark's significance in the Biblical narrative is not to be downplayed. The Ark serves as a beautiful precursor to Jesus, the ultimate embodiment of God's presence among His people. One of my favorite illustrations of this is found in 1 Samuel 4.

Here we find God's chosen people recoiling from a massive defeat suffered at the hands of their enemies, the Philistines. Israel's elders huddle up and try to make sense

of their losses. Suddenly, they remember the Ark of the Covenant is in a nearby town. In a revealing move, the elders don't mount their animals and begin to journey towards God. Instead, they send messengers to have the Ark of the Covenant delivered to them. Scripture records their motive, "Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us" (1 Samuel 4:3). Notice the absence of worship in their efforts. God's people don't count Him worthy of a daytrip so they summon Him like one would a pizza delivery. They're only interested in God for one thing, what they can get out of Him.

God is not impressed with His people treating Him like a good luck charm. His response to the Israelites is quite startling. Yahweh, the great LORD of the angel armies, the one who sits enthroned between cherubim warriors, this God of all creation, allows Himself to be captured by the enemy. The Philistines cart the Ark off like a trophy of war and throw it into a pagan temple. Now, this is not how the story ends. Read 1 Samuel 5-7:2 and see how God receives His due glory from both the Israelites and the Philistines. For now though, don't skip over the fact that God allowed Himself to be captured by man. It's one of many beautiful gospel pictures painted throughout the Old Testament.

Skip to the New Testament and you'll find people attracted to Jesus in a similar manner to how the Israelites desired the Ark. Some are truly following Jesus in order to worship Him, but many in the crowd only want Jesus to serve as their miracle vending machine. In love, we find Jesus urging people to seek Him for greater satisfaction than mere physical comforts.

After He feeds a crowd of more than 5,000 people, He tells them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not

because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you” John 6:26-27a. The crowds still think Jesus is talking about physical bread and begin pressing Him again for food. Much like the Israelites, they are not worshiping God. They’re simply trying to milk Him for a free lunch. What is Jesus’ response? Just like in the Ark story, God allows Himself to be captured. This time though, Jesus goes even further. He allows Himself to be beaten, spit on, flogged and ridiculed. Ultimately, He lays down His life and is crucified.

If you finish reading the Ark story from 1 Samuel, you’ll discover even more pictures of the cross. God destroys the enemy from the inside out. He brings His people deliverance when they weren’t expecting it and in a way they couldn’t have imagined. After His capture, God returns to His people. All victory goes to God as those He saved do nothing but receive this gift of deliverance. It’s an amazing story and a beautiful “shadow of the things to come” (Colossians 2:17). The substance of this story, as with every story in Scripture, is Jesus Christ.

Don’t be like the Israelites before the Ark or the crowds following Jesus. Don’t approach God as one does a lucky rabbit’s foot. Come to Jesus with the awe of a person who’s seen their hero take their place on a cross. Come with the zeal of a man or woman who’s just seen God return with victory in hand. After all, the cross isn’t payment for a drive-through meal. It provides the true Bread of Life and the real Living Water. Taste and see that the God who was captured now reigns supreme over all. Let that reign extend into your heart today as you come before Him!

Self-Esteem vs. Crumb Begging



She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith!"
Matthew 15:27-28a



Everyone knows Jesus healed people during His earthly ministry. What tends to be overlooked is the occasion or two when He resisted doing so. We find such a story in Matthew 15, when a Canaanite woman pleads with Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus, usually quick to respond to such requests, at first doesn't even acknowledge her. When she is not deterred by His silence, Jesus tells this Gentile woman, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." She humbles herself even more, kneeling before Him and uttering the raw, desperate words, "Lord, help me!" Amazingly, Jesus *still* doesn't give in! Instead, He nudges her further, claiming it's not right to give food meant for children to house pets (those who are not Jews). Quick on her feet, the woman responds, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." At this remark, Jesus applauds her faith (an honor He rarely bestows) and heals her daughter.

Many have struggled with this passage. At first glance, it appears to paint a cold, aloof and even racist picture of Jesus. “What does Jesus have against women, children and non-Jews?” some skeptics ask. The answer is, “Nothing at all!” Jesus loved children (Matthew 19:14), and readily approached women and foreigners in love (see His tenderness toward the adulterous Samaritan woman in John 4). His response to the Canaanite woman is intentionally uncommon, meant to strengthen her faith and teach an important lesson to all who hear this story.

So what is the purpose behind Jesus’ strange actions? The answer is found in the demonstration of the woman’s faith. Let’s examine her actions more closely. She starts off seeking Jesus in desperation and tears, calling Him Lord. She then persistently follows Him, to the extent that others observe her earnest zeal. Next, she kneels before her Lord and begs for help. Finally, she admits her unworthiness for mercy and grace. In all of these actions, she’s commended for her faith. Genuine faith it appears, requires a desperate embrace of humility.

This is why the gospel is such good news. It’s the divine response to that which is really, really bad news. The cross doesn’t just give our heart a boost of adrenaline towards Jesus. It takes unworthy men and women who are God’s enemies by choice, and exalts them to the role of beloved children. This is how people whom Jesus calls “unworthy servants” (Luke 17:10) can be “seated with him in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 2:6). It’s why the God who describes us as dogs begging for crumbs, promises to give us a “good measure, shaken together, running over” (Luke 6:38). It’s all because Jesus took our place on the cross.

The reason we struggle to grasp this is because we forget humility. We often act like we are somebody who deserves mercy and grace. This is the great fallacy and danger of the self-esteem epidemic the world preaches and that many in the church have embraced. There is no self-esteem found in the faith-filled Canaanite woman. The virtue of her lowly estate is that she has great Christ-esteem.

One of the few places in Scripture we are commanded to boast is in James 1:9-10. James writes that we should proclaim appreciation for both the exultation and the humiliation the gospel brings. Self-esteem is a substitute for gospel exaltation. It offers elevation *without* humility. The gospel preaches elevation by grace *through* humility. In other words, Jesus is looking to exalt those who admit they are broken, needy and desperate. He shuns those with a puffed up and deserving view of self, but embraces the one with a contrite and repentant heart.

What are you holding up as a virtue today? Are you feeding a self-esteem worldview, or are you like the Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus grateful for crumbs? Jesus gives the former nothing, but gives everything to the beggar. Be intentional today to see yourself as nothing, even worse than nothing, without Christ. As your self-worth shrinks, it will give your mind the room it needs to better value Christ. Cash-in the investment you hold in self-worth for the greater treasure the cross provides. Like the Canaanite woman learned, you will find there is no better trade you can make!

“Works” is Not a Bad Word



Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock... everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.

Matthew 7:24, 26

But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

James 1:25

So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

James 2:17



Growing up, my grandparents would treat my siblings and me to a yearly beach trip on a small island off the coast of South Carolina. During the three hour drive there, I would wear out my bright red Sony Walkman by playing my favorite cassette, a beloved edition of “Wee Sing Bible Songs.” One familiar tune on it contained the chorus, “The wise man built his house upon the rocks, and the house on the rocks stood firm. The foolish man built his house upon the sand, and the house on the sand went CRASH!”

Whether or not this song was a part of your childhood, you're probably familiar with the 4-verse parable it comes from in Matthew 7. "Build your house upon the rocks, not on the sand," it says. The lesson being, a good foundation is important. As simple as this message is, few of us bring any real application from this story into our lives. Think about it; can you put your finger on any real change you have made in your life based on hearing this parable? If not, it's probably because of the ambiguity we bring to the bedrock Jesus is talking about. If you were to ask most Christians, "What is the rock, the solid foundation which we are to build our life on?" most would respond, "Jesus." Although that's not a wrong answer, this parable goes further. According to Jesus, the solid foundation of a Christian's life is hearing and doing the words of God (Matthew 7:24, 26). The rock in this parable is not just Jesus; it's obedience to Him.

The reason this is so important is because talk is cheap. It's easy to say you're a follower of Jesus. It's something entirely different to take sacrificial steps to actually follow Him. However, it's these steps which confirm our saving relationship with the Lord.

Understand obedience does not save. Christians are saved apart from works and through the grace of Christ. This salvation will be facilitated however through faith and repentance, and repentance is shown to be genuine through works. In other words, works don't save, but they provide evidence that we have been saved. This is why Paul and James can use the same Scripture in the Old Testament to prove, "one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" and "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (compare Romans 3:28 & 4:3 with James 2:24).

Confusing? A little. Crucial truth to understanding the gospel? Absolutely!

Confusing grace with works is a heresy which has spawned countless cults, religions and self-help philosophies. Banking your life on grace not accompanied by works makes you a happy-go-lucky fan of Jesus instead of a true follower. These two fallacies are where we get pharisaical religion and cheap grace. Both miss the cross from opposite sides.

Are you saved? God implores you to make sure. 2 Peter 1:10 says to “be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election...” And how do we confirm this? By examining how our works are being shaped by the gospel. Peter finishes the verse, “...for if you practice these qualities [see verses 5-7] you will never fall.” Our works confirm we have been saved.

There is a storm of God’s wrath brewing. It starts in this life and finds its full strength on the Day of the Lord or the day of your death. But there is good news! There is rescue! There is solid ground on which to build a house whose walls offer warmth and comfort in the gales of the tempest. Is God, through His gospel, building this house for you? Look to your works as a warning or as a confirmation. For the Christian, works are not (contrary to popular belief) taboo. They are like fruit to a farmer who is inspecting his crop, determining if his plants are living or dead. In light of Jesus’ sacrifice, build on solid ground today by reading God’s Word and obeying it. Take up your cross as a response to the great God-man who hung on one for you. You will find no better building material!

Why the Bible Doesn't Spell Out How to Be Saved



*And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your
God with all your heart and with all your soul
and with all your strength and with all your
mind, and your neighbor as yourself."*

Luke 10:27



When I was a boy, our church would hold a Vacation Bible School every year. After hearing the gospel message, we were taught the proper response to it consisted of three actions: Admit, Believe and Confess (A,B,C). Even though these are accurate Scriptural terms, I began to wonder if there was something more God desired as a response to what He had done on the cross. The older I grew, and the more I studied Scripture, the more confused I became. In addition to the gospel ABCs, I discovered the Bible also calls us to receive (John 1:12), repent (2 Corinthians 7:10), be baptized (1 Peter 3:21), obey (Romans 16:26), abide (John 15:4), love (1 Corinthians 13:3), and bear fruit, just to name a few. By now the growing list of the A,B,D,R,R,B,O,A,L,Bs of salvation had gotten quite overwhelming.

Then I came to the story of the rich young ruler in Mark 10. Here Jesus is asked point blank, "What shall I do

to inherit eternal life?” “Finally!” I thought, “This is where Jesus will lay out a clear plan of how to respond to salvation.” But as is usually the case, Jesus does the unexpected. Instead of going through an Old Testament version of a Romans Road tract, Jesus simply challenges the young man on his definition of “good,” calls him to give up his possessions and tells the twelve disciples salvation is impossible without God. I was still confused. Why doesn’t Jesus just spell out what to do in a few easy steps?

I carried this puzzlement about the proper gospel response with me to college. Then one afternoon, while reading my Bible on a lunch break, it hit me. I’d been trying to find that magical passage in Scripture which made everything crystal clear - that one verse which summed up the whole of what it meant to react to God’s grace. But instead of being frustrated because the Bible lacked a “response-to-the-gospel” summary page, I realized I should be treating the omission as intentional and designed for my own good. Here’s what I mean:

If the gospel were presented purely as a formula, it could risk becoming academic head knowledge void of action. Doctrine without action is useless. Liken it to a paratrooper who is about to drop into enemy territory for the first time. Aware of the fact his own survival depends on the success of his mission, he spends hours studying maps which show his drop zone. He becomes an expert on how to use every piece of his battle equipment. But then, just as the engines of the plane are warming up for the jump, he scratches his head, packs up his bags and heads home. He never makes the jump. He has memorized the mission’s formula, but fails because he doesn’t throw Himself into action.

On the other hand, action without doctrine behind it is equally vain. In the reverse image of our homebound paratrooper, it would be the equivalent of a young soldier hearing of an opportunity for combat and running onto the battlefield with nothing more than his street clothes on. Void of armor and weapons, he doesn't know who he is supposed to fight or what he is supposed to do. Passionately, he flails his arms around wildly, but without a vision for his mission, and because he is ill-equipped for what it requires, he quickly fails.

As it turns out, neither singular head knowledge nor the ready-fire-aim approach is helpful for soldiers. It's not good for responding to the gospel either. The good news of Christ's salvation must be understood, but it must also be lived out. Our heads and our hearts must rally around the same message for it to produce eternal fruit in our life. This is why Jesus says one must, "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

I believe this is why the Bible provides slightly different answers to the "How does someone respond to the gospel?" question. The answers don't contradict; they provide a full picture of what it means to believe and follow. This is why we must be reading Scripture every day, the easy and the hard parts. Yes, you can (and should) be able to speak the gospel clearly in under two minutes (see the last devotion for an example). However, every jot and tittle of Scripture is important to fully understand what Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross and what He calls us to in response.

What book of the Bible have you been avoiding recently? Numbers? Lamentations? Revelation? Jump in and buckle up my friend. There is beauty, calling and gospel in these books. God didn't just write a math formula for us to memorize. He wrote a book for us to know Himself through. Learn your ABCs, but in the words of Hebrews 6:1, "Let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity." And whether today has you jumping out of planes or doing anything else for the glory of Jesus, allow your head and your heart to work as a team in response to the finished work of our wonderful Savior!

What if God Could Have a Bad Day?



*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.
Hebrews 13:8*

*For I the LORD do not change; therefore you,
O children of Jacob, are not consumed.
Malachi 3:6*

*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above,
coming down from the Father of lights with whom
there is no variation or shadow due to change.
James 1:17*



When my brother and I were growing up, my mother stenciled a growth chart on the doorframe of our bedroom closet. Each year, she'd use a ruler and pencil to mark our progression. In our minds, this was an important event! At measurement time, we'd both straighten up and stand tall, eager to see the strides we had made from the previous year. If the doorframe showed an inch or two improvement, we were elated. No change however, amounted to a failure. It was a blow to our "manly" aspirations of being superheroes, baseball players or whatever else our career ambitions consisted of at the time. That's just the way it was

for us as kids. Change was expected. We sought after it and celebrated it with passion.

Now I'm 32. I live in my own house, have a wife and kids, and no longer keep track of my height. That old growth chart in my closet has been replaced with a scale in my bathroom. I'm still changing, but now I find the growth is happening horizontally instead of vertically. Today, I find myself trying to reverse the process of change rather than accelerate it.

It doesn't matter if you're 5 or 55, whether you're bodybuilding or buying thicker glasses - as a human, you've accepted the fact you're always changing. In this case, what's true with your body is also true with your spirit. Your emotions and your demeanor often follow the path of a yo-yo. This is why the exclamation, "I'm just having a bad day," has become a readily accessible excuse for detouring off the path of level-headedness. It's why "letting out steam" and "venting" are common de-stressing tactics, and is why even the most Mister-Rogers-like personality finds itself getting short-tempered at times. We expect these types of changes in ourselves; we expect them from one another. Strangely enough though, we don't expect change out of God.

Even though God's unchanging nature is an important doctrine, it's a trait of His we often take for granted. But should we dare? After all, what if *God* were having a bad day? What if *He* needed to do some venting? What if God could lose *His* cool from time to time? Can you imagine the sad state of humanity if we were ruled by such a God? It's sobering when we consider just how often we presume upon Christ's unchanging nature because it's all we've ever known.

God goes out of His way through both Testaments to describe Himself as patient and loving. A common Scriptural mantra is that God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). However, God is also consistently holy and just, One who despises sin and who maintains a fierce and righteous anger towards it. This is why the same Bible which contains beautiful love songs about God alluring and speaking tenderly to His people (Hosea 2:14-15) also has graphic imagery of God smearing dung on the faces of rebellious hearts (Malachi 2:3).

God’s attributes of love and justice, His forbearance of sin and His demanding righteousness, press hard against one another, squeezing man in the center. We would crumble between these forces, but thankfully Jesus, the God-man, stepped into our place and satisfied this holy tension through His perfect life and sacrificial death.

This is the good news of the gospel! The anger of God need not rest upon you because it was exhausted on Christ. The love of God is yours to treasure because it was bestowed to you through the imputed righteousness of Jesus. God doesn’t change and therefore the power of the cross, and your status as a child of God, doesn’t either. Unlike the sundial, which found its usefulness in harnessing shifting shadows, the cross only works when its source of power, God Himself, shows “no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). There will never be a time when He looks at the cross and says to you, “You know what? I’m just not feeling like myself today.” Praise God that His attributes and His sacrifice are eternally consistent!

A Popular Sin



Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

Romans 13:1-2



Today's devotion will step on some toes. In fact, I can pretty much guarantee it will offend you. The reason is because I'm going to call you out on a sin you've committed in the last 24 hours but have not repented of. Curious? Skeptical? Ready to be thrown for a loop? Here goes: It's a sin to drive over the speed limit.

Already I can hear the muffled laughter and the shirks. "Speeding a sin? Come on man, let's talk about something serious." Well I am serious, and here's why: God doesn't fool around when it comes to disobeying authority. He says in Romans 13:1-2 to resist the governing authorities (i.e. to drive over the posted speed limit), is to resist God Himself. Then comes the scary part. God says such disregard incurs judgment. In verses 4 and 5, He says it invokes the wrath of God. God's wrath is bigger than a mere ticket and a fine. His judgment throne is not traffic court. Starting to grasp

the concept? Without the cross, the just punishment for speeding is Hell.

Maybe you're still skeptical. To see why obeying the law is important (even the parts which seem minor to us), let's examine one of the most revealing things about our love for speeding: We always want just a little more than what's allowed. If everyone always wanted to drive 45 mph, we could just assume there was something special about this particular speed which appealed to us. But that's not how it works is it? Instead, this is what we find: If the speed limit is 45, we want to go 50. If it's 55, we want to go 60. If it's 65...well, you get the picture. This incremental indulgence reveals we don't drive fast for the sake of driving fast. It shows we like to push our limits and flirt with "minor" rebellion to God and the authority He has bestowed to man.

To be honest, this devotional is not about speeding (although I do hope you'll drive a little slower tomorrow). This devotion is really about the mentality we bring to God as the Father of all authority. It's easy to show up in church and nod your head to the pastor's message about submission to God. It's a piece of cake to sing along to the worship song on the radio that speaks about surrendering your all to Jesus. It's something else entirely to obey authority when no one else is looking.

What does this kind of obedience look like? It means working hard at 4:50pm on a Friday when your boss is not around. It means purchasing a music track instead of burning a copy from your friend's library. It means picking up your pet's droppings at a park or apartment complex when you are by yourself and no one else is watching. These opportunities for obedience may seem trivial, but they are

the nitty-gritty parts of life the gospel wants to redeem for the sake of Christ. It's here, when an earthly audience is removed, that the Father, "who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:6).

So yes, Jesus died for speeders. Had Henry Ford operated in the first century, Jesus would have perfectly obeyed the Galilean speed limits of the day. His would-be perfect driving record and His perfect obedience, have since been credited to the believer. It's because of this marvelous truth that we want to obey God in all things. We submit to authority not to earn His approval, but to respond with thanksgiving to His great gifts of mercy and grace.

What is a Savior hanging on a cross worth to you? Five mph? Ten? Slow down my friend, and take time to live life to the glory of God in all things.

Three Reasons Not to Become a Christian



The kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which a man found...in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Matthew 13:44



This devotion may surprise you. It lists three real reasons why you may not want to become a Christian. It has become unpopular today for some Christians and churches to tell you what you are about to read. However, it's exactly the sort of message Jesus spoke of when He was here on earth.

Read the first four books of the New Testament and you'll find passages where it almost seems Jesus is trying to discourage people who want to follow Him (Matthew 8:18-22, Luke 9:57-62). This is not the case though. Jesus is really asking everyone to first consider what it means to be His disciple. At one point, Jesus actually commands people to count the cost before they commit to this new kind of life (Luke 14:25-33). So before you become a Christian, you may want to first consider these three reasons not to:

If you become a Christian:

- 1) You will have to become a slave to Jesus.
“He who was free when called is a bondservant to Christ” (1 Corinthians 7:22b).
- 2) You will have to die to your sinful life every day.
“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).
- 3) You will have to live in such a way that the world thinks you are a fool.
“The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

These are weighty reasons not to become a Christian. Why would anyone want to become a slave, die to their current way of living and choose to be thought of as a fool? Well, one reason is because the message of Christianity is true.

God really does exist. He created you and the rest of the universe. You are a sinner and have disobeyed God's commands. God really will judge the world and send all people who are not Christians to Hell where they will be punished for eternity.

That's some incredibly bad news. But Christianity is also about exceedingly good news. Although God's wrath is real and demands justice, He also has a great love for all people. God became a man as Jesus. Jesus claimed to be and really was (and is) God. He lived a perfect life with no sin and died a horrible death on a cross. At Jesus' death, two great

things happened: All of Jesus' righteousness was credited to Christians and all of Christians' sins were placed on Jesus.

Because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, God looks at Christians as if they had never sinned and had always obeyed. When Christians die, they do not go to Hell, but are instead taken to Heaven where they find perfect joy forever in God's presence.

So, how do you become a Christian and have access to this power Jesus' sacrifice gives? First, you must believe what the Bible teaches about God, about your sin and about Jesus' sacrifice. Secondly, true belief will lead you to repentance. Repentance means you turn from your sins and change your mind about how you want to live.

It's important to understand that Christians still sin daily and that their good works cannot save them. Only Jesus was good enough to satisfy God's perfect requirement. Jesus' righteousness and sacrifice are free gifts of grace and mercy which come through faith. However, a Christian's faith will be proven genuine by good works and a new lifestyle. True belief involves repentance which will lead a person to:

- live as a slave to Jesus' commands
- daily renounce one's sinful lifestyle, and
- be willing to look foolish to non-Christians

Becoming a Christian is the greatest and most life changing event you can ever experience. Will you count the cost today?

