

## THE “WOW” SCRIPTURES FROM MATTHEW TO JOHN



Useful recipes for daily living that taste good, never fail to satisfy the appetite for God, and are made to be shared with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

### Matthew

#### **The Long Way Around! (4:1-11)**

*“Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him!”*

I like short cuts; shortcuts save time and time is a very precious commodity to me. For example, recently a bird had made a mess on the hood of my car. I noticed it as I was pulling out of the garage and immediately began processing a plan of action. “That kind of mess on a car’s finish will mar the finish,” I thought. “So, this is what I will do. I’ll grab a piece of paper toweling from the house, dampen it and do a quick rub. When I get to town I’ll run my car through the car wash and problem solved.” The part that worked well was the toweling and the water. I was able to do that with the engine idling and without losing two minutes of precious time. The car wash part didn’t work so well, how-

ever. By the time I got to town I'd forgotten completely about the mess on my car's hood. In fact that lack of remembering lasted for an entire week until a coworker noticed a white smear on my hood and asked if I had dropped paint on my car. That's when I remembered the car wash. I ran my car through on the way home but noticed as I emerged from the wash to the drier that the spot was yet visible as an opaque spot on the new waxy finish. It would now take a bit of elbow grease to put things right. That two minutes saved a week earlier turned into a half hour job in the end.

I like shortcuts; unfortunately, sometimes they don't work out the way I planned. Here's a story: "Robert Wood Johnson, the former chairman of Johnson & Johnson, was known to be a terror when he inspected his plants. On one such unannounced visit, the plant manager had a fortunate 30-minute tip prior to his arrival. Hastily he had things spruced up by ordering several large rolls of paper transported to the roof of the building. When Johnson arrived, he was furious. "What in the heck is all that junk on the roof?" were his first words. How were they to know that he would arrive in his personal helicopter?" (Edward Buxton, *Promise Them Anything* (Stein & Day), in *Reader's Digest*, March 1980.)

Shortcuts can be fun and they will save you time, at times. The problem with shortcuts is that they have a compromising nature about them. Here's the compromise. Perhaps nine times out of ten they work. It's that tenth time that bites though. You and I need to be very careful when it comes to the daily temptations that the devil, the world and our own flesh will throw at us. We may be tempted to take a shortcut when it comes to keeping our car's finish clean, but abiding temptation? We can do it our way, the shortcut, plowing through and hoping for the best, or God's way, the long way around, slowing down and prayerfully calculating the consequences of our actions. The first is likely to bite, the second is likely to bless.

*Meditate.* Did you ever watch a football game between two teams that didn't like each other? The odds are you'll see the referees throwing penalty flags more often than not. It slows the game down but keeps it under control. Temptations are like that. They are inevitable and will, if you allow them, disrupt your life completely. Keep a notecard, handkerchief or small token in your pocket, purse or wallet. When temptation hits, take it out and throw it. Keep the game under control. Don't take risks with your soul.

### **Holly's Button Box! (5:5)**

*"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth!"*

I have a will. In that will Holly and I have divided up things that belong to us that, perhaps, our children might wish to have someday when we've passed away. The list is long and filled with things of diverse value. There are the pictures, clocks and several pieces of furniture that have appreciated in value over the years. Although they have some degree of sentimental value, like our nice piano in the Great Room, for the most part their value is determined by what they might be sold for. Then there are the things that have little monetary value but plenty of sentimental value. They might be sold for very little but to possess them because they have intrinsic value beyond a material value is what is meaningful; my personal Bible or Holly's button box, for example. Both are Goodwill items, but I'm sure that both will someday become keepsakes in one of our children's homes.

Inheritance is like that. Most things have value, but not all things have monetary value. What was Jesus saying when he preached, "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). What sort of inheritance did he have in mind? Like Holly and my inheritance, the "thing" he is speaking of as an inheritance can be easily confused. Was he talking about the world and those material things in the world that you and I find so valuable? Or, was he

talking about something else, a different kind of inheritance, the earth, that possesses a different kind of value? I believe that he was not speaking of the worldly things that can be bought or sold. Meekness is a quality of Christian character that bespeaks a courageous adherence to God's will, an uncompromising willingness to be obedient no matter what. So, how does God reward such character? He gives us the earth, but not the world. The world is the stuff, the things that you and I have put here; the buildings, appliances, automobiles and the like. These are the things that we in our Christian freedom have made and placed here. They are valuable, but we won't inherit them by our obedience. No, we get the earth. So, what is that? It's kind of like Holly's button box. As it is Holly's personal, valuable possession, so is the earth God's personal possession. He made it devoid of things of worldly value, but full of things of intrinsic, divine value.

So, obey God and you're likely to receive an inheritance of very dear value, the earth itself. When you and I battle sin and evil, stridently pursuing a life of valiant, Christian integrity, God chooses to share the intrinsic value of his creation, the earth, with us. On the one hand it seems like only a button box, on the other, it's the very first thing God made, even before man. The resale value is minimal, the intrinsic value is matchless.

*Meditate.* Never mix the meaning of the world and the earth. When you keep these concepts separate in your mind you'll quickly find that the world may be glorious and fun, but you can't take it with you. The earth, on the other hand, might just be going along for the ride.

#### **Saws-all—More Than A Tool! (5: 14-16)**

*"You are the light of the world."*

I own a Saws-all. A Saws-all is a powerful tool for doing just about anything. When I bought it, however, I had pretty much one thing in mind, cutting wood in tight places. A Saws-all is the type of cutting tool that allows you to make cuts in places where a circular saw just isn't useful. For years I took my Saws-all and used it to make those difficult wood cuts. Until one day I discovered that this powerful tool was far more powerful than I had thought and useful than I had thought. When you put the proscribed metal, cutting blade on it, it can cut not only through wood but through steel as well. This made my Saws-all extremely useful for remodeling purposes since so often you are cutting through old framing studs that are nailed in. For years I was in the practice of pulling these studs apart by hand with a hammer and pry bar. A Saws-all, however, properly fitted with the right metal cutting blade, makes cutting through nails as easy as cutting through wood.

When you own a tool it's better used when you learn how to use it to its greatest potential. So it is also with your faith.

Here's a story: In a tenement district in New York City, a boy in ragged clothes was seen with a small piece of broken mirror in his hand. Holding it high in the air he moved it slowly back and forth, watching the narrow slit of a window above him as he did so. A business man came walking down the street and spied the boy. "What are you doing?" the man suddenly demanded as he shook the youngster roughly by the shoulder. "Like most boys in this neighborhood, you're probably up to some mischief, aren't you?" The boy looked up into the stern face of his accuser and said, "See that window up there Mister? Well, I have a little brother who has a room on that floor. He's a cripple. The only sunlight he ever sees is what I shine up to him with my mirror!"

When you and I walk through this world, do we reflect the light of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, so that someone living in darkness might also see the same light that we can see? When we don't live our faith but simply keep it to our-

selves, we deny others the eternal reward that our faith, working for them, can give. When we are quiet but should be speaking up, we deny the light. When we go along with what the crowd is doing, we deny the light. When we allow sin to dim our light, we deny the light. Just like a Saws-all never realizes its full potential until you push it to its limits, so too is our faith. Left alone, it is but a tool. Pushed to its fullest potential, as a tool in the hands of the Almighty God, that potential is limitless.

**Meditate.** Take a moment at the end of the day to reexamine where you've been that day. How hard have you worked? Could you have worked harder? Did you miss any opportunity to let your light shine to glorify your Father in heaven? The only way you and I can improve is to make sure we set goals based on the day for the next day.

### **Boomerang Light! (5:16)**

*"In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven."*

I've become accustomed to sleeping in total darkness. Here at Beech Springs darkness is a reality. Dark is really dark. There are few if any lights in our little valley. Our nearby neighbors are far enough away so that a light turned on in their house or garage is barely visible to us. Fortunately for us none of our neighbors has one of those bothersome security lights that goes on after dark and lights up everything for acres around. As we've lived here for decades I've become so accustomed to the dark that I have trouble sleeping unless I have total darkness. Yet, there are some lights that don't seem to bother me at all. Holly's reading lamp, for example, doesn't seem to bother me. There is a light, however, that can wake me up from a deep sleep. It's not brilliant or vast like a security light. It's actually fairly mellow by light standards. It's the light from my sleeping computer screen in the office down the hallway from our bedroom. If for some reason my computer decides to turn itself on in the middle of the night that strobing, soft and undulating light will wake me up every time. That light penetrates the darkness in a way that none other in our house is able to do. It begs you to check it out and deal with it.

Jesus preached that our "light," the light that dwells within us and testifies to the love of Christ, ought to so shine before men "that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). What kind of light is this? Is it like the security light, Holly's reading light, or, perhaps, like that strobing, computer light? Security lights are bold, bright and dominating. I believe if we emit that kind of light it's just preaching, telling others what to do in a brash, bold sort of way. That's easy and that's obnoxious. I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind. OK, Holly's reading light? I'm so used to her narrowly focused reading lamp that I can go to sleep in minutes when she might be reading for hours. That kind of light is like is just the same old, same old words, uttered without emotion or passion. Those kind of words bounce off, even lull us to sleep. No, that's not the kind of light Jesus was talking about either. The computer light, although not brash or intense, is able to penetrate. It strobos and draws you to it with a come see what I'm all about approach. That's what Jesus was talking about. It's a light that can't be hidden and begs to be discovered. Jesus meant by this light not preaching but living. When you and I live our lives according to God's Word, our lives attract others. They want to find out what our character, our devotion to loving others before ourselves, is all about. It's a light you can't sleep through or one that is obnoxious. It's a light that's advertises one who lives the truth as well as preaches it. Hard to turn that one off.

### **Out Of Touch! (5:21-26)**

*"But I tell you that anyone that is angry with his brother will be subject to the judgment."*

Years ago I became acquainted with an older couple, the Hansons, who lived at the very end of the street I grew up on. Everything about them set them off as odd. They were in their seventies on a block of young people in their twenties and thirties raising families. They pretty much kept to themselves while everyone else on the block seemed to live in other people's backyards. Each house on the block was a ranch style home, three bedrooms, one bath, a kitchen, living room and unfinished basement. All the homes were the same except for how they were painted on the outside. The Hanson's house was an odd frame home with antiquated, asphalt siding. There were two small bedrooms and everything about it said old farmhouse. The Hansons owned an Allstate, one of those Sears cars you could buy out of the Sears Catalog back in the late 1940s. They didn't own a TV set. That really set them apart from the rest of the block. If you couldn't watch Ed Sullivan you were deprived. They also kept old newspapers around the house, papers dating from World War I. They were laid out on a reading table in their tiny living room. They kept to themselves and, for the most part, seemed out of touch of the world of satellites, Rock and Roll, Twist and Shout and TV dinners. I'm sure they viewed us as odd as we viewed them. Our 1960s values probably made them very uncomfortable.

When Jesus preached to the vast and teeming crowds that gathered around him on hillsides and lake shores how odd His words must have sounded to the Jews seeking a political leader and to the Greeks in search of a new philosophy. In a sense His personality must have smacked of someone out of touch with the reality of the day. Blessed are the meek? If you humble yourself you will be exalted? Thinking evil is as bad as doing evil? In a world controlled by the ruthless Romans, the humble were vulnerable, the meek crushed and thinking evil was just a way of blowing off needed steam. This prophet was out of touch. His teaching made the average Joe uncomfortable.

In a way we live in a world that still finds folks like the Hansons odd, or, perhaps, even to be avoided at all costs. If you aren't mainstream in thinking you make most people uncomfortable to be around you. Jesus teachings still cause that kind of reaction. The world hasn't changed much since the Romans ruled. Humility, meekness and being condemned for our thoughts still smack of being out of touch. Yet, that is where God wants us to be, out of touch with the values of this world and in touch with the values of knowing, understanding, and following Jesus Christ. In a way I guess God wants us to be like the Hansons, living peaceably, but a bit out of touch. I suppose the Hansons weren't that odd after all.

**Meditate.** The teachings of Jesus Christ really don't make a lot of sense when it comes to finding the American Dream or just trying to get by from day to day in a world that seems pretty menacing. A lot of things in this life just don't make sense do they. Find an old jam jar and put a label on it that says "Discipleship." When things don't make sense, write them on a piece of paper and drop them into the jar. It's a reminder that only a disciple of Christ will ever understand the teachings of Christ. You may find a newly imparted wisdom with every slip of paper you drop in.

### **Bad Breath in Souls! (5:23-24)**

*"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."*

Now that the kids have all left the nest many things have changed around here at Beech Springs. There are fewer cars parked in the driveway. There is no music in the house that either Holly or I haven't turned on. Holly only needs to wash clothes once a week as opposed to three times a week. We no longer need to put leaves into the kitchen table; it works just fine for two without any leaves. Perhaps one of the biggest changes however is the food. These days our refrigerator seems a bit bare compared with just months ago. There's shelf space, no need to jockey plates, Tupper-

ware and bags around just to put something into the fridge. We buy less food, and few things any more in bulk. This has both an up side, however, and a down side. The disadvantage has to do with dairy products, in particular, milk. We used to buy milk by the gallon, but now the half gallon will do. My son Dan drank a lot of milk when he was at home, Holly and I really don't drink that much milk. The problem is, even a half gallon sits a little bit too long in the fridge, past the out date, and commonly begins to spoil.

I like to push the envelope with many things and outdated milk is just one of them. Yesterday I had a bowl of cereal and pulled out the milk. I'm in the habit of checking the outdate on milk, and that morning was no different. Sure enough, the date had passed. Hmmm, outdated? Well, that's what the carton said, but everyone know there's a lot of fluff in those dates. I gave it a smell. It was borderline, but I decided to take the risk. I poured it over the cereal and dug in. The first spoonful was curious, the second was convincing. The milk had spoiled and my cereal was, well, polluted and inedible. Out over the back deck it went. The opossum would feed tonight.

Milk spoils easily, but so does the human soul. I know we don't often think of our souls as something that might have a freshness problem, but I believe they do. There are many things that can push your soul to a stale state. Take debt for instance. When we carry a grudge, we carry debt. When we fail to follow through on a promise, we carry debt. When we deny love, we carry debt. When we avoid responsibility, we care debt. These kind of debts add up and they spoil your soul. When you go to pray and bare your soul to God what does He smell? He smells an aroma that is unpleasing and your prayer is meaningless. Your soul has bad breath and needs to be refreshed. If you have unpaid debts like this, try taking care of them first before coming to God with your prayers. You will quickly find that a soul with an aroma of freshness is a soul that God loves to embrace.

**Meditate.** Take stock of whom you owe and what. Don't let debts of love, generosity and forgiveness pile up. Check them off you list one by one and you'll quickly find that your prayers will come easier and go a whole lot farther.

### **A Puff of Smoke! (5:25)**

*“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.”*

Here's a story: Andrew Carnegie was a Scottish-American industrialist and one of the most important philanthropists of his era. Although Carnegie gave most of his money away, he had his detractors. Often regarded as the second-richest man in history after John D. Rockefeller, Carnegie had his enemies. On one occasion a man barged into Carnegie's office, stormed past his secretary and pushed open Carnegie's door, plopping himself in a chair without introduction. He began railing against the injustice of Carnegie having so much money. In his view, wealth was meant to be divided equally. Carnegie listened thoughtfully and then summoned his secretary. He asked his secretary for an assessment of everything he owned and at the same time looked up the figures on world population. As the man sat dumbfounded in front of him he did a little arithmetic on a pad and then said to his secretary. "Give this gentleman 16 cents. That's his share of my wealth." The man left with his 16 cents and speechless. (Source unknown.)

Carnegie's strategy was a brilliant one; don't go to war with your opponent unless first disarming him. Good advice, but such that is rarely taken. Human nature as it is, would incline most of us to duck and fire as opposed to standing our ground, assessing the situation and finding a way to snuff the burning fuse of reaction and retaliation. As the saying goes, "Discretion IS the better part of valor." Jesus' advice points this out clearly. Disputes are to be settled, without regard to first what is fair to us. All of us feel it's our right to be treated fairly. That only seems natural. When

someone harms or defames us without cause, stretching fairness to its utmost, we're naturally inclined to seek first our rights and worry about the consequences later. This, however, is not the divine prescription. There is a higher court of justice that is far superior to the one we feel naturally inclined to, the court of divine imperative. Jesus says that we must first seek to pay our debt to our adversary before considering what may or may not be fair to us. It is more important to God that we show kindness than kindness be shown to us.

St. Francis of Assisi put it this way, "Lord may I not so much seek to be loved, as to love; to be understood, as to understand; to be pardoned, as to pardon. For it is in giving that we receive and pardoning that we are pardoned." When disputes arise in your life be quick to end them without first thinking of how fair or unfair it might be to you. Show love, seek to understand and place your pardon out front before you seek justice. You may find your adversary speechless and the conflict but a puff of smoke.

**Meditate.** There's an old saying, "Hate in the back seat gives full freedom to love in the front."

### **Someone's Shade, Not Mine! (5:42)**

*"Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."*

Holly and I live among a forest of beautiful Beech Trees here at Beech Springs. Most of these are from sixty to eighty feet high, and in the mature stages of growth. The shade and comfort that these trees provide is hard to describe. As we've just passed through a prolonged drought, the fact that much of our little valley survived is testimony to the many mature Beech trees, literally hundreds of them, providing critical shade from the hot, summer sun. We're realistic though. Trees, like people, pass away, and it takes years to restore a grove of mature trees ravaged by storm or disease. Holly and I were recently examining two, very tall Beech Trees just outside our Great Room window. They shade our entire house and keep our cooling bills in the summer down. Beneath one of the trees is a small Beech, no higher than four feet, that Holly has carefully nurtured from a seedling. I asked her why she didn't just pull it up as it looks out of place in the flower garden around the trees. She told me that, "Should one of these tall Beech die, this one will replace it." My first thought was, "So what, we'll never be here to enjoy that little tree. We'll be long gone and home with the Lord before it provides any shade to us or shelter for the house. As we both looked at that little tree for a moment longer, the thought occurred to me that, perhaps, "I ought to let the next owner worry about that."

Why did I say that? As I thought about it, I became aware of how uncharitable the remark was. Deep in my sinful heart I was searching for a reason for someone else to deserve our generosity. What if it was a complete stranger living here in decades to come? Perhaps a son or daughter might deserve such generosity, but a complete stranger? I guess it's natural to feel a sense of merit when we give things freely to others. It's like the beggar asking for a hand-out on the street. Our first thought justly seems, "Sure, but what will he do with that dollar?" What does Jesus tell us to do, however? Jesus tells us to put merit away and put our generosity out front, without regard for whether someone will use our gift rightly or not. Perhaps the next owner of this property will cut that little tree down. According to Jesus, my decision to be charitable has nothing to do with someone else's intent.

It's been said that, "The true meaning of life is to plant trees, under whose shade you do not expect to sit." Be generous with your gifts, giving freely without judging who deserves what and when. The reason is simple; Scriptures don't just, merely suggest generosity, Jesus commands it. So, whoever you are, enjoy that little Beech tree; may it bring you as much joy as the trees in this valley have brought Holly and I.

How to? You and I live in the shade of God's undeserved grace. It's good to remind ourselves often that God gives without judging what we might do with that grace; He simply gives it, and so should you and I.

### **Walkaway Prayer! (5:48)**

*"Be perfect therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect!"*

Years ago I had charge of an in house print shop. In that role I supervised a dozen or so employees who worked preparing, printing and binding service manuals for the Outdoor Power Equipment employer I worked for. One of my responsibilities was to do an annual review of each worker, evaluate their performance based on goals set earlier in the year and then determine what kind of raise, if any, each worker merited. Although it was always my intent to give a raise, sometimes it just didn't work out because there just was too much in a worker's folder, as we called it, to show merit. I remember one employee, we'll call him Chuck, who had a pretty full folder. He had been tardy to work a number of times and his overall performance was a stretch to call average. He really hadn't made much progress over the prior year, so I couldn't give him a raise. I pulled him into my office and gave him the bad news. He frowned, but thanked me and left. Over the course of the following week I finished all of my evaluations and, with a sigh of relief, I closed the book on another year of evaluations. That's when Chuck reappeared in my office. He wanted to talk. He really wanted that raise, so he asked me to give him a list of things that needed improvement and promised me that he'd work on each. Over the course of the next few months Chuck and I worked on the list. Within six months he had achieved measurable improvement on each item and, not surprisingly, Chuck got his raise.

In a very real sense you and I are like Chuck when it comes to our prayers of asking. "Dear Lord, please give me this or that." God is okay with us asking for things, He expects us to ask Him for whatever we wish to ask Him for. The fact is that often He doesn't give us what we ask for. What do you do when God is silent? Is yours a walkaway prayer, assuming God has said "No?" Or, like Chuck, do you return in prayer to ask Him what it is that might be hindering Him from responding to your requests? It's God's will to give you what you ask for, as it was my will to give Chuck a raise. Once Chuck figured out what I needed, he got what he needed.

Prayer is all about relationship building and not just asking. When our relationship with God is strained or missing, our prayer is empty and hollow. Chuck and I developed a great relationship over the course of those six months. That was key to him getting what he wanted, but what is more important, it became the source of a friendship that remained for years. Seek that relationship with God today; ask Him in prayer what you need to do to draw closer to Him. You may find that in the drawing will come the reward.

**Meditate.** God knows that you and I aren't perfect. That's why He sent Jesus to be perfect for us. Nonetheless, He asks for our perfection in this sense. Perfect the art of knowing your faults and striving to correct them. In so doing you will build a relationship with God that will reward you from now into eternity.

### **A Rutted Road! (6:5-8)**

*"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men."*

I do many things habitually. If you ask my wife Holly, she'll tell you EVERYTHING I do is habitual. Whether this is actually true, I confess that habit is very important to me. One of the things that I do weekly, every Thursday morn-

ing, is to call my Mom. If it's Thursday before 9:00, I will either be on the phone with Mom or just finishing up. There have been very few Thursdays when I haven't talked with my Mom over the course years since my Dad passed away. I guess you could say that calling Mom is ritual for me. The one thing about our Thursday talks, however, that departs from ritual is what we say to each other during these talks. I don't script what I'm going to tell Mom. Whatever comes to mind when I hear her voice on the other end of the phone quickly becomes the gist of the conversation. I believe Mom feels the same way about that. In this sense, making the call is the habit, repetition, Thursday after Thursday, week after week; what we say, however, is a conversation, and not a script. Each Thursday's call is a habit; each Thursday's conversation is an opportunity. The habit can become a rut; the conversation serves to smooth out the rut and make it a road.

Habits can be dangerous, especially when they lead to unthinking behavior. Here's a story: Years ago when the western United States was first being settled, roads were often just wagon tracks. As time went by the ruts grew deeper and deeper. These rough trails posed serious problems for those who journeyed on them. Once a wagon and team got into one of these ruts, it became difficult to turn out. On one of these winding paths was posted a sign that read: "Avoid this rut or you'll be in it for the next 25 miles!" So it is with habits. They're easy to do without thinking—which is why most of us have so many of them. (Source unknown)

Do you make it a habit to pray? You know, like my Thursday calls to Mom. A little alarm goes off in your heart and you know it's time. That's great. Being habitual in prayer is an important part of building your relationship with God. Being habitual in what you say to him is not. Scripting prayer is easy. "Our Father, in Heaven, etc. Amen!" When you're finished, how do you feel? Safe? Ready to move on? Or, do you feel empty, somewhat unfulfilled. Scripting prayer is like that deep, rutted road. After time it becomes easy to just keep doing it because doing something different is, well, hard to do. You wouldn't script a conversation with your Mom, why would you do it with God? God likes to hear your prayers; He loves to hear your thoughts. The next time you pray, talk to God; make it a conversation, an opportunity. Just let the words flow. Choose to travel down a smooth prayer highway, avoiding the ruts that just words can dig, oh so deep.

**How to?** Jesus gave us a wonderful formula for prayer, the Lord's Prayer. However, He didn't intend for us to simply repeat the words. He wanted us to hang our thoughts on them and construct conversations with God that are fresh and new every day.

### **Like Barking Dogs! (6: 7-8)**

*"But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."*

Earlier this year, in the depth of winter, I celebrated a birthday. Along with the usual cards, family gathering and gifts, this year I celebrated in an unusual way. I woke early that birthday morning and the house felt a bit cold. So I pulled on my robe and parked my feet into a pair of slippers and shuffled downstairs to our Great Room to put some wood in the wood stove and get a fire going. Unfortunately, the night before I had failed to get wood in from the garage and now I was staring at an empty log cart. So I rolled the cart out to the garage shutting the door behind me. You guessed it; I locked myself out. Ordinarily this wouldn't have been so bad except that it was 5° outside with a wind chill about 15° colder. I knew that there was a key to a deck door, carefully hidden, but I would have to trudge through deep snow to get to that particular door. I did and when I got there the key didn't turn the lock. So, I decided to bang on the door to rouse Holly or Dan still asleep. It didn't work. Finally the key turned the lock and I made it in

out of the cold. Later Holly commented that it would have been far wiser of me had I knocked on Dan's bedroom window than stood on a deck, a good distance away, banging on a door. She was right. Thank goodness for me the key DID turn that lock.

Sometimes when we pray and prayers go unanswered, could it be we're knocking on a door God isn't prepared to open? Here's a story. Warren Wiersbe writes: "In October 1983, I was painting a neighbor's home. They had a small black dog that would go to the back door and bark and bark until someone finally got the message and let it out. One day I was there, painting the outside of the home, while everyone else was gone. Their little dog, however, took up his station at the back door and barked incessantly all day. The sad thing was that it never dawned in his little brain that all his barking was totally useless—no one was home to hear!" (Warren Wiersbe, Famous Unanswered Prayers)

Scriptures tell us that when we pray we ought not to babble on with many words thinking that God would be impressed with our "prayer show." That's like knocking on a door and no one is there to hear it. Like that barking dog, wordy and lengthy prayers become nothing more than noise, useless to us and silent to God. He doesn't hear babbling and isn't impressed with our ability to speak many words. It is true that we can never pray too much. It is also true that we CAN pray without sincerity, believing that the words are magic, casting a prayer spell on God He can't resist. Are you knocking on a prayer door God is not there to open? Try brevity and repetition with sincerity; it might just be the window God is looking to open, if only you make the wise choice to find it.

**How to?** Take a moment at the end of the day to reexamine where you've been that day. How hard have you worked? Could you have worked harder? Did you miss any opportunity to let your light shine to glorify your Father in heaven? The only way you and I can improve is to make sure we set goals based on the day for the next day.

### **Rote Prayer! (6:8)**

*"Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."*

Holly and I taught homeschool here at Beech Springs for nearly fifteen years. Between the two of us we spanned every learning level from Preschool through High School. There was a whole lot of learning going on under this roof for years, and different methods by which that learning happened. In some cases it was one of our students watching online classes, taking notes and working independently. That worked well for much of the coursework. However there was much rote learning as well. Rote learning is all about memorization and repetition. We used it when we wanted one of the kids to secure the foundation of a subject. Math tables or spelling rules would be an example. When a periodic table had to be memorized for Chemistry, rote learning was involved. I don't think that anyone really enjoys rote learning, but it is a necessity when lots of facts or data needs to be memorized. We'd ask Dan, Hannah or Rachel to recite word for word or fact by fact what they knew, and they would tell us what they knew and we already knew. Holly and I weren't learning from what they were telling us, but just listening to what they had memorized helped them remember it for themselves down the road. They learned the words and data by pouring their knowledge into us. In that sense we were a repository for their understanding, but not the result of it. Their ability to remember was the result.

You know, God works in a very similar way with you and I when we come to Him in prayer. We aren't telling Him anything He doesn't know already, yet He still requires that we tell Him what it is He already knows. Oswald Chambers writes. "That is the meaning of prayer—I tell God what I know He knows in order that I may get to know it as

He does. It is not true to say that a man learns to pray in calamities, he never does; he calls on God to deliver him, but he does not pray. A man only learns to pray when there is no calamity (The Quotable Oswald Chambers, page 203).

Think about it; when you start out each day in habit praying to God, telling Him everything that He already knows He will do for you in that day, you are doing the rote practice of prayer to be prepared to call upon God when you need Him the most, in times of trouble, sorrow, despair or grief. Just like our homeschool students who recited to Holly and I what we already knew but what they needed to know, so it is with you and I in prayer. We need to keep in the practice of prayer to be able to bring our needs to God regularly. Rote may be tedious, even at times boring, but in the end it serves to be a great foundation for independence. Be a slave to daily prayer and discover how free you are when real needs arise.

**How to?** Do you workout every day? Keeping physically fit should be on all our daily calendars. Treat prayer the same way. Do prayer workouts daily. In the end you will be a fit in prayer and more capable with each passing day.

### **Dress Those Lines! (6:24)**

*“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”*

Many years ago I participated in both the NJROTC (the Naval Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp) and AROTC (the Army Reserve Officer Training Corp). I was in High School in the former and college the latter. Along with the coursework and the drilling there was something called dress. Dressing a line meant making sure that each man in a line or column was directly placed in front of the man behind. When the drill officer looked at a line of cadets he would yell, “Dress right, dress!” That mean to put your right arm out laterally to touch the left shoulder of the man to your right. Every cadet had to make sure that his arm and the man’s shoulder were directly in line, without a degree of variation. The officer would peer down the line, squint and make sure that it was a STRAIGHT line. At the time I really couldn’t see the point to dressing a line. It seemed like one of those many things that the military do without much meaning but with much devotion. When I got to my second year of college I got my answer. Our company commander actually posed the question to the class to see if anyone really knew the reason. No one did. He then asked this question: What’s at the end of the dressed line? The answer was simple. It was either the flag or an officer representing the Corp. Dressing right meant that each man in that line dressed on the beginning of the line, the purpose for the line, devotion to country.

There were many things in that dressed line that could cause a line to be uneven. If your shoes weren’t directly in line with each other or your neck wasn’t turned completely to the right a dressed line could be undressed quickly. It really wasn’t that hard to “kill” a dressed line, as we used to say in ROTC.

You know, it’s no different our money. There are many things that can come between us and God, and money is one of the prime culprits. “Someone has said that you can take two small ten-cent pieces, just two dimes, and shut out the view of an entire landscape. Go to the mountains and just hold two coins closely in front of your eyes—the mountains are still there, but you cannot see them at all because there is a dime shutting off the vision in each eye. It doesn’t take large quantities of money to come between us and God; just a little, placed in the wrong position, will effectively obscure our view. (Cedric Gowler). When it comes to money God is asking us to “dress the line” that leads to eternal life, and money has a way of easily undressing that line. When you and I organize our lives around money, the line to God is no longer straight and the view of our final goal at the end of that line is obscured. So, “dress right, dress Christian.” Keep your lines straight. absolutely true to God’s line of things.

**How to?** You may not have a line to dress on at home but try standing occasionally in prayer and thanksgiving to God with your right arm extended. You may not feel it, but you have your hand on the shoulder of God.

### **Evel Knievel? Never! (6:25)**

*“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?”*

Here’s a story. The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety. During the Napoleonic Wars the French army invaded Austria. On Easter Sunday morning a force of 18,000 French soldiers suddenly appeared before an Austrian town that had no means of defending itself. The town council met, certain that surrender was the only answer. The old dean of the church, however, reminded the council that it was Easter, and begged them to hold services as usual and to leave the trouble of defending the town in God’s hands. The council followed his advice. The dean went to the church and rang the bells to announce the service. The French soldiers upon hearing the church bells ringing concluded that the Austrian army had come to rescue the town. They broke camp, and before the bells had ceased ringing, vanished. (Source Unknown)

It may seem that the Austrian town fathers were acting foolishly, not thinking about the safety of the towns people at all. On the surface it would appear so. Nonetheless, it really wasn’t a case of blind hope or insane reliance on the powers that be. Rather, what the church dean said made sense to them. It was a matter of true priority. Hey, it’s Easter! What do we do on Easter? We go to church and celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. That means worship and the ringing of bells. The defense of the town became a secondary consideration for the town council. They truly believed that misplaced priorities were more of a concern than worrying about 18,000 French soldiers. They would worship and concern themselves with the French later, when the first priority was accomplished. It had nothing to do with blindness and everything to do with clear thinking.

Those Austrian councilman knew that, in this particular situation, God WAS their only defense, and they decided to let Him worry about things out of their control. Jesus tells us “do not worry about your life.” He isn’t saying be foolish about your life and give it no thought at all. God isn’t looking for you and I to be Evel Knievels. He wants us to think about all things, especially our lives. Risk is something that comes packaged with faith. When risk takes flight without faith, that is truly foolish. A man is a fool who takes no thought at all for his life. Rather, Jesus is saying be careful about your relationship with God. Put that first before all other things and risk becomes a matter of faith and not anxiety. Don’t be afraid to ring the bells of faith when trouble comes. Your troubles might just disappear when they seem the most menacing.

**How to?** Keep a jar on your kitchen counter labeled worries. Every time you become concerned with something that is truly troubling, write it on slip and put it into the jar. Designate one day a week to open the jar and read about your troubles. You may be surprised how many have already fled the battlefield.

### **God’s George Webb! (6:26-27)**

*“Look at the birds of the air, they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”*

Here at Beech Springs we kind of think of our feeders as the local George Webb's for birds. Our bird friends go through literally hundreds of pounds of bird seed every year, as well as dozens and dozens of suet cakes. I'm sure the ever present supply of food, water and shelter keeps them coming back year after year. Yet, there is one subtle factor that also keeps them around, grit. Our driveway is paved with traffic bond and the pieces of limestone are the perfect size for a bird's crop. Food, water, shelter and grit; it's hard to beat the combination if you're a bird.

It's always amazing to me how birds seem to find grit, even in the depth of winter with the driveway iced over. Yet, they find it. In fact our feeders are the busiest in the dead of winter when grit is the hardest to find. Without grit to help them digest the seed, our little avian George Webb's would close down overnight. Over the course of decades, however, that has never happened. We keep filling the feeders and the birds keep emptying them. I guess they keep coming back, trusting that with the dawn of each new day, somewhere, grit is to be found. Their job is to be a bird; along with the big stuff, the seed, the small stuff, the grit, just seems to happen.

Here's a story: During the nineteenth century, George Muller was well known throughout England as a man who relied on God. Over the course of ninety years, he built dozens of orphanages. Without a personal salary, he relied only on God to supply the money and food needed to support himself. A man of radiant faith, he kept a motto on his desk that brought comfort, strength, and uplifting confidence to his heart. It read, "It matters to God about you." Muller believed that those words captured the meaning of trusting in God, and he rested his claim for the divine help he received for decades on that truth. At the end of his life he testified that the Lord had never failed to supply all his needs, big and small. (Unknown)

Over the course of years our bird feeders have never failed. Our bird friends keep coming back, trusting that everything they need will be there, the seed, the water, and the grit. What an example of trust. I believe that's why Jesus used birds as an example of total trust. A bird is not a worrier, a bird is a truster. It doesn't work to be a bird, it works to be a warm, feathered creature that trusts in God to provide. This is the law that governs its life. You and I are no different when we focus on trusting God to provide. We simply need to show up everyday at God's George Webb, each new day filled with His promise of free grace and love. The seed and water of the Word will be there, along with the grit of His promise to provide all our needs. Therein is the promise that keeps us coming back for more.

### **Prevailing Character! (7:1)**

*"Do not judge, or you will be judged."*

I have a radio in my office commonly tuned to a baseball game in the background, as I'm doing something elsewhere in the house. Recently I was helping Holly with the dishes as I heard one of the broadcasters announce, "It was a hard fought battle, but good pitching and timely hitting prevailed." I finished helping Holly and walked into my office to listen to the game recap. My team had taken an early lead and fell behind. They took another lead, holding the opponent scoreless until one of our middle relieving pitchers arrived in the 7th Inning. He allowed a run; a tie game. My team came back in to bottom of the 8th Inning to break the tie. Our manager replaced the middle reliever with a closing pitcher who struck out the side in the 9th to seal the win. Thus the home team "prevailed."

There are a number of ways to win in baseball. You can play a terrible game, the opponent make an error a crucial point, and blow the game. You win, but don't prevail. That was a gift. An opponent might play a brilliant game for eight innings, maintaining a 1-0 game. The home team comes up in the bottom of the ninth with two outs and a runner at first base and hits a home run. The opponent had six hits and we one. We win 2 - 1. In baseball this is called a "walk-off" win. Most announcers would call that lucky.

A baseball team develops character. Over time they will build that character based on how they win or lose games. The teams with “good” character are the teams that win consistently as the “prevailing” club. They may not be the most exciting, but they are the most consistent and, ultimately, the most successful. Statistically they have fewer MVPs on their team, or pitchers with twenty wins; however, you will usually find them near the top of their division in the win/loss column. And, that’s what matters in baseball.

What makes good character in a person? Is it similar to a baseball team that consistently wins without flair, without reliance on thrill of the moment wins? I believe this is so, and I believe that is what Jesus had in mind when He instructed, “Do not judge, or you will be judged.” Character is never summed up in the moment; it is always a sum of many moments of prevailing work and effort, just like a good baseball team. Oswald Chambers put it this way, “Character is made by things done steadily and persistently, not by the exceptional or the outburst.” (Studies on the Sermon on the Mount, 1460 L) So, be careful how you build your character, it will be what other judge you by. You can strive for flair or pursue a prevailing spirit. The first may be exciting, the second a much better way of being known.

**How to?** Strive to live for the day, but not the moment. Moments happen, but you can’t count on them. Days occur; when moments are hard to find!

### **A Favor In Kind! (7:2)**

*“For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”*

Here’s a story: One day two taxidermists stopped in front of a window in which an owl was on display. Being taxidermists both, they looked at each other and the wheels began to turn in their minds, critical wheels. Being professionals in what they did, they decided to apply their criticism to a job done by one of their competitors. They immediately began to criticize the way it was mounted. Its eyes were not natural; its wings were not in proportion with its head; its feathers were not neatly arranged; and its feet could be improved. After finishing this first round of criticism, they launched into another round. The entire pose of the bird is wrong, it should have wings spread, not clamped so tightly to its body. And, see how dusty the bird is? This mount hasn’t been cleaned in quite some time. Finally, after firing volley after volley at the poor bird, they finished with their criticism, turned to each other and winked in satisfaction. Their competitor had been thoroughly and rightfully criticized. It was at this point the old owl slowly turned his head, and winked back at them. (Source unknown).

Criticism. As the old saying goes, it’s easy to criticize. The problem with criticism is that because it is so easy, it is also quite inexpensive. We mete it out without much thought mostly, cheaply and at a price that seemingly costs us little to employ. But, is that true? If we really gave it a lot of thought we’d find out quickly that criticism is one of the dearest of commodities, coming at a very high price to both the giver and the receiver. Normally we don’t worry about the receiver much as long as we, the giver, feel fulfilled in letting go with our jibes and arrows freely. But do we really get away that cheaply? Jesus tells us that we may not be so lucky. He explains that as we give out our criticism, so it will be returned to us in measure. What did He mean by that? When you and I decide to be critical of others we are being watched. If we are shrewd in finding fault with others, this is what becomes a defining characteristic of who we are. People recognize this and, well, return the favor. If we are quick to criticize, we are quick to have the favor returned.

There is a warning in Leviticus 19:17b, “Rebuke your neighbor frankly so that you will not share in his guilt.” This warning is preceded, however, by another warning. “Do not go about spreading slander . . .” (16). When should you

criticize and when not? Ask yourself this: Am I motivated by an earnest desire for the welfare of the person I think needs correcting? Am I going to face him honestly, but gently? Do I find the task disagreeable, or am I secretly getting some pleasure out of it? If you can answer these questions “yes,” be assured others will think well of you and, return the favor in kind. What more can you ask?

**How to?** Remember there is a difference between critical thinking and thinking critically. God wants us to evaluate our criticism in light of what He teaches in Scripture. That means putting some thought into it before we think it!

### **The Gift of Warning! (7:13-14)**

*“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only few find it!”*

I recently took my car to have the oil changed at one of those quick-change, service places. As I settled down in the waiting room for a short wait I noticed the door was open to the service bay area. I was able to observe the several technicians as they did the oil changes. There were three young men working the cars, and a manager watching over the work. One of the technicians appeared to be in training, as the manager spent more time with him than the others. The young man had just removed an oil pan plug and was frantically trying to pull the capture can in place before oil spilled out on the floor. As he reached for the capture can and dropped his wrench the manager appeared and gave him a hand. Picking up the wrench he carefully cleaned it off and handed it back to him. I couldn’t hear what he said, but I watched him gesture toward the capture can as he continued to wipe off the wrench. I assume he had something to say about oily wrenches and pulling capture cans into place before dropping an oil plug. He smiled while he spoke and then handed the tool back to the young man. I was impressed with how unthreatening he was. His warning seemed kind, unthreatening.

As a parent I know that I’ve not always been as loving correcting my children. Sometimes frustration and a lack of patience can turn a kind warning into a looming threat. You know, “If you do that again I’m going to . . .” “Well, fill in the blank. The problem with threats is that they do little to change behavior and often lead to rebellion, even worse. Warnings, on the other hand, are a far more effective way of dealing with behavior that needs to be changed. That young man needed to remember to pull the oil catch can into place before pulling the plug. He needed to remind himself to wipe off his tools as well. When the manager pointed out that failure to do it the right way might lead to future messy spills and unnecessary wear and tear on the tools, he gave that young man an opportunity to grow in his job instead of growing in his anger over a job not done well.

There’s an old saying, “God never threatens and the devil never warns.” How fortunate we are that God is more interested in changing bad behavior than condemning it. That’s the devil’s domain. He accuses and then he condemns. God, on the other hand, is continually warning us through His Word that certain behavior will lead to certain penalty. Avoid the behavior, you will avoid the penalty. Take the right path, and you will find your way to Heaven. How gracious is our God that we need not fear His wrath, because His love is so compelling to teach, to change and to improve. It makes the devil’s threat all the more empty, doesn’t it?

**How to?** Life is full of opportunities to give warnings and heed them as well. There is no place in a Christian’s life for threats however. When you feel you need to threaten always defer to a warning. In the end it will serve both you and the one who may have hurt you.

## Hearts Gripping The Tools! (7:21-22)

*“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles!’”*

My son Dan has always been my right hand. Ever since he was a little guy he was always there to lend a hand. I remember years ago when he told me he could mow the lawn. I trusted him to drive the tractor, and that was one more chore I could rely on him to do. Over the years Dan took over one chore after another for me. After the mowing there was the trash burning; he did that for years. Dan took care of trimming the brush, weed whacking, and pruning the trees when they needed it. If I needed a hand hauling, lifting, building or tearing down, Dan was always there to help. Now Dan has left Beech Springs, probably for good. It was time for him to be on his own. I miss his being here, but knew that someday it would be inevitable. Funny thing is, though, that many of the tools he and I used together are still here. His chainsaw is here along with the air compressor. Many of the tools that he and I used to fix cars, drain oil and maintain things are still in their places; just Dan is gone. It's odd, when I think of the things that need to be done, many of the tools to do them still hang in their rightful places. The work is still doable, as long as the tools are there. Without Dan's hands to hold them, however, work them and put them to the test, it just isn't the same.

Tools are one thing, the workers that use them are another. Either way the work can get done, but someone needs to pick that tool up from the workbench to do it. Recently I had to clean out the water lines on our travel trailer to prepare it for winter storage. To do that I needed to pull out the air compressor and blow out the lines. This is something that Dan would normally have done for me, but now I had to do it on my own. The work got done all the same, but now the chore was mine not Dan's.

God has a full workbench of tools as well. He has preachers and teachers, those who show mercy and those who are generous. The list of tools on His workbench is long and impressive. Any job that needs doing, He has a tool to get it done. The list of spiritual gifts that He invests in you and I is comprehensive; but lest you get hung up on the tools, there is a sobering fact that must be come to grips with. The fact that we have a gift is no more important than Dan's air compressor sitting in the corner of my garage. These are tools. God uses them for His own purposes, but the tools don't make us holy or worthy. They're just tools. It's when we put our hands to the tools in faith and devotion to the jobs those tools are doing, that makes us a part of the holy work being done. Like Dan, God misses us when there's work to be done; but be assured, the work will get done, with or without our own hearts gripping the tools.

**How to?** When you do the Lord's work be sure that your heart and soul are in the work before you do it. Pray that the Lord would bless the work by your hand and that your heart would be lifted up in thanks for the honor of being the tool to do the work.

## The Perfect Tucker! (8:27)

*“The men were amazed and asked, ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!’”*

Here's a story: In 1948 a guy by the name of Tucker designed what many critics today claim was probably one of the best designed cars of all time: the Tucker. The car was rear-engined and rear wheel drive. A perimeter frame surrounded the vehicle for crash protection, as well as a roll bar integrated into the roof. The steering box was behind the front axle to protect the driver in a front-end accident. The instrument panel and all controls were within easy reach of the steering wheel, and the dash was padded for safety. The windshield was made of shatterproof glass and de-

signed to pop out in a collision to protect occupants. The car's parking brake had a separate key so it could be locked in place to prevent theft. The doors extended into the roof, to ease entry and exit. The engine and transmission were mounted on a separate sub frame and the entire drivetrain could be lowered and removed from the car in minutes. In future models Tucker planned to introduce magnesium wheels, disc brakes, fuel injection and self-sealing tubeless tires. The car was years ahead of its time and literally threatened the design of every other car on the road at the time. The perfect car, the Tucker never made it into mass production because auto makers of the day made sure that Tucker was put out of business. He was too creative and the car too innovative to compete with.

When God designed Adam, the first human being, He designed a man that was the perfect design. He was designed to be holy, to live in harmony with God's perfect creation, to literally walk with God speaking with Him face to face. Adam was the epitome of advanced, spiritual design; and, like the Tucker, he drew the interest of the competition, Satan. It didn't take Satan long to plot his evil designs against the godly man that God the Father had designed. Adam possessed wisdom, virtue and integrity, all threats to the lies and deceit of Satan. Adam needed to be stopped, and Satan ended God's innovative plan for a creature who would be the ultimate caretaker for His perfect creation. Satan's plan was to get by, just by being adequate. He duped Adam into believing the lie as well; and Adam never went into production.

Thank God that He wasn't through; He didn't submit to Satan's blackmail as Tucker did to his competitors in 1948. He had a plan for making good on His design and sent Jesus Christ to walk the earth in the manner He had first designed Adam to do. Jesus easily mastered everything that Adam had failed to do, maintaining a steadfast obedience to the Word and will of God. The Tucker never made it to market because of the craftiness of a few. Thank God that the craftiness of one, Satan, was no match for the Perfect Designer of all things, God Himself. So much for the competition? So much!

*How to?* Do you confess your sin every day? God asked us to examine ourselves and confess our shortcomings, our unwillingness to stick to His design for us, daily. But, to do so without recognizing the perfection of Jesus Christ in abiding by that design would be empty indeed. Jesus Christ, better than a Tucker when it comes to quieting the competition.

### **Like Catching a Porcupine! (10:22)**

*"All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved!"*

Are you devoted to taking the hard path in life or the easy path? While most of us are inclined, because of guilt, to say that we would never avoid the hard path if it is the right path, the temptation to swing off the hard path in favor of the easier is always tempting. The fact is, sometimes what seems easier may, in the end, not be the easiest after all.

Here's a story: My family has always enjoyed hiking. Holly and I spent many years on the local Kettle Moraine trails with our kids just hiking up and down the various eskers and dikes that dot the area. There is a network of these trails and one nearby lake hosts one of our favorite esker trails. A number of years ago we were hiking as a family and not really familiar with the several trails that wound around the lake and came to one of those great, trail forks. The Blue Trail went up an esker and down into a deep valley and the Yellow Trail went across a flat, prairie expanse. With a bunch of kids in tow and not knowing exactly how far each fork would take us we chose the Yellow Trail for its easier approach. As it turned out, that was a mistake. It ended up being over a mile longer. The result, crabby children and stressed parents.

I should have opted for the more difficult trail and would have had a more enjoyable hike. Unfortunately, that uphill jaunt over the esker seemed so imposing at the time that it blinded me to the fact that, perhaps, beyond the esker the trail may have become more manageable. Life is often like that. We take a quick glance, draw a quick picture of what we think might happen, and then, JUMP to a conclusion. That reminds me of the story of the old woodsman who knew how to capture those prickly porcupines. He'd give this advice about catching one: "Watch for the slapping tail as you dash in and drop a large washtub over him. The washtub will give you something to sit on while you think about your next move, whatever that might be."

When it comes to choosing a hiking path it's probably always a good idea to figure out which one will work out the best in the long run. However, when it comes to choosing a spiritual path, a way that may take us down the path of ridicule or worse, that shouldn't be the measure. Standing up for Jesus is probably more like trapping a porcupine than anything else. It's likely we'll get pricked by criticism and it probably will be painful. But, like the old woodsman, that's when it's time to plunk down on God's promise that if "we stand firm" despite the pricks and stabs of criticism, He'll figure out a way of getting us through. For the moment, just sitting on the problem may be enough.

*How to?* When you're faced with talking about Jesus, just think of that old Woodsman sitting on that washtub and, perhaps, it will put a smile on your face despite the pain of the criticism.

### **Compelling The Whisper! (10:27)**

*"What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, shout from the roof."*

I use the dark a lot. Because I walk in the dark of the morning most times of the year, I am used to being in, and experiencing the darkness. During the summer months, however, the early morning light makes for a different walking experience altogether. Except that I am able to see things better during the summer, there are some other subtle differences that, when you think about it, are very interesting. For example, I like to speak with God while I walk. This is my morning prayer time, and actually speaking my thoughts out loud is something that I'm accustomed to doing. (I know that there are times when a neighbor might pass by and wonder who Mark is talking with. Nonetheless, conversing with God in the still of the morning is just too comforting and compelling to pass up. I suppose it has something to do with the image of Adam "walking and talking" with God in the cool of the morning.) One thing that I've noticed, however, is that in the summer dawning I tend to speak out loud. When it's dark at other times of the year, however, I tend to whisper as opposed to speaking. You might try this sometime yourself. There's just something about the darkness that compels the whisper and the light that allows the words.

One of the things about darkness is that I believe it not only causes you to become a better listener, it also makes you a more disciplined speaker as well. The darkness hides obstacles, dangers and potential impasses from what the eyes might normally see in the daylight. It is the ears that become the chief guide in the dark. Talking and walking in the dark is never a good idea since your talking might mask the very sounds around you needed to guide you around obstacles and safely home. When we practice listening well, the benefit is we also become better speakers at the right time.

When trials and troubles darken your day God is asking you to listen much and speak little. There is divine guidance waiting there for you in the midst of the darkness, but, interestingly, it may be no more than a whisper. Talk too much, criticize God for His timing, His silence or His chastening, and you may miss the whisper in favor of your own, spirit-troubled words. When life is dark, it's time to listen, and listen intently. When you walk as I do in the

dark of the morning it is difficult to know what you are doing if you are busy talking out loud. The same is true of your walk in times of trouble. Speak too much, occupy yourself with yourself, and you may miss the very pathway God is revealing in His wisdom to lead you back to the light of His grace. The dark times of life compel the whisper. The time to shout, however, is in the day.

*How to?* The art of the whisper is become a lost art. Take note sometime of how many people have lost the ability to whisper. Take time every day to whisper; it's a good skill to have when the dark days of life give you pause to wonder.

### **The Stomach for Christ! (11:12)**

*"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men take hold of it."*

Here's a story: Ten years ago I decided to run for public office. I did my research and discovered what needed to be done in order to get my name on the primary ballot, just months away. There were petitions to circulate in order to collect the hundreds of signatures necessary for nomination. I needed to find volunteers to circulate these and get them back in time for them to be submitted to the State Elections Office. I would need to open a bank account to collect any funds that I was able to raise to help fund the campaign. I would also need a Treasurer and, perhaps, someone to manage the campaign. It took weeks, but I was able to gather a team of volunteers, including a Treasurer and a Campaign Manager. The required signatures were gathered and all the necessary paperwork submitted. I was on my way. That's when I decided it would be a good idea to contact a friend of mine, Glenn, already serving in the State Legislature, to get some valuable input as to what I might expect in the weeks to come, prior to the primary. He obliged and sat down with me to look over my neat stack of petitions and hear what I had done in preparation for the campaign. He smiled and shook his head as I glowed about the great team I had put together and the funds that were already coming in to support my campaign. "That's great Mark, but do you have the stomach for what you're about to do?" I felt the wind slowly slipping from my sails. "Sure." I said. "I think so, but fill me in." He did. Over the course of the next hour or so he poured over what it takes to run and win a legislative, primary campaign. There were the parades to walk, the town hall meetings to attend, the letters to the editor, the door-to-door literature drops and the various civic functions to attend. "And when you have done all these things," He stated matter-of-fact, "Be prepared to do them all over again. Oh, and by the way, there will be glitches with your paperwork and several trips to Madison before you're done. If you can do that and survive, you'll be okay." By the time he left my sails were limp, but I vowed to see it through.

Glenn was accurate. Over the course of the next several months I walked over a hundred miles, wore out a pair of shoes, lost my voice several times, missed a lot of meals and, yes, made more than one trip to Madison to iron out a glitch here and there. The campaign was a great deal of hard work; I made it to the primary and lost. Without a doubt it was one of the most rigorous things I've ever done or will probably do again.

You know, following Christ is no different. You either have the stomach for it or you don't. It's hard work and there are times when you will be disappointed, even discouraged; but you can't go into a life of following Christ unless you're willing to work hard, sweat it through and accept the labors inherent with the job. The one big difference with this campaign though is this: if you put in the work, you WILL win the prize. That makes the effort worth it, don't you think?

**How to?** Work out for Christ. Get in shape spiritually and, importantly, physically. There work is more than just talking, there's walking to do as well.

### **The Crush! (11:28)**

*"Come to me all you who are weary and are burdened, and I will give you rest!"*

Pressure. The crush. It mounts and mounts until you can almost feel the top of your head coming off. Tension breaks into your day; it was going along pretty well, then something went wrong. The next thing you know stress walks right in the door. Perhaps it was criticism that cut you down. It may have been failure that covered you in shame. Maybe it was something as simple as the realization that what you planned just wasn't going to happen. Whatever the case, tension and stress happen quickly, and often linger a long time. We all know the feeling. When tension captures our nervous system the body immediately begins to compensate by speeding up heart rate. The faster rate pumps more blood increasing internal pressures on every organ in the body. The body compensates by increasing and isolating blood flow to the brain. More pressure.

What's a person to do? Some people simply develop very thick skins. They ignore criticism, do an end run around failure, and make it a point not to plan anything, expecting bad things will happen to wreck their plans anyway. Is that how God wants us to handle the inevitable pressures of life?

Jay Kesler makes this point. Take a bathysphere, the miniature submarine used to explore the ocean in places so deep that the water pressure would crush a conventional submarine like an aluminum can. Bathyspheres compensate with plate steel several inches thick, which keeps the water out but also makes them heavy and hard to maneuver. Inside they're not alone. When their lights are turned on and you look through the tiny, thick plate-glass windows, what do you see? Fish! These fish cope with extreme pressure in an entirely different way. They don't build thick skins; they remain supple and free. They compensate for the outside pressure through equal and opposite pressure inside themselves. Christians, likewise, don't have to be hard and thick-skinned—as long as they appropriate God's power within to equal the pressure without. (Jay Kesler.)

Jesus says, "Come to me." When life is poised to crush you, you have two choices. You can try to bear up under the pressure, develop a thick skin, hope for the best and take your chances, or you can step away from the danger, and into a force that is always greater than any pressure that can be brought to bear on you, Jesus Christ. You know something, the weaker and more feeble you are when you come, the more comfort that is waiting. Makes choosing kind of simple after all.

**How to?** When you're running a fever you normally don't wait to take an aspirin. The longer you wait the more difficult it is to bring the fever down. When the crush happens, don't wait to see what will happen, turn to Christ in the moment and not the day.

### **Remembering Dandelions! (12:26)**

*"Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand."*

Recently, as I was walking past the old Airstream parked in our driveway, I saw a glint of light near one of the trailer tires. I reached down to pick up an odd-looking bolt. It had an odd triangular marking on the head and it was a bolt

with a hex-head indentation. That meant it had to be turned with hex wrench; a type of bolt that I seldom-used around Beech Springs. I thought for a moment and then plopped it into my pocket. I'm not sure where I put it but I think it ended up in one of those catchall cans in the back garage. The mystery of the odd bolt was solved, however, the next time Holly and I went camping. As I pulled out the awning, one of the support arms felt right off the awning. That odd bolt I had carelessly tossed into a can would have uniquely fit the missing hole in the awning arm.

Sadly, that's the way we sometimes treat relationships; quick to discard or relegate to storage only to miss the value later.

Here's a thought from Mary Daniel: "How well I remember being taught how and when to pull out the dandelions. But oh, how I loved the fluffy, soft, yet sometimes prickly little yellow 'flowers'. Many are the moms who have received countless beautiful bright bouquets proudly presented from the grip of a tight little fist. How we used to love sitting in a field or on the grass, seeded white fluffy dandelion in hand, taking a big breath and letting it out as we blew it away bit by bit. There was a time too, years later, when some friend's came to visit, and during the course one afternoon, I sauntered off into the field, paring knife and stainless steel bowl in hand, to carefully gather dandelion leaves to be brought home, washed, and made into a delicious salad. Or, once tasted, who could forget the pungent tangy taste of dandelion wine? Yet to most, it's considered a weed. Often, dandelions lie amongst the flowers, so to pull them up, we may also pull up those things which we consider to be more important, or of more value. How like life that is. Often, by finding some things unacceptable, we end up missing out on some things priceless in value." (Mary Daniel)

Life is like a dandelion. There are members of society or life situations that some consider useless; yet others receive them as having been given for a purpose, to learn from, to teach—they are priceless. To remove them or to take them away would cause those lessons to go unlearned; opportunities to help or make changes gone. Just as God gave us the dandelions, He also gives us each person, each situation, and with them, an ability to accept or reject them. When we're faced with what we may consider "weeds" in our life, it's best to clutch those relationships in our hand that we might use them as opposed to putting them in our pockets and losing them.

**How to?** In this ever enveloping electronic age it's good to remember that a letter or a card are still cherished by most people. Get into the habit of writing every now and then. It keeps good friends close and draws old friends closer!

### **Graffiti With Meaning! (14:22-24)**

*"(Jesus) went up on a mountainside by himself to pray."*

Not long ago I had a pretty bad case of the flu. I infrequently get the flu; and in most cases when I do, it's mild and my only symptoms are a headache and, perhaps, a mild fever. However, this time it was the whole "smash," as they say. I had the fever, upset stomach, headache and a bad case of the chills. I think the chills are the worst part of the flu for me. They ebb and flow. After a while you might shake so hard that you get muscle fatigue. They are so unpredictable. One minute you're calm and the next your shaking. I remember laying under the covers, anticipating each round of shakes. After a while all I could do was shake and wait. I could relish the wait or hate the shake. Life can be like that—sunshine then shadow, fortune then sorrow. It's our choice which one we choose to embrace.

Here's a story: Two boys loved carnival rides and the ride advertisement read, "The thrill of your life! No restraints or bars. You will be suspended in midair. A Breathless experience!" "That's for me!" each boy boasted as each put his quarter into the Carney man's hand. The ride was simple enough: You entered a huge, circular room and were told to

stand up against the wall. There were no restraints provided, just the way he liked it. Then the room would start to spin, and the speed would increase until you found yourself, through the force of gravity, “glued” to the wall. Once you were “trapped,” the floor would move out from under you, leaving you swirling around at amazing speeds, stuck to the wall with nothing under your feet. It wasn’t long before the boys started to spin and spin. When the floor dropped and they pinned to the wall, one boy’s face suddenly grew pale and only one thought filled his mind. “When will it stop. I can’t breathe. When will it stop?” The other little boy laughed and cheered, unable to hear his friend’s pleas. They both survived—the one laughing from his belly, the other choking in his stomach. (Author unknown)

Isn’t life often as frantic? As this life spins faster and faster, dizziness becomes your constant companion. At first, as things get going, you think that you just might have a chance of weathering the ride. But as one problem slams into another, things get going faster and the ride gets more rough. At this point your only thought is stopping life and getting off. Where is God when you need to get off the ride? You cry out, “Will it ever stop?” The Bible tells us “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14: 26-27). You have a choice to make: Enjoy the ride and wait for God’s peace that’s sure to follow, or let the ride shake and nauseate you. It’s a matter of which one you choose to relish, the shake or the wait.

**How to?** Try spinning around every now and then and reach out to steady yourself on something solid. It will help to remind yourself of the steady and solid force of God in every Christian’s life.

#### **How to Git All You Can Hold! (14:29)**

*“Come, he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.”*

First impressions are important; however, they can be misleading, especially when it comes to making judgements based on trust. A number of years ago Holly and I were visiting the Picture Rocks National Lakeshore in Upper Michigan. The shore of Lake Superior is lined with sheer, beautiful cliffs of sandstone and there are many overlook sites along the lakeshore drive. One site near Munising is built out over the crashing waves nearly one hundred feet below. The first time you step out on the platform there is a distinct feeling of being suspended out over the lake, especially since the base of the lookout is made of that wrought iron grating that allows you to see right down below you. Obviously the platform must be safe or it wouldn’t be there. Nonetheless, my first impression was, will it hold me and Holly and how safe is it? If I went with my first impression, I wouldn’t have stepped on it. Instead, I decided to trust that the supports underneath that platform were secure as advertised, safe and able to hold me.

First impressions are powerful and sometimes difficult to overcome, especially if you’re the cautious type. When it comes to faith, however, first impressions based on caution can actually be hazardous, let alone foolish. That reminds me of this old, desert chronicle: The following letter was found in a baking-powder can wired to the handle of an old pump that offered the only hope of drinking water on a very long and seldom-used trail across Nevada’s Amargosa Desert: “This pump is all right as of June 1932. I put a new sucker washer into it and it ought to last five years. But the washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water, out of the sun and cork end up. There’s enough water in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour about one-fourth and let her soak to wet the leather. Then pour in the rest medium fast and pump like crazy. You’ll git water. The well has never run dry. Have faith. When you git watered up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller. (signed) Desert Pete. P.S. Don’t go drinking the water first. Prime the pump with it and you’ll git all you can hold.” (Keith Miller and Bruce Larson, *The Edge of Adventure*.)

If that desert wanderer were to focus on thirst, the first, cautious impression of need, the results would be disastrous not only for him but for others. Stepping out in faith means trusting that even though you can't see the results of that trust, you just need to place your foot of faith out into the unknown anyway. Faith is not an intelligent understanding, it is a commitment to an understanding we can't see but know we have to believe.

**How to?** Walking in the dark is good practice from time to time. Take a walk around your house sometime with the lights out. You will bump into a few things, but trusting that your understanding of the way will be good enough in the end, will get you through. That's called faith.

### **Sentry With No Post! (15:14)**

*"Leave them; they are blind guide. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."*

Last night as I went to let the dogs in and turn off the lights on the back deck, I was met with a cascade of tiny white moths circling around the porch light. Did you every wonder why moths are attracted to light? When little Frodo and Sammy had made their way in and the door was shut, I decided to "google" that. As it turns out, moths typically are active after nightfall as they search for food and mates. Although we don't know everything about moth navigation, we do know that they use the stars and moon as navigation tools, keeping on track by using a light point as reference. I thought to myself, "If those moths are trying to get somewhere, porch lights weren't a good choice. I went back out to the porch and turned the light on again. In a matter of moments the misdirected travelers and hunters had returned. Those moths were looking for something they would never find; but that didn't stop them from wasting the energy trying to get there. Sometimes you and I are no better, chasing after blessings that God has said, "No!" to long ago.

Here's a story: In his book, "Mind Your Own Business," Murray Raphel shares the following story. "Years ago, in Russia, a czar came upon a lonely sentry standing at attention in a secluded corner of the palace garden. 'What are your guarding,' asked the czar? 'I don't know. The captain ordered me to this post,' the sentry replied. "The czar called the captain. His answer: 'Written regulations specify a guard was to be assigned to that area.' The czar ordered a search to find out why. The archives finally yielded the reason. Years before, Catherine the Great had planted a rose bush in that corner. She ordered a sentry to protect it for that evening. "One hundred years later, sentries were still guarding the now barren spot." (Author unknown. If anyone has a proprietary interest in this story please authenticate and I will be happy to credit, or remove, as the circumstances dictate.)

Unfortunately moths fail to comprehend the concept of artificial lighting. Because they've mistaken a dead end street for a highway, they never get where they long to go. Fortunately for you and I, God has given us the ability to discern such things. At least, we ought to be able to do that; but when, whether out of stubbornness or habit, we flutter around pursuing things in this life that God has said, "No!" to, we only end up getting hurt or never achieving the potential God has ordained for us to achieve. Are you guarding dreams that have long since vanished? Perhaps you're guarding dead space and nothing more. Dreams are great things but often God blesses us in ways we can't see. Don't flutter around dreams that you haven't entrusted first to God. Dreams that are not blessed are dreams that are empty and fleeting. They really aren't there at all!

**How to?** What are you pursuing today? Really, ask yourself today what your goal for the day is. Do this every day and your spiritual eyes will sharpen and you'll avoid going down blind path that lead only to destruction!

## Complicating the Simple! (16:1-4)

*“The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.”*

It's been said that there are “two types of people: those who simplify the complicated and those that complicate the simple.” Here's a case in point. Late last winter our postal delivery person decided that our mail had to be delivered to the house as opposed to leaving it in the box up on the road. She drove down our driveway and made the handoff. She then continued to backup in front of our garage but misjudged the snow pile bordering the driveway. She backed into that. I waved at her and motioned that she could just pull forward and go around the turnaround in our driveway and out. For some reason she insisted on trying to try again and back into the same direction. Despite the fact that the circle drive would have allowed her to simply drive forward, she was bent on doing it the hard way. She backed into the snow again, got stuck momentarily, and then continued to get her truck turned around and out.

She worked hard at complicating the simple; and, I believe, she succeeded. Perhaps this is what our lives look like to the God when He shows us how to live but we're busy living it our way. He's looking at a clearly laid out path while at the same time watching us drive in all directions but the one He is pointing to.

Here's a story: If you put a buzzard in a pen six or eight feet square and entirely open at the top, the bird, in spite of his ability to fly, will be an absolute prisoner. The reason is that a buzzard always begins a flight from the ground with a run of ten or twelve feet. Without space to run, as is his habit, he will not even attempt to fly, but will remain a prisoner for life in a small jail with no top. The ordinary bat that flies around at night can't take off from a level place. If it is placed on the floor or flat ground, all it can do is shuffle about helplessly. Then, at once, it takes off like a flash. A bumblebee, if dropped into an open tumbler will be there until it dies unless it is taken out. It never sees the means of escape at the top, but persists in trying to find some way out through the sides near the bottom. It will seek a way where none exists, until it completely destroys itself. (Author unknown.)

In many ways, there are many people like the buzzard, the bat and the bee. They struggle about with all their problems and frustrations, not realizing that if they look up, they'll find the answer. God's message to us is simple. “Deny ourselves and follow Him.” It's the right way and it's the best way. But, like that postal carrier, we often are so focused on the way we think we need to go, that we fail to see the way that God has revealed would be the best way to go. Don't complicate the simple. Take every opportunity to see how simple knowing Jesus is. Simplify!

**How to?** Every morning as you and I pull out of bed Satan is there with one reminder: Life is difficult and there is much to do. Don't trust in a simple solution, look for the the hard way out. “If it hard, it must be right?” Not. It's a good idea to start every day with this mantra: Simplify . . . simplify!

## Love's Breaking Point? (22: 39)

*“Love your neighbor as yourself.”*

Do you consider yourself an extreme person? People given to extremes tend to push the edge and, normally, bargain for just a little bit more than they can handle. Push far enough and, as the old adage goes, “The breaking point happens at the point of no return.” I was thinking about this the other day as I was fixing a loose nut on my snow thrower shoot. I'm one of those guys given to tightening things as tightly as I can. It is my habit to apply as much torque as possible to make absolutely sure that a particular nut won't come loose again. It doesn't matter that nuts and bolts

have a tolerance factor designed into them; I just keep tightening things until, well, sometimes they break. It did—so much for extremes.

What about love? Like that nut or bolt, is there a point of no return; a place where too much love can become a detriment? Can too much love backfire?

Here's a story: In September 1992, Jack Kelley, foreign affairs editor for USA Today, witnessed firsthand the famine in Somalia. One particular starving boy touched Kelley: "Our photographer had a grapefruit, which he gave to the boy. The boy was so weak he didn't have the strength to hold the grapefruit, so we cut it in half and gave it to him. He picked it up, looked at us as if to say thanks, and began to walk back towards his village. We walked behind him in a way that he couldn't see us. When he entered the village, there on the ground was a little boy who I thought was dead. His eyes were completely glazed over. It turned out that this was his younger brother. The older brother kneeled down next to his younger brother, bit off a piece of the grapefruit, and chewed it. Then he opened up his younger brother's mouth, put the grapefruit in, and worked his brother's jaw up and down. We learned that the older brother had been doing that for the younger brother for two weeks. A couple days later the older brother died of malnutrition, and the younger brother lived. I remember driving home that night thinking, I wonder if this is what Jesus meant when he said, "There is no greater love than to lay down our life for somebody else.'" (Peter Kennedy, ©2002)

Do you love others as yourself? How about more than yourself? Mother Teresa wrote: "I have found that if I love until it hurts, then there is no more hurt, but only more love." Unlike that nut on my snow thrower, God designed people to handle extreme love. There is no breaking point when it comes to applying all the love we can. Today would be a great day to find someone who needs your love. Jump in and give it all you can. The great thing about love is that it has no tolerance limit for your personal torque; you'll never exceed God's specifications for applying love. He designed it that way.

**How to?** Examine your love regularly. Do you put the love owed you before the love you owe others? How about pardon? Do you make it a point to offer forgiveness before you seek it? Putting others first will help you to love your neighbor as yourself.

### **The Talent Show! (25: 14-30)**

*"And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

My Grandpa Leo always told me: "The reason we don't get more done in life is because we don't think we can do it in the first place." So, years ago, before Holly and I moved to Beech Springs, we owned a small bungalow in a nearby town. The house needed more bedroom space and another bathroom. We looked at remodeling costs and decided that there was only one way we could get the job done; I needed to do it myself. The job entailed removing the old roof, building a dormer and closing everything up before winter. I had never done a job like that before and wasn't sure if I had the skills. Nonetheless, after doing the research at the library, and remembering Grandpa Leo's advice, I decided to do it. It worked and I never looked back.

Often we feel that, because we don't have "enough" talent, we shouldn't try first. Here's a story: Once there was a talent show at a local hall. The first contestant played a saxophone solo. It was so brilliant that the audience cheered wildly and gave him a standing ovation. Shortly after he walked off the stage, a very prominent individual in the music industry offered the player a recording contract, and a chance to play with some of his jazz heroes. The second

contestant read a poem she wrote. The words and the way she read those words moved some people to tears. When she was done, the audience cheered enthusiastically. Shortly after she walked off the stage, she was offered a position writing poetry for the local newspaper writing, with an opportunity to publish more of her work. The third contestant walked out to the stage carrying a guitar. "Well," he stammered, "I had thought I would play this guitar my father gave me. But there are other players so much better than me, so I didn't put anything together." The crowd fell silent. Shortly after he walked off the stage, his father seized the guitar and gave it to the saxophone player saying, "Take this and use it so that others may hear the music this instrument makes." (Author Unknown)

How often do we feel like the third contestant? Perhaps you're feeling like you have a talent for something, but you're not sure if you are talented enough. Have you ever thought about where your talents come from? God knows our potential better than we do! He gives us an abundance of talents because He loves us enough to trust us with them. It is up to us to use those talents. Otherwise, like the father of the guitarist in the story, He will take our talents away from us and give them to someone else who will use them. So let's use our talents proudly, toward eternal ends, trusting in God who gave us those talents. Not enough talent is never a reason for not discovering your true potential.

**How to?** Take inventory of your talents regularly and note whether or not you are using them to God's glory!

### **Going Nowhere! (28: 18)**

*"Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.'"*

Both Holly and I have recliner, rocking chairs. We like to sit in the evening, chat and go over the day's events while rocking back and forth. Yesterday evening, as we were talking and rocking, it occurred to me how much energy went into pushing that rocker back and forth. Whether it is Holly pushing off with one foot or me with both, over the course of an hour or so we collectively put a lot of energy into making sure those rockers keep going. Although we cover a great deal of ground discussing the day's happenings, it also occurred to me that we don't go anywhere. Rocking always brings you back to the same place you were, despite the amount of energy or effort you put into it.

Are you a worrier? To some degree we all do it. There are those who fall deeply into it and others that step lightly over it. Nonetheless, worry is probably a part of every Christian's day to some extent. You know, worrying is very much like those recliner rockers. You can pump hard or lightly, one foot or two, for a moment or an hour, but the result is always the same; you don't get anywhere. You always end up where you started. Worry is no different. You can worry deeply or lightly, the result will still be nothing. In a way it's kind of like when Holly decides that she is going to cook extra food for a family get-together. Whether you cook just enough or more than you need, people will still eat the same amount. The extravagance of more food or the economy of just enough will not affect anyone's appetite. Worry is fear's extravagance. It extracts interest on trouble before it comes due. It constantly drains the energy God gives us to face daily problems and to fulfill our many responsibilities. It is a sinful waste because it results in nothing. It's been said that, "Worry is faith in the negative, trust in the unpleasant, assurance of disaster and belief in defeat. Worry is wasting today's time to clutter up tomorrow's opportunities with yesterday's troubles." (Source unknown)

The Bible tells us that, "All power is given to Jesus Christ" (Matthew 28:18). If He's been given ALL power, reason and faith certainly would dictate that you and I have none with which to control our lives. Jesus has been given the authority and power to take our bad situations, our hopeless causes and our terrible messes, and fix them. We have

no right to make claim on His power; God has not given us the privilege. In fact, we insult Jesus when we worry at all, as God has assured us that Jesus has all things under control. If you're compelled to worry out of habit or, perhaps, because you enjoy it, remember, the more energy you put into it, the less you'll accomplish. In the end the problem will still be there. Only time and opportunity will have passed— without you.

**How to?** My old friend Alice Leedy Mason, now long with the Lord, was in the habit of exclaiming, "Praise the Lord!" every time something went wrong in the course of her day. I don't think she carried any of Jesus's burdens for Him; she never would have insulted our Lord that way.

## Mark

### Seek The Giver! (1:35)

*"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went to a solitary place!"*

One of the sad consequences of a society so focused on itself is that the very character of a people changes over time. One gauge of character has always been the ability to show gratitude. Why has a sense of gratitude seemingly begun to disappear from society? The reason is very simple; the more we show gratitude to one another, the less the focus is on us. When we give thanks away we transfer importance, honor and grace to someone else. Those things have to come from somewhere and they come from the giver. So much for gratitude.

Selfishness stifles gratitude and selfishness is nothing new; its been around a very long time, ever since Adam blamed Eve for his sin.

Here's a story: In 1860, a ship went aground on the shore of Lake Michigan near Evanston, and a nearby observer, Edward Spencer, taking note of the ship's plight and imminent danger to all on board, waded into the water and swam out to the ship. He grabbed a passenger and then swam back to shore. To the astonishment of the ship's captain, he went right back into the frigid waters and swam out to the ship again. This he repeated sixteen times until everyone was safe on shore. In the end, all 17 passengers were rescued by this one man. Unfortunately in the process, Spencer's health was permanently damaged. For years he suffered from recurring bouts of pneumonia. Some years later at his funeral, a reporter from the Chicago Tribune, remembering Spencer's heroic story from years past, attended. The reporter was astonished by the small handful of people attending. He noted, in a story that appeared in the paper the next day, that "not one of the people he rescued" had showed up. Talking with Spencer's widow, he was further astonished that not one of those saved ever thanked him personally at all. (Source Unknown.)

When things go well for you and I, when we benefit from things that others have done for us, or God, in His grace, has simply poured out His love all over us, what is our first reaction? Human nature as it is will often make us turn inward to examine what we've done to merit the gift. "What makes US special that we have such good fortune?" How sad. Funny how when our day goes badly we often turn to the Lord in pleading. Yet, when our day goes well, we pat ourselves on the back. Jesus had good days and bad ones, just like you and I. One thing He always did was to never forget to give God the glory for the good days. His first thought was about the Giver and not Himself. Having a good day today? Look upward; that's where good days come from.

**How to?** The Lord's angels are always busy gathering up our pleas and begging and laying them at our Father's feet. May we never forget that, despite the fact that our prayers of need are always considered with grace, our prayers of thanksgiving smell O sweet.

### **I Want It Now! (4:19)**

*“... but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful!”*

“I want it now!” There’s a commercial on TV from a company that advertises trust settlements—now. The nature of a trust involves rules governing the trust and typically involves a waiting period until that trust becomes available based on those rules. This company, however, promises that it has a way of getting around those rules and you CAN “get it now!” Anything wrong with that? It might be arguable that being able to “get it now” beats “getting it later.” What bothers me is that this company preys on the lustful side of human nature. Wanting things right now is about lust and not about need; and when we get caught up in lust, it’s easy to become blind to everything else.

Here’s a story: There once was a king, grossly overweight. After a violent quarrel with his younger brother, the brother led a successful revolt against him. He captured the king, but did not kill him. Instead, he built a room around him in his castle and promised him he could regain his title and property as soon as he was able to leave the room. This would not have been difficult for most people since the room had several windows and a door of near-normal size, and none was locked or barred. The problem was the king’s size. To regain his freedom, he needed to lose weight. But the brother knew his older brother, and each day he sent a variety of delicious foods. Instead of dieting his way out of prison, the king grew fatter. When the brother was accused of cruelty, he had a ready answer: “My brother is not a prisoner. He may leave when he so wills.” The king stayed in that room for the rest of his life and wasn’t released until he died . . . a prisoner of his own appetite. (Source Unknown)

When we find ourselves saying, “I need it now. It can’t wait,” we’re probably dealing with lust. God’s Word tells us that the worst thing about lust is that it has a preoccupying ability to rule our thoughts to the point where nothing else matters. Even good things like our own physical or spiritual health will take a back seat to the lust for things right now. God’s grace is all about waiting on God, demanding nothing and expecting everything. God grace is His unmerited love that He freely gives to all who ask. His only requirement for fulfilling that grace is that we are willing to be patient in the timing. Lust blocks grace because it demands fulfillment now, and will not wait. An unwillingness to wait serves to choke the work of grace that God plants in each of us daily. It’s a work that requires patient nurturing to insure daily growth. Want it now? Why not ask God first whether your want is His will. There’s no need to become a prisoner of your own lust when the door is always open to him who waits.

**How to?** Keep a list of needs and constantly check it against your list of things you’ve brought to God in prayer. You’ll find it easier to wait when you know God has His hand on the door to your happiness.

### **Followup Love! (5:43)**

*“... (he) told them to give her something to eat.”*

I remember having a bad case of pneumonia as a little boy. I was so sick, so congested and hurting, that I wasn’t even able to lay down at night to sleep. My lungs hurt and I was running a fever. My Mom took good care of me during my sickness. She took me to see a doctor and made sure that I had the right medicines. She fed me soup and kept me hydrated. She did everything that a Mom should do to make sure that her child would get better. She ran a calming humidifier in my room to keep the air clean and medicated. My meals were served in bed and Mom checked on me during the night to see that I was doing well. Eventually I got better and returned to school and all of my usual activities. Looking back on the illness now, after decades, though, the thing that I remember most vividly was her insis-

tence on fluffing the pillows that propped me up in bed. It was a simple thing, but it was all about love and giving me something more than I needed to get better. I like to call that followup love. It's love that follows love; it adds something extra that makes the first love even more meaningful.

Here's a story: A little boy was eagerly looking forward to the birthday party of a friend who lived only a few blocks away. When the day finally arrived, a blizzard made the sidewalks and roads nearly impassable. The boy's father, sensing the danger, hesitated to let his son go. The youngster reacted tearfully. "But Dad," he pleaded, "all the other kids will be there. Their parents are letting them go." The father thought for a moment, then replied softly, "All right, you may go." Surprised but overjoyed, the boy bundled up and plunged into the raging storm. The driving snow made visibility almost impossible, and it took him more than half an hour to trudge the short distance to the party. As he rang the doorbell, he turned briefly to look out into the storm. His eye caught the shadow of a retreating figure. It was his father. He had followed his son's every step to make sure he arrived safely. (Source Unknown.)

I like to think that this is the way that God cares for you and I. Sure, He provides daily bread and protection. He cares for us in the first order of love by making sure that we are amply provided for and securely protected. Our God does more than this, though; He shadows us with His followup love by adding love to love. He adds bounty to the daily bread and comfort to the protection. We sense this added love, but often don't grasp it fully, almost like my sense of the fluffed pillows now, over fifty years later. We often hear about Christian joy; but in the end, isn't this the source of all joy, both the unmerited first love and the fluffing up love of that which secretly follows the first?

**How to?** When God blesses you with His grace be prepared for the fluffing that may follow. It's that second love that's so satisfying and memorable. Try not to miss it.

### **Just Walking on Water! (6:48b)**

*“... About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake.”*

Are you goal oriented? Every day as I sit down to work in my office here at Beech Springs, I a calendar on my laptop. It lays out all my goals for the day; goals that I've preset for myself the previous day at work's end. In colorful order each day's task is laid out with an expected time of completion. That's efficient and I'd find it very difficult to take on all the tasks of the day without my calendar. Yesterday, as I was finishing up work for the day and deleting the very last task on my calendar, I sat back with a sigh and thought, "A job well done; you did everything that you set out to do!" But, did I? I had completed the work; that was obvious, but the better question was, "How" had I done it? Did I skip over tasks, thoroughly complete them, treat every task with a sense of importance, and honestly done the best job I could? Or, was the goal of completion more important than the process of getting done?

Here's a story: Many years ago when I was a student in college I happened to see a bit of graffiti scrawled on the sidewalk in front of the library entrance. I stopped to look thinking it was some pressing bit of political thought, as it was an election year. The graffiti, however, had nothing to do with politics and everything to do with a philosophy of life (although I doubt that the artist had that has his or her intention). It read: "E = MC<sup>2</sup> – Albert Einstein." Directly underneath the chalk inscription it read: "Very good, Albert, but next time show your work. C+." I laughed but then it struck me how deeply meaningful this bit of student sarcasm was. Most of us know the famous equation, energy is equal to mass times the speed of light squared. It's so well known, in fact, that we kind of throw it around as a scientific euphemism of sorts. Nonetheless, the graffiti artist had made a point, however unknowingly, that the process of getting to that famous theorem for explaining relativity was far more important than the equation itself.

Process. The Bible tells us that Jesus walked on the water. It's a great story and one of my favorite parts of Scripture. Think about it though. Where was Jesus going? Was He headed to the other end of the lake? Did He have a particular end in sight or was He simply going on with calm and certitude toward an end that needed to be finished with calm and a resolute spirit? I don't believe He had a shoreline or goal in sight. He was just walking, walking on water and doing it well. I believe that's what God calls us to do every day, to continue with our lives with honesty, integrity and a resolute will to finish things well. It's the process not the goals that make a difference in a Christian's life. In that sense every day is another opportunity to live life well, simply walk on the water, and leave the goals to God.

*How to?* Walking on the water seems impossible, doesn't it? However, when you consider all the things that can come between you and just finishing your day in one piece, walking on the water doesn't seem all that impossible after all. It's a miracle just making it from one day to the next. Consider your life this way and the process will become far more meaningful than the goal.

### **Amazing! (7:37)**

*"People were overwhelmed with amazement. 'He has done everything well,' they said. 'He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.'"*

Wow! With the recent introduction of Apple's I-Phone the price per share of Apple stock has risen to over \$700 per share. That's amazing for a company that was on the edge of bankruptcy within the last twenty years or so. Some analysts are predicting that a share of Apple stock might surpass the \$900 mark by sometime next year. Again, amazing. What started out as a garage project for a couple of guys less than forty years ago has now become the fastest growing company in the world. The value of Apple's stock exceeds the gross domestic product of dozens of countries around the world. When I was just getting into computing back in the early 1980s I could have bought a share of Apple stock for a few dollars. One hundred shares of Apple stock bought for a few hundred dollars a little over thirty years ago would now be worth over \$70,000! As I look back at that missed opportunity I can only sigh and wish; but, as the old saying goes, "If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride!"

Wishing about Apple stock is a useless exercise. It's interesting to be amazed at what Apple has done, it's far better to lose the amazement, however, and try to figure out a way to buy the stock. Similarly, we can be amazed at what God has done for us. That's cool. Nonetheless, it makes more sense to drop the amazement and investigate how we can turn our awe into serving Him.

Here's a story: A young boy, on an errand for his mother, had just bought a dozen eggs. Walking out of the store, he tripped and dropped the sack. All the eggs broke, and the sidewalk was a mess. He tried not to cry, but it was useless; the tears ran and he sobbed out loud. A few people gathered to see if he was OK and to tell him how sorry they were. In the midst of the works of pity, one man handed the boy a quarter. Then he turned to the group and said, "I care 25 cents worth. How much do the rest of you care?" Words don't mean much if we have the ability to do more. (Stanley C. Brown.)

God is amazing and the things that He does for us and despite us are truly amazing. It's easy to get caught up offering words of praise to honor Him and then going on with our lives. "God be praised!" "To God be the glory!" Certainly God desires our praise; but praise and thanksgiving without works of faith to demonstrate our amazement and thanksgiving is empty. Every day you and I have the opportunity to witness firsthand how God delivers, heals, sustains and answers prayers; truly amazing. Now, when we are done being amazed, the time has come to get on our "spiritual horses" and ride. Not doing makes us spiritual beggars; doing makes us spiritual Sons of the Living God.

*How to?* It's good to stand in awe of what God has done and is doing in your life daily. When you are done being still in the moment remind yourself that quiet time was always meant to be followed by something more.

### **In The Balance! (8:35)**

*"For whoever wants to save this life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."*

It felt good to be alive this morning. As I took my morning walk and slowly made my way up the hill toward the rising sun I thought, "Life is so valuable. I'm thankful to be alive and able to see this beautiful sunrise." I found myself thinking, "Have I ever been more thankful for my life than this moment?" I have a beautiful wife, children, a home, employment and friends. It doesn't get better than this I continued to muse. Then it struck me; I do remember a time in my life when I was ever more thankful for being alive than that moment on top of the hill. Years ago I was in a terrible car crash. Although my car exploded in flames, I made it out without getting burned. As I sat in the squad car that morning I remember watching my car burn and thinking, "Boy, I am thankful to be alive!"

The car accident brought me closer to an understanding of what it means to be living because, for that moment, I was stripped of everything else; my very life had been in the balance and wife, family, jobs and friends weren't a part of the equation at the moment. It was only my very life that mattered. Possessions didn't figure in at all.

Here's a thought from Marjorie Holmes: "Lord, help me to realize how futile is this passion for possessions. Because one of my best friends died today in the very midst of her possessions. She was in the beautiful home she and her husband worked so hard to achieve, the home that was finally furnished the way she wanted it with the best of everything. She was surrounded by the Oriental rugs she was so proud of, the formal French sofas, the painting, the china and glass, the handsome silver service. She had been snatched away while silently, almost cruelly, THEY remain. Lord, I grieve for my friend. She had so little time to enjoy the things that meant so much to her. But let me learn something from this loss; that possessions are meant to enhance life, not to become the main focus of living. Help me remember that we come into the world with nothing and we leave with nothing. (Marjorie Holmes.)

You and I DO come into the world with nothing, and the closest we come to that "nothingness" is that chance moment in life when all of our possessions become meaningless because our very life is in the balance. I know, I am a cancer survivor as well as a survivor of a horrific car accident. There comes a time in each of our lives when the only way to see what an enormous value our life is, is when all that we possess hangs without meaning in the balance of life. Perhaps it is a good thing to discover "nothingness" from time to time in our lives. How else would we ever discover the true value of God's greatest gift, our very lives.

*How to?* Picture your life without any possessions. Yes, it's scary, even nearly impossible to do. Nonetheless, if you make it your practice to imagine it often, how much more you will value the day, the very moment, each a gift without measure from above.

### **Needless Trouble! (9:23)**

*"Everything is possible for him who believes."*

We've all seen the movie, "The Wizard of Oz." There's that famous scene near the end of the movie where Dorothy, desperate to return home to Kansas, is told by the Good Witch of the North, "Everything is possible if you believe. Just click your ruby slippers together and say, "There's no place like home!" As a kid that part of the movie always

sent a shiver up my spine. Dorothy was about to get home after so much trouble and plotting. The whole movie was about her getting there. The complicated plot involved witch's brooms, Yellow Brick Roads, flying monkeys, spells and near-disaster experiences. In the end, however, it came down to the simple, not the plotting. Just believe and touch those slippers together. The power to get home had been her's all along. Of course, that was the theme of the movie, and that's what made it fun to watch. It was a good feeling to know that believing resulted in arriving where we needed to go.

Are you striving to get somewhere in life? Heaven, perhaps? It's easy to get stuck on the Yellow Brick Road, seemingly getting nowhere no matter how hard we try to follow the path. Is the key to getting there as simple as Dorothy's ruby slippers? Is the power to find our way home as easy as believing?

Here's a story: There once was a young missionary who had been assigned a car that would not start without a push. After pondering his problem, he devised a plan. He went to the school near his home, got permission to take some children out of class, and had them push his car off. As he made his rounds, he would either park on a hill or leave the engine running. He used this ingenious procedure for two years. When a new missionary came to that station, the young, mechanically challenged, missionary proudly began to explain his arrangement for getting the car started. The new man began looking under the hood. Before the explanation was complete, he interrupted, "Why, my friend, I believe the only trouble is this loose cable." He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, turned the switch, and to the young missionary's astonishment, the engine roared to life. For two years needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time. Only a loose connection kept him from putting that power to work. (Source unknown.)

Jesus tells us that, "Everything is possible for him who believes." Was He just talking about Himself, or were you and I included? He meant you and I. He put us on His level if only we were willing to believe that even the impossible was possible for a believer in Christ. God empowers us in Christ to get home, our Heavenly Home. All we need to do is believe and repeat these words, "There's no place like Heaven, there's no place like Heaven." Welcome home!

### **The Tail of Truth and The Tongue of Love! (9:50)**

*"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."*

Are you a great lover? I'm not talking about a Rudolf Valentino or a Clarke Gable. I mean, we all possess love in some quantity. Yet, it isn't the possession that matters but the use. How do we choose to use the love that God has placed in our hearts? Some guard it and protect it from the hurt others might cause; others freely give it without stopping to understand the gift or with whom they are sharing it. Sometimes I think that dogs have a better handle on how to use love than we do. A dog watches its owner, waiting for a command or a signal that draws out a wagging tail. Once the moment is right, the tail wags and the tongue licks. Dogs combine obedience and love into a package of behavior that both promotes affection and prevents misbehavior. We could learn from that. We need to understand that love alone is worthless without truth, and truth is worthless without love. Combining them is key to blessing others with the love God gives us.

Here's a thought: Sodium is an extremely active element found naturally only in combined form; it always links itself to another element. Chlorine, on the other hand, is the poisonous gas that gives bleach its offensive odor. When sodium and chlorine are combined, the result is sodium chloride, common table salt; the substance we use to preserve meat and bring out its flavor. Love and truth can be like sodium and chlorine. Love without truth is unpredictable, even blind, sometimes taking us places we shouldn't go. On the other hand, truth by itself can be offensive, even poi-

sonous. Spoken without love, it can turn people away from the truth we are trying to give. When truth and love are combined in a human heart, however, then we have what Jesus called “the salt of the earth,” and we’re able to preserve and bring out the beauty of our faith. (Source Unknown.)

Jesus tells us that we must have “salt in” ourselves to “be at peace with each other.” What does that mean? It means that we need to first combine some spiritual ingredients within our hearts to give ourselves to family, friends, even our enemies, in peace. First, we need to have faith in and understand God’s promise to love us. This is the “sodium” of truth. It’s the truth of God’s Word. That’s the first, and most important ingredient. Next, we need to be willing to both share that faith with others while possessing a willingness to make a difference in a world bent on hating, destroying and blocking the love of God. This is the “chloride” of love. Separately, neither is effective, even safe. If a dog can figure it out, so can we. Make it your passion to possess the “tail of truth” and the “tongue of love.” Become a great lover by possessing the most powerful force on the face of the earth, truth and love combined.

**How to?** The wallpaper on my laptop is a picture of one of the faithful dogs that Holly and I have owned over the years. Keeping pictures of pets is more than just a fetish of pet lovers, it’s a way of reminding ourselves of the need to always be mindful of how to use the love that God has freely given each of us in His grace.

### **Moving Mountains! (11:23)**

*“I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.”*

Moved any mountains lately? The Bible tells us that all we need to be able to move the mountains in our lives is to believe, plain and simple. Jesus told His disciples, “If anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him” (Mark 11:23). So, how about the mountains in your life? Perhaps you’re facing financial hardship with no way out; or battling the darkness of loneliness, and no friends to help. For some it might be sickness, or the loss of a loved one. Sometimes these seem impossible mountains to move. Yet Jesus plainly tells us that even these, are, in fact, movable. How? Do you and I have the power to make it happen, or is what Jesus is telling us is imagery or “feel good” teaching?

Here’s a thought from an unknown poet: Lord, I’ve never moved a mountain and I guess I never will. All the faith that I could muster wouldn’t move a small ant hill. Yet I’ll tell you, Lord, I’m grateful for the joy of knowing Thee, and for all the mountain moving down through life You’ve done for me. When I needed some help you lifted me from the depths of great despair. And when burdens, pain and sorrow have been more than I can bear, you have always been my courage to restore life’s troubled sea, and to move these little mountains that have looked so big to me. Many times when I’ve had problems and when bills I’ve had to pay, and the worries and the heartaches just kept mounting every day, Lord, I don’t know how you did it. Can’t explain the wheres or whys. All I know, I’ve seen these mountains turn to blessings in disguise. No, I’ve never moved a mountain, for my faith is far too small. Yet, I thank you, Lord of Heaven, you have always heard my call. And as long as there are mountains in my life, I’ll have no fear, for the mountain-moving Jesus is my strength and always near. (Source Unknown.)

To be honest, I haven’t moved any mountains lately either. As I look up from these thoughts I see a range of mountains: cancer, bills, family and friends that I miss—now with the Lord, and more work than I feel I can accomplish without help. Nevertheless, these are the same mountains that were there yesterday and will probably be there tomorrow. You see, I believe that Jesus has moved these mountains in my life, day to day, and will continue moving them just like chess pieces on a board. All I need is to believe He will do this. I keep moving forward and the moun-

tains continue to recede into the distance. They will never bury me, and I will never move them into the sea; but, I know someone who can and will, Jesus. It's more than imagery, it's reality; you just need to believe.

**How to?** It there a hill or climbable mountain in your area. It really doesn't matter the height. Put on your climbing shoes and hike to the top. Whether a hundred steps or a thousand, conquer that hill. When you're on top and it's under, be reminded that when we put the cares of this world under us, nothing stands between us the "mountain mover" Jesus Christ.

### **To Eat A Tree! (12:17)**

*"Then Jesus said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.'"*

How important is money to you? How important is your money to God? There isn't a person among us who would answer honestly that money isn't important. If that weren't true there wouldn't be so many financial planners in business today helping you and I to take care of our money. We've been in the grips of one of the longest recessions in the history of our economy. Money during a recession is, by definition, available but investments with that money is conservative. As investments decrease, the economy suffers. People hold their money close to the vest, as the saying goes. They guard it, and with that guarding comes an even deeper sense of value. I can't remember a time in my lifetime when money was talked about more or so religiously moved through conservative investment channels.

The question is, though, how valuable is that precious commodity, money, to God? Is God also holding our money closely, putting it to conservative use in His Kingdom? What would God do to get His hands on our valuable cash?

Here's a story: What's the most outrageous thing you would do for \$10,000 cash? That's the question posed some years by Chicago radio station WKOX, which attracted responses from more than 6,000 full-tilt crazies. The eventual winner: Jay Gwaltney of Zionsville, Indiana, who consumed an 11-foot birch sapling – leaves, roots, bark and all. For the event, he donned a tux and dined at a table set elegantly with china, sterling, candles and a rose vase. Armed with pruning shears, the Indiana State University sophomore began chomping from the top of the tree and worked his way, branch by branch, to the roots. His only condiment: French dressing for the massive birch-leaf salad. The culinary feat took 18 hours over a period of three days. When it was all over, Gwaltney complained of an upset stomach. Evidently the bark was worse than his bite. (Campus Life, December 1980, p. 19.)

People will do some outlandish things to get their hands on cash. These days money has achieved a higher level of importance to each of us as we struggle to get by like everyone else. What about God? Is He going through the same struggles? The fact is, God doesn't need our money; He never did. He's perfectly capable of achieving His goals here on earth without our wallets. God wants our hearts, not our wallets. He reminds us in His Word that our money is a gift from Him, and how we use it says something about our hearts. God doesn't want us to do outrageous things to demonstrate how generous we are; He only wants us to be willing to do what ought to come natural, out of love, give back to Him who gave it first.

**How to?** Keep a business size card in your wallet or purse where you keep your cash. On the card print these words: "As He gives!" It will be a constant reminder as to where your money came from in the first place.

## **Birth Pains! (13:8)**

*“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.”*

I remember my Dad telling me years ago that when I was born he brought my Mom to the hospital, checked in and then was told to go home and wait. He had no idea of what happened after that until he got a call from the hospital telling him that I was born. Fortunately, when our first child was born over thirty years ago, I WAS there, holding Holly’s hand during her labor pains. Throughout the process of all four of her labors, we experienced what seemed like a lot of uncertainty, labor pains, followed by a great certainty—birth. Nevertheless, although we knew a child would be born and the pain would result in joy, it didn’t eliminate the reality of the labor pain while it was happening.

When I look around at the world today it reminds me very much of those hours Holly and I spent together in the birthing rooms years ago. It seems like we so wanted to curse those moments of pain and anxiety; they were so extreme, so difficult to get through. Yet, we didn’t because we knew that in the end God would bless us with a child.

Are these dark times of war, lovelessness, persecution and uncertainty any different? Should we as a people be realistic on the one hand, seeking to understand the signs of world decay, and hopeful on the other, understanding that the signs have meaning and will result in new life, if only we’re willing to believe?

Here’s a thought from the philosopher, Kierkegaard. “I see a theater where a variety show is happening. Each show is more fantastic than the last, and applauded by the audience. Suddenly the manager comes out and apologizes, but the theater is on fire, and he begs his patrons to leave in an orderly fashion. The audience thinks this is the most amusing, and cheer thunderously. The manager implores them to leave, and he is again applauded vigorously. At last he can do no more. The fire raced through the whole building and the audience with it. “And so,” he concludes, “will our age, I sometimes think, go down in fiery destruction to the applause of a crowded house of cheering spectators.” (Resource, July / August 1990.)

The signs of the times indicate a fire burning that will soon destroy this sin-weary world. We can choose to see the signs, as difficult and frightening as they might be, but also hope in what is to come, or we can ignore the signs as alarming as they are and hope for the best. As I couldn’t overlook Holly’s pains, neither should we overlook the signs. The trick is holding each other’s hands as the pains of this world increase, without losing the hope that new life will come when the pains pass away.

*How to?* There’s nothing wrong with watching the nightly news, despite all the negative things you’ll witness in the course of thirty minutes or so. It is wrong to despair over the new, however. Remember, in the end, something better is just around the corner.

## **Crazy Success? (14:50)**

*“Then everyone deserted him.”*

What’s the measure of success? If we measure success by any of these tools, wealth, popularity or power, most of us would default, by circumstance, to failure. Statistics show that few people ever earn enough money to be considered wealthy by today’s standards. Popularity? Is your name on the lips of thousands, hundreds or, perhaps, only dozens? If it’s power we seek, we’d probably need a whole lot of wealth and popularity first to make that possible. It may

seem somewhat discouraging, even debilitating to think in these terms. Yet, the fact is that it is highly unlikely that either you or I will ever have enough money, fame, or the power that may come from both, to be considered successful, at least by today's standards.

So, what IS the measure of success? Are you and I doomed to a life of relative failure simply because we don't have enough money or friends to grab the power we need to be called successful?

Here's a story. In the spring of 1883 two young men graduated from medical school. The two differed from one another in both appearance and ambition. Ben was short and stocky. Will was tall and thin. Ben dreamed of practicing medicine on the East Coast where all the money was. Will wanted to work in a rural, midwest community. Ben begged his friend to go to New York where they could both make a fortune. Will refused. His friend called him foolish for wanting to practice medicine in the Midwest. "But," Will said, "I want first of all to be a great surgeon, the very best, if I have the ability." Years later the wealthy and powerful came from around the world to be treated by William Mayo at his renown clinic smack-dabb in the Midwest, the Mayo Clinic. (Today in the Word, July 1990, p. 17.)

William Mayo was a tremendous success. He got there by persevering and endeavoring to be something of value and importance to others, a great surgeon. Jesus Christ lived among a people who hated him. He worked with twelve illiterate men who deserted him. Finally he was killed for what he preached, forsaken and alone. Was he a success? As a powerful man, probably not; as a Savior, perfectly. Jesus was a success because he strove to be above all things the perfect Savior. He succeeded. To the world Jesus seemed a crazy failure; to us I guess you could say he was a crazy success. Are you interested in being successful? The odds of you getting there are far greater if you strive to simply be the best that you are—little money, some friends but a whole lot of crazy power based on persevering and believing that God doesn't make any junk, just Christians with the potential to be crazy successful.

**How to?** The only way to prove success is to prove yourself successful daily in the tasks God has given to you today. Focus on daily achievement; it's the pathway to a life of crazy success.

### **An Underwear Moment! (14:72)**

*"Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: 'Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.' And he broke down and wept."*

If you're like me shame is one of the hardest things to bear. We've all been there. That loose "bad" word that slips from our lips when something goes wrong, or we find ourselves in a tight spot we hadn't seen coming. Sometimes it might be an action we had the fullest confidence in, that turns out to be nothing but a foolish move. I remember a time years ago when I was installing soffit and fascia on a garage I had built. I missed the nail with my hammer, hit my thumb, put a hole in the soffit and let slip a word I quickly wished I had back. For the moment my thoughts were dark, my words unclean and my actions, well, a poor example. The hammer went flying along with my words. At that moment my Father-in-law happened to come around the corner of the garage. How many shades of red I turned, I guess you'd have to ask him.

While I wish I had that moment back, it did serve to become a lesson well learned for the future. I seldom pick up a hammer these days without seeing that look on my Father-in-law's face.

Here's a story. Author Leo F. Buscaglia, on the moment he'd most like to forget: "When speaking in public I sweat profusely, and always carry a few neatly pressed white handkerchiefs. Once, before a large audience, I had already

used two handkerchiefs. I reached for number three and proceeded to wipe my forehead—only to find to my horror that I was using a pair of pressed white briefs, underwear that had inadvertently been piled among the handkerchiefs. With as much poise as I could muster, I completed the dabbing and quickly returned the underwear to my pocket. I often wonder how many viewers in the national audience shared the ‘brief’ embarrassment. Amazingly I went on to deliver what I believe was one of my better public talks; the underwear somehow acting as a mind clearing moment that put my words into even sharper perspective for the evening.” (Source unknown.)

How should you and I look at embarrassment, even shame, when it comes to living our lives to the fullest? While no one ever invites shame and I can’t imagine anyone who enjoys it, it does have its moments. The shame of the moment I call the “hammer moment” has never left me. I have hit my thumb a few times since then and, yes, a word has slipped here and there, but I can tell you I’ve never thrown a hammer like that again. I have shame to thank just as Buscaglia had his underwear moment. While you and I ought always to strive to avoid those underwear moments in life, at least when they happen, we need to learn from them. Who knows, perhaps your next underwear moment may help you avoid disaster down the road. God is great; He never misses a moment to teach, not even an underwear moment.

*How to?* When you do something shameful never act to hide or withdraw. Remind yourself and others that sometimes God allows underwear moments to happen. Once the apology has been given, fly the underwear flag and move on.

### **God Loves Clean Floors! (16:20)**

*“Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.”*

Recently I had lunch with a friend who took early retirement at age 55. He told me all about how happy he was now that he didn’t have to make that long commute every day. I nodded and agreed that commuting was something that I was glad to no longer do as well. He also told me how great it was to sleep later in the morning, and to have the freedom to work with his hobbies whenever he wanted to. I agreed as well that this would be good. Then he asked me why I hadn’t considered retirement since I was now past 60. We were sitting on my patio at the time facing the addition that I had built onto the house years ago. I simply pointed at it and told him “That’s why. I just like looking back at things that I’ve done and admiring the finished product. I guess that’s why I like to work; I get pleasure in simply reviewing the day’s tasks every evening and thinking, ‘That felt good. I got it done.’”

Daily tasks can be large or small, important or insignificant. We can work in or out of retirement. How does God feel about our work? Is He concerned for the product or the effort?

Here’s a thought. “If you’re into bumper-sticker philosophy, you’ve probably seen the axiom, ‘I owe, I owe, so off to work I go.’<sup>1</sup> For a vast portion of the workforce, that’s the best reason they can muster for going to the job each day. According to one poll, only 43 percent of American office workers are satisfied with their jobs. In Japan, the figure dips to 17 percent. In the first century, Christian slaves had even less reason to be enthusiastic about their work. But Paul gave them a way to grasp a glimpse of glory amid the grind. He wanted them to show the beauty of their faith in Christ by how they work (Ti. 2:10). A significant and often overlooked way that we serve God is in our everyday tasks. Martin Luther understood this when he wrote, ‘The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the

shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.” (Our Daily Bread, September 5, 1994.)

Ultimately I guess I work because of the sense of accomplishment that comes with tackling problems, overcoming obstacles and being able, in the end, to admire the finished product. How about God? I like to think that He appreciates just kicking back and admiring the finished work too. Keep in mind that it isn't just the big jobs, like building my addition, that please Him; simple daily tasks please Him just as well. God just likes clean floors. Whatever we do on a daily basis He will bless as long as we remember that no work is unimportant as long as you and I are happy doing it.

*How to?* God likes clean floors. It's good to remember that no task is too small or unimportant to miss God's attention. He blesses everything we do, as long as we do it with a smile.

## Luke

### **Hilarious Heaven! (2:13)**

*“Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.”*

When was the last time that you laughed so hard that the tears came and your belly ached? If you're like most adults, you'd be lucky to do that even once a year. Research has shown that as we grow older, we laugh less and with less intensity. Small children, under the age of 10, however, laugh up to 150 times a day. The average adult, you and I, less than 15, on the average. (Youth Worker Update, Signs of the Times, August 1993, p. 6.) Added to that, young children employ more of their body in laughter. They really get into it, in the majority of those 150 laughs. Adults, on the other hand, seldom put more than a minimum, physical effort into their laughter.

There's an old saying that we ought to “laugh to the devil's envy.” Why? The devil isn't capable of laughter, so he's jealous. God and the angels own laughter. Laughter isn't trivial or just one of those marginal blessings that God in His wisdom poured out with a bunch of other nice things. It's singular, important and, unfortunately, missing from many Christian's lives. The result might be critical.

Here's a thought. Author Norman Cousins tells of being hospitalized with a rare, crippling disease. When he was diagnosed as incurable, Cousins checked out of the hospital. Aware of the harmful effects that negative emotions can have on the body, Cousins reasoned the reverse was true. So he borrowed a movie projector and prescribed his own treatment, consisting of Marx Brothers films and old “Candid Camera” reruns. It didn't take long for him to discover that 10 minutes of laughter provided two hours of pain-free sleep. Amazingly, his debilitating disease was eventually reversed. After the account of his victory appeared in the New England Journal of Medicine, Cousins received more than 3000 letters from appreciative physicians throughout the world. (Today in the Word, December 18, 1991.)

I believe that God blesses both weeping and laughing. They're holy to God, but laughter is special. When the angels announced the birth of Jesus Christ, they came with joy and what was, undoubtedly, hilarious, heavenly laughter. In fact the night was probably filled with the most tremendous tear-invoking, belly bursting laughter as has never been heard before or since. Unfortunately, you and I, so weary of life and subject to stress and anxiousness, aren't probably able to bear that level of laughter. Perhaps if we return to our childhood, the simple things that caused us to laugh

even when hurt abounded, we might, someday qualify for a heavenly titter or two. Ultimately, one important goal in life for all of us is to learn how to laugh more often and more heartily. The angels can bear it and God expects it; why are you waiting?

*How to?* Log the number of laughs that you engage in sometime; you may be surprised how few they might be.

### **Going My Way? (2:51a)**

*“Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them.”*

“Things just don’t seem to go my way!” I don’t know about you, but I’ve been known to say that every now and then. It doesn’t happen after just one or two misfortunes or unplanned consequences. No, these words normally follow a train of bad things that just keep happening. For example, I’m currently on a medication that causes neuropathy in the fingers; I have a lack of feeling in my fingertips. At first it was annoying when I continued to fumble for things, incapable of grasping them the way I used to. After several months annoyance became impatience, even anger at times. “Why do I have to be dropping things all the time?” After months of dropping things I’ve finally had enough. It’s time to blame someone or something for the inconvenience of having to pick things up constantly. Submitting to the numbness in my fingers has become very difficult for me to accept.

Submitting to things out of our control IS hard. It’s frustrating to have to yield to things that want to get in our way.

Here’s a thought from Stephen Beck. “Driving down a country road, I came to a very narrow bridge. In front of the bridge, a sign was posted: ‘YIELD.’ Seeing no oncoming cars, I continued across the bridge and to my destination. On my way back, I came to the same one-lane bridge, now from the other direction. To my surprise, I saw another YIELD sign posted. Curious, I thought, ‘I’m sure there was one posted on the other side.’ When I reached the other side of the bridge I looked back. Sure enough, yield signs had been placed at both ends of the bridge. Drivers from both directions were requested to give right of way. It was a reasonable and gracious way of preventing a head-on collision. When the Bible commands Christians to ‘be subject to one another’ (Ephesians 5:21) it is simply a reasonable and gracious command to let the other have the right of way and avoid interpersonal head-on collisions. (Stephen Beck.)

Has God designed yielding into our lives as part of a divine plan to make something out of us we aren’t capable of doing unless we submit to whatever over a period of time? Think about Jesus. He spent thirty years yielding to His parents. Thirty years is a long time, but it was the designated time that God had planned for His Son to yield prior to the three years of ministry work that would lead Him to the cross. Are you and I any better than Jesus? I guess if yielding, dealing with dropping things for a while, is God’s plan for me, who am I to complain. Your will be done. I’ll continue to bend over and pick things up in the hope that someday God will graciously reveal why dropping them is good for me.

*How to?* When you find yourself asking why things keep happening to you that you hadn’t planned for or wished, remind yourself that nothing happens in this life that God doesn’t allow for a reason. Keep going; don’t try to make too much sense out of it. Simply believe that someday you’ll be the wiser for it.

### **I Know What I Believe, But . . . (3:8)**

*“Produce faith in keeping with repentance.”*

There are two ways to fix a leaky pipe. You can choose to patch it somehow and hope for the best or you can choose to replace it and start over with something that promises to work from the start. Recently I was confronted with a leaky shower water drainpipe in the wall of my house. The pipe had been slowly leaking for weeks and I just couldn't ignore the bucket that I kicked every time I walked into the basement. I knew that I had two options: patch it best that I could and hope it would hold, or pull it all apart, putting in the extra effort that would be required to do it right. The first would be faster, easier and less expensive. The alternative would, needless to say, not be. Yet, since I wanted the pipe to work for me and not against me, I bit the bullet and did it the hard way.

Doing it the easy way has always been very tempting for me since avoiding unnecessary work has always seemed to be the right thing to do. It was time efficient and, in the blush of the moment, cost effective. Sometimes, if you really want to change things for the better, shortcuts need to be ruled out. Ultimately, the two things you're trying to save, money and time, are the two things that end up costing you the most.

Here's a story: In his book, *Little House on the Freeway*, author Tim Kimmel writes: "I had a friend who was adamantly pro-life. He and his wife even gave some thought to opening a pro-life clinic in town. Then, one day, he related to me how he had made a mistake and gotten another woman pregnant. I asked him if they were going to put the baby up for adoption. Pressing him for an answer he replied, "I know what I believe, Tim, but that's different from what I had to do. I had to make a decision that had the least amount of consequences for the people involved.' Just by the way he said it, I could tell my friend had rehearsed these lines over and over in his mind. And by the look in his eyes and the emptiness in his voice, I could tell his words sounded as hollow to him as they did to me. (Author unknown.)

If we want to lead righteous lives, faithful to our calling as servants of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is important that we understand the significance of changed lives not just patched up ones. Just getting by as a Christian always has its consequences. When we fail and our failure becomes sin we need to make the clear-cut decisions that lead to complete repentance. What is more important, that repentance must be tied to action. If we are truly committed to changing our sinful behavior, we need to be sure that we are committed to making the hard and sometimes painful changes that are necessary. Believing is one thing--doing is another.

*How to?* Try doing things the hard way every now and then, even if the easy way is apparent. Keeping in practice by embracing the hard over the easy is a great way to exercise you ability to believe that sometimes the hard way is the best.

### **The Challenge Has Its Price! (3:11)**

*"The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."*

When was the last time that you stepped out of character, as they say, and done something that others might have considered excessively daring, perhaps uncharacteristic of who you are or not conforming to the person that they knew? For most of us that is probably something that, rather than striving to do on occasion, we really try to avoid at all costs. Stepping out of character can be dangerous. First, if we attempt to be something that we haven't practiced being before, we run the risk of getting it wrong. We've all been there; the situation presents itself and we say, "Why not? Let's give it a try. I know that it's something I wouldn't normally do, but, hey, it would be fun to try." Unfortunately, mess up once and you're probably not going to try again. It's the nature of venturing into unknown, personal territory. If we succeed, we will be applauded. Nonetheless, once that success is no longer fresh, we return to the

old normal we're know for. Fail, and there's no forgetting. Failure tends to stick with people longer than success. It's no wonder that most of us won't risk stepping out of character.

However, does God want us to step out of the norm, out of our comfort zone, from time to time, to do the work that only the extraordinary effort can achieve? There's risk, but to God, perhaps, the risk is worth it.

Here's a thought from political columnist, Hugh Sidey: What does this country look for when it elects a president? The Presidency to this day rests more on the character of the person . . . than on anything else. The Founding Fathers designed it that way. It was their idea to find a man in America with a great character and let him invest that character in a tradition, shaping a national character of the nation. They found George Washington. He did his job splendidly. When he took the Presidency, he wrote: "I walk on untrodden ground. There is scarcely any part of my conduct which may not hereafter be drawn into precedent. There is a cost, but the challenge has its price." (Source unknown.)

"The challenge has its price." There's a cost for believing in and worshipping God. It's called serving Him and bringing glory to His name. That service may involve leaving our comfort zone from time to time, serving God in way that may be both out of our nature and, out of character. Sharing, for example. It's not something our sinful nature is conforms to. God, however, wants you and I to step out of our sinful character and into a rather daring one, charity marked by putting others before ourselves. It's risky, but that's the nature of untrodden ground. Christians are born to be leaders, and leaders look for that untrodden ground. A place where character is usually put to the test, outside our comfort zone.

*How to?* New things creep up on us all the time. Life is full of challenges. While it's never a good idea to play spin the bottle with life's challenges, it is a healthy character builder to be in the habit of trying new things from time to time. It's the price of leadership. Whether we like it or not, God calls each of us to lead. That's the nature of living in and with the Holy Spirit of God.

#### **Faster Than You Can Run! (4:4)**

*"It is written: "Man does not live on bread alone.""*

Telling the truth was something that I was taught as a child. If Mom or Dad caught me in an outright lie, even a half truth, there was a punishment. There was also a lesson to be taught at the same time. I'd get a lecture on "Why it was very important to always tell the truth." That lecture usually ended with a reference to God's commandment to "Never bear false witness." Telling the truth was a primary emphasis of my youthful training. Today, however, I often marvel at the convenient lie that is accepted by many if the outcome justifies it. Half truths? Not much wrong there as long as no one is harmed. Moral standards today have changed. I fear that few children are punished anymore for the lie; and lectures on always telling the truth are probably rare. I'm reminded of something Winston Churchill once said, "Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened." I think that many in today's society are hurrying away from the truth and doing so with little conscience or much thought.

How important is it to put the truth before convenience? Does God really hold us to such a high standard?

Here's a story. A couple of hunters chartered a plane to fly into the Canadian wilderness. Two weeks later when the pilot came to pick them up, he saw the two animals they had bagged and said, "I told you fellows I could only take you and one moose. You'll have to leave the other behind." "But we did it last year in a plane this size," protested

one of the hunters, "and the other pilot let us take two moose." "Well, okay," said the pilot. "If you did it before I guess we can do it again." So the two moose and the hunters were loaded in and the plane took off. Because of the heavy weight, it rose with difficulty and was unable to clear an obstructing hill. After the crash, the men climbed out and looked around. One hunter said to the other, "Where are we, anyway?" His companion surveyed the scene. "I think we got about half a mile farther than we got last year." (Source Unknown.)

Not telling the truth, imposing an argument in the place of truth, has its consequences. Ultimately, when you and I opt to bargain for the truth instead of just making sure that it is revealed up front, we're headed for a moral crash. Jesus knew the importance of telling the truth. In His battles with Satan He never stopped to debate it; He merely stated it and let it speak for itself. When you're confronted with an argument, don't get pulled into a debate over what is or isn't true. If you know the truth, tell it. If you don't, search it out. The odds are you'll stumble over it eventually. When you do, remember, the truth always flies faster than you can run.

*How to?* Get in the habit of stating the truth when confronted with an untruth. Statements are always much harder to defeat than questions. Debate has its place except when it comes to understanding the truth.

### **If You Want To Turn The Light On! (6:2)**

*"Some Pharisee asked, 'Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.'"*

Holly and I have raised a family of four and now, the children have all left home. Dinnertime not long ago was a busy, noisy time at the Brunner home. Since we were home schoolers there was talk of the day's lessons. Then there was talk of dance and piano lessons, 4-H meetings, dog-training issues, bicycle repairs and sundry other topics of particular interest to our children. In all the "hubbub" that surrounded dinnertime and even the hours following dinner (those were filled with homework help and reading books to the little ones), Holly and I had precious little time to ourselves to just, well, talk. It really didn't matter what we talked about; in fact small talk was something we craved but had little time to practice. That's when we discovered that bedtime, kids all tucked kids in bed, provided just the right amount of solitude to facilitate some small talk—just Holly and I. To this day it isn't uncommon for us to drift off to sleep with small talk whispering in our ears.

Looking for quiet time? Spiritually we need it. Shutting out life's busyness is another important key to spiritual health.

Here's a story: In a letter to his friends, hymn writer Wendell P. Loveless related this story: One evening a speaker who was visiting the United States wanted to make a telephone call. He entered the booth, but found it to be different from those in his own country. It was beginning to get dark, so he had difficulty finding the number in the directory. He noticed that there was a light in the ceiling, but he didn't know how to turn it on. He fumbled all over the booth looking for a switch but found nothing. As he tried again to find the number in the fading twilight, a passerby noted his plight and said, "Sir, if you want to turn the light on, you have to shut the door." To the visitor's amazement and satisfaction, when he closed the door, the booth was filled with light. He soon located the number and made the call. (Our Daily Bread.)

In a similar way, when we draw aside in a quiet place to pray, we need to block out our busy world and open our hearts to the Father. Our darkened world of disappointments and trials will then be illuminated. We will enter into communion with God; we will sense His presence and provision for us. Jesus often went to be alone with his Heavenly Father. Sometimes it was after a busy day of preaching and healing and at other times it was before making a

major decision (Luke 6:12). Seeking solitude, in that sense, is a discipline, one that must be cultivated and practiced. As Holly and I had to search for that quiet time when the kids were in bed to get a worthwhile conversation going, so it is with our prayers and God. Try finding a quiet place to talk with Him and you might find that a little small talk can reap big dividends.

**How to?** If you don't have "quiet time" built into your day somewhere, you are missing one of the greatest opportunities to draw closer to the Lord. It may be only five minutes, but it will be the best five minutes of the day you'll ever set aside.

### **Around Or Above! (6:24)**

*"But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort."*

The decade of the '80's has become known as the decade of the leveraged buyout. One company after another went on the trading block in those days as other companies, leveraging their assets, went on a buying spree. Unfortunately, if you worked for a company on the block, you often found yourself out of work. This happened to me several times back then and Holly and I often found ourselves concerned as to whether or not we would be able to recover financially each time it happened. One of my best friends at the time, a grizzled old veteran of several of these takeovers, told me this: "Don't worry about it too much, Mark. The real measure of wealth is how much we're worth WHEN we've lost all our money. Now you've got a leg up on it."

Here's a story: About a hundred years ago, "Gold Fever" hit North America. Thousands of men and several women followed their dream of striking it rich from a stake in the Klondike, only to face a harsh climate, expensive "required" items, treacherous mountain passes, amoral con artists, uncontrollable flooding created by the spring thaw, bacteria-laced drinking water in makeshift tent cities, and digging through granite-like permafrost at the rate of about a foot a day. Very few found even enough gold to pay for their trip home. Recently, the Bre-X Company started a new sort of "Gold Fever" in North America. Samples from geologists revealed veins of the precious metal in superbly dense quantities in the hills of Indonesia. Money stampeded into the company as investors dreamed of multiplying their nest eggs. When the samples proved to be falsified, fortunes were lost in the devaluation of Bre-X stock.

Almost two thousand years ago, Jesus warned his followers that the riches of this world would one day perish. He instructed that no one could effectively serve both God and money; we must choose to pursue either one or the other. If we choose money, any treasures we acquire, any temporary pleasure we may experience, will be lost to us when we die. But the treasures we amass in heaven while we pursue the way of God will never be exhausted. We may or may not experience material success in this life, but those who follow God live with the joy of knowing that we are the much loved children of the King of all Kings and will be welcomed with celebration and a rewarding eternal life upon our return home. Such a life has meaning and purpose. Where is your treasure accumulating? Around you or, above? Get a leg up on riches; be content with a little and find out how rich you will feel with less.

**How to?** Holly and I keep a coin jar into which all of our extra change is tossed. Every few months or so we cash it in. We call it our mad money. The jar serves another purpose, though. It reminds us that loose change, a little, can amount to something. It's a matter of putting what is less out in front every now and then.

### **Parsley On A Platter of Fish! (6:40)**

*“A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.”*

As the director of several nonprofit organizations I get many opportunities to speak before audiences. Standing behind a podium, with an audience in waiting to receive whatever it is you are about to give them, has always delivered a small high. I enjoy public speaking, and the larger the audience, the bigger the high. My wife Holly is my manager in these things. As my pride is tested every time I step behind the podium, she is there to make sure that I am reminded of how much better the speech could have been written, or how I should have been more intent on eye contact; as well as the distracting shine off my balding head and the fact that I could have spoken more clearly or with more volume. She keeps me in shape for the next audience encounter, always making sure that I begin my talks with the requisite amount of humility.

I enjoy being recognized; it's a part of my prideful nature that has always needed close monitoring. With monitoring a sort of sobering realization always comes to fore. I'm really not that talented or entertaining expect by my own reckoning.

Here's a story: When Irving S. Olds was chairman of the U.S. Steel Corporation, he arrived for a stockholders' meeting and was confronted by a woman who asked, "Exactly who are you and what do you do?" Without batting an eye, Olds replied, "Madam, I am your chairman. Of course, you know the duties of a chairman—that's someone who is roughly the equivalent of parsley on a platter of fish." So much for a sense of importance. Although Olds was a very successful businessman in his own right, (he founded the Olds Motor Company and later the R.E.O. Motorcar Company, he never let that go to his head. There was always the matter of some other businessman who might be much more successful or brilliant in his mind. Olds had a way of never equating success with personal fame. Perhaps that's why he is often regarded as one of the most successful businessmen of the 20th Century. (Bits and Pieces, June, 1991.)

What about you and I? If we are blessed with opportunity, maybe even material wealth and possessions, should we take that to heart and make it who we are? Certainly Jesus was the greatest man to ever live upon the face of the earth. Yet, he put all men before him. He hid his success in God and preferred others to shine above himself. So it is with us. Fame is for others, faith is for us. We're the parsley on the plate, a compliment to the main course, Christ Jesus himself.

*How to?* A house with many mirrors is a house with great potential for humility. It's good to check in daily at the mirrors in your house to be reminded of just how great you aren't.

### **The Echo of Our Cries! (7:13)**

*“When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, ‘Don't cry.’”*

Crying out. There just are sometimes when you and I are compelled to cry out. Things pile up, stress builds, grief grows or frustration overcomes, and the weight of these burdens pushes us to become vocal. "Oh my God, why?" Then we fall silent, almost embarrassed to have asked the question, we fall to our knees in supplication. Overcome by submission before the Lord, the God of the Universe, we become silent. Yet, the echo of our cry still rings within our heart.

How does God react to those cries? Is God looking for our cries; in fact, does He expect them? Is this the time when God is best glorified in our weakness as He reveals His strength?

Here's a story: During the Thirty Years' War in the 17th century, German pastor Paul Gerhardt and his family were forced to flee from their home. One night as they stayed in a small village inn, homeless and afraid, his wife broke down and cried openly in despair. To comfort her, Gerhardt reminded her of Scripture promises about God's provision and keeping. Then, going out to the garden to be alone, he too broke down and wept. He felt he had come to his darkest hour. Soon afterward, Gerhardt felt the burden lifted and sensed anew the Lord's presence. Taking his pen, he wrote a hymn that has brought comfort to many. "Give to the winds thy fears; hope, and be undismayed; God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears; God shall lift up thy head. Through waves and clouds and storms He gently clears the way. Wait thou His time, so shall the night soon end in joyous day." (Our Daily Bread, May 7, 1992.)

It is often in our darkest times that God makes His presence known most clearly. He uses our sufferings and troubles to show us that He is our only source of strength. He expects our cries. They do not offend Him or in any way turn Him away from our woes. When you are filled with fear, crying out loudly is natural. God designed us to do that. This opens the door to the Holy Spirit of God, who walks in and confidently and with comfort proclaims, "Don't cry! Listen to the truth that I am now going to share with you. I am in control and have heard your cries." And when we see this truth, like Pastor Gerhardt, we receive new hope.

Are you facing a great trial? Don't be afraid to cry out when you are moved to do so. Comfort is on the way. Take heart. Put yourself in God's hands. Wait for His timing. He will give you a "song in the night."

*How to?* Don't hide your tears when they are a result of grief, stress or frustration. Tears will help you come to grips with the music of God's grace.

### **Rough Roads! (7:38)**

*"... and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them."*

We've just gone through a long and very difficult drought in our valley. Some say that we haven't seen weather like this in over fifty years. I was talking to one of our neighbors the other day and she said that she couldn't recall a summer and early Fall like this in her eighty plus years. I thought that significant since she and her family have farmed these bottom lands for over 150 years. Yet, her property across the creek from us has stayed pretty green as has ours. What little rain we did receive I captured with water barrels and, since our valley is spring fed, I've tapped into our spring regularly to keep our garden and flower beds green and growing despite the drought. My neighbor has done the same. Our properties are stretches of green despite the brown of the surrounding hills.

The drought has reminded me of something else over the course of the last few months; it reminded me of the spiritual drought that has also closed in upon our land. As we have watered our properties to keep them green, how shall we water our lives to keep them spiritually alive in these dry and desert-like times of spiritual decay?

Here is a moving poem from Olga Wiess:

"The road is too rough," I said,  
"Dear Lord, there are stones that hurt me so."  
And He said, "Dear child, I understand,  
I walked it long ago."  
"But there's a cool green path," I said;

"Let me walk there for a time."  
"No child," He gently answered me,  
"The green path does not climb."  
"My burden," I said, "Is far too great,  
How can I bear it so?"  
"My child," He said, "I remember the weight;  
I carried My cross, you know."  
But I said, "I wish there were friends with me  
Who would make my way their own."  
"Oh, yes," He said, "Gethsemane  
Was hard to bear alone."  
And so I climb the stony path,  
Content at last to know  
That where my Master had not gone,  
I would not need to go.  
And strangely then I found new friends,  
The burden grew less sore;  
And I remember—long ago  
He went that way before. Olga J. Weiss

How shall you and I make it through these times of spiritual drought? We must water the path of our passage through these difficult times with tears of repentance from a wellspring of hope founded in love for our Savior Jesus Christ, who walked this dry and lonely path before us. We can take hope in the fact that He would not ask us to walk a path he had not already trod. The way will be secure but not without sorrow, pain and hardship. In the end, our lives of repentance and faith will keep the path green when all other paths around us are barren and dry.

*How to?* No day is complete without some tears of repentance. These are sweet and will keep your spiritual path green and watered until you reach the dawn of hope where there will be no more tears, only eternal joy.

### **Improbable Faith! (9:13-14)**

*"He replied, 'You give them something to eat.' They answered, 'We have only five loaves of bread and two fish—unless we go and buy food for all this crowd.'"*

When you think back on your life, did you ever notice that the wonderful things in life often begin with a difficulty; and that the very wonderful, have often begun with an impossibility? The terrible injury that resulted in a new hobby—the gut-wrenching argument with a spouse or a friend, that became a deeper understanding, or the unexpected pregnancy that blossomed into the child that you just couldn't live without. When you stop to think about it, our lives are literally filled with difficulty and impossibility, piled one atop the other. How often those things that looked so remote, so approachable and alarming end up becoming the deepest blessings in our lives. If only we have the faith to believe the difficult, the seemingly impossible, can we overcome these in time and at God's pleasure.

Automobile genius Henry Ford once came up with a revolutionary plan for a new kind of engine which we know today as the V-8. Ford was eager to get his great new idea into production. He had some men draw up the plans, and presented them to the engineers. As the engineers studied the drawings, one by one they came to the same conclusion.

Their visionary boss just didn't know much about the fundamental principles of engineering. He'd have to be told gently--his dream was impossible. Ford said, "Produce it anyway." They replied, "But it's impossible." "Go ahead," Ford commanded, "and stay on the job until you succeed, no matter how much time is required." For six months they struggled with drawing after drawing, design after design. Nothing. Another six months. Nothing. At the end of the year Ford checked with his engineers and they once again told him that what he wanted was impossible. Ford told them to keep going. They did. And they discovered how to build a V-8 engine. (Napoleon Hill, Think and Grow Rich, 1960.)

When God calls us to tackle the difficult and conquer what might seem the impossible, He always provides a way to make that happen--even when we don't see it right away. Jesus once asked His disciples to feed five thousand people who had assembled to hear Him preach with only five loaves and two fishes. His words to them were "You give them something to eat." Faced with the impossible, they scratched their heads and asked "how?" He provided the answer--use your faith! Jesus wouldn't have asked them to do it unless He knew it could be done.

Are you faced today with the difficult or even the impossible? Remember. If it couldn't be done, He wouldn't ask you to do it. God never asks us to do what is truly the impossible. He only asks us to face that which seems impossible with an improbable faith anchored in the hope that the God who can do anything will work that anything through us.

*How to?* Every day presents us with impossibilities. Welcome them. They are only exercise for our God.

### **Passing Moments! (9:62)**

*"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."*

Funny thing about life; no two moments are ever the same. What was a minute ago is now different. From moment to moment everything changes. As I key these words into the keyboard the likelihood that my fingers will key the same, exact sequence in the next moment is remote. How odd it is that we so often seek what was, the past, or is, the present, without a thought of what most certainly is coming with just the passing of another moment in time.

When it comes to making a difference in this world which moment is more important; now or what is to come?

Here's a story: In early May 2003, a cloud descended on Cannon Mountain near Franconia Notch, New Hampshire. Near the top of the mountain, obscured in the cloud, was a rock formation that had become the state symbol for New Hampshire. Because in profile it looked like the face of a man, it had become known as the Old Man of the Mountain. This famous rock profile was engraved on New Hampshire license plates and other materials promoting the state. Because of the effects of wind and rain and the natural splitting of the rocks, the rock formation was in danger of falling. So steel cables and turnbuckles had been installed in a valiant effort by state officials to try to keep the face intact and in place. But on the night of May 3, 2003, a mighty crash of rock was heard from below and people feared the worst. When the clouds lifted from the Notch, people looked up to see that the face was gone from the mountain. The rocks that had composed the Old Man of the Mountain profile had fallen in a great rockslide. Nature and erosion had worked to erase the face. (Peter Kirby)

I am often reminded of how important it is to recognize how the moment is always passing and it is ours to capture, if only we're willing to move with it. Take Jesus' disciples when they joined him on the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter had suggested they stay on the mountain, worshipping Jesus, but Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem and

the suffering and salvation that lay ahead for him. After the cloud shielding Christ lifted from the mountain, Christ left the mountain, not staying there, but making his way down the mountain to perform healing, teaching and making his way to the cross to die for our salvation. If you and I can agree that God has placed each one of us here to make a difference in the world, how can we relish the moment when what is to come can't be stopped? Time flies and no man can catch it. Since it won't stop for us we can't stop for it. Waiting around will only give passing time an opportunity to erode our purpose as it did with the Old Man in the Mountain. It is always better to keep moving than sliding away.

**How to?** Try not to live your life in the past or in the future. Treasure each moment as a gift, because that is what time is, a gift from above.

### **Broken Hearts, Not Broken Fences! (10:29)**

*“And who is my neighbor?”*

I grew up in a neighborhood decades ago where everyone knew everyone. People walked next door just to see how you were doing. They gathered in yards around picnic tables and lawn chairs for no good reason at all. If the Bloesch's Ford Station Wagon didn't leave the driveway for two days someone would stop by and see if Marlene was sick or Al was out of town. Everyone knew when the Johnson's went down to Iowa to visit her folks, because they would make sure we knew when they were leaving and coming back. I miss that. I have neighbors today, but it isn't the same. People are so self-sufficient these days. They can stock their pantries with food without leaving their driveway. There are so many conveniences that make life easier to live without the help of others. I long for the neighborliness of days gone by.

Is it because we no longer need one another that we find being neighbors so difficult? Or, is it something much more defining, more essential to life itself, that is missing?

Here's a story: Catherine Booth was the “mother” of the Salvation Army. “Wherever she went,” said Campbell Morgan, “humanity went to hear her. Princes and peeresses merged with paupers and prostitutes.” One night, Morgan shared in a meeting with Mrs. Booth; and a great crowd of “publicans and sinners” was there. Her message brought many to Christ. After the meeting, Morgan and Mrs. Booth went to be entertained at a fine home; and the lady of the manor said, “My dear Mrs. Booth, that meeting was dreadful” “What do you mean?” asked Mrs. Booth. “Oh, when you were speaking, I was looking at those people opposite to me. Their faces were so terrible, many of them. I don't think I shall sleep tonight!” “Why, don't you know them?” Mrs. Booth asked; and the hostess replied, “Certainly not!” “Well, that is interesting,” Mrs. Booth said. “I did not bring them with me from London; they are your neighbors!” (Source Unknown.)

Who is my neighbor? The fact that those “neighbors” Booth invited to the meeting lived nearby the rich lady who found them dreadful really didn't make them her neighbors. What could have made them her neighbors was not proximity but attitude. If her heart was open to loving others no matter who they were or where they lived, that would have made the difference. Neighborliness lives in your heart and mine. If our hearts are right with God, every human being is our neighbor. The people who lived on our block decades ago loved one another; therefore they needed one another and made it their purpose to be neighbors. If we long for neighbors the first place we need to search is within and not without. Neighborliness is more about broken hearts than broken fences.

*How to?* Finding neighbors begins with finding love. Is your heart right with God? If it is, the love of Christ will cause you to be a neighbor with everyone you meet.

### **Big Feet–Bigger Heart! (10:33)**

*“ . . . an when he saw the man he took pity on him.”*

A number of years ago I was waiting for a flight that had been delayed. There was nothing to do but bide my time so I headed to a nearby bookstore in the terminal mall to buy a magazine. As I was browsing through the magazines I became aware of a disturbance across the mall in a little coffee shop. A young woman with three kids was struggling to get control of her kids and the noise was apparent to everyone. I felt suddenly compelled to cross the mall and offer some support. I debated the thought for not more than ten seconds. As I began to put the magazine back into the rack, however, someone else beat me to the punch. A young soldier, backpack and all, had stopped and was offering to buy the crying kids some burgers and fries. I guess his reaction time was a bit better than mine.

I think it's true that most of us care enough to want to do the right thing when others need our help. But, often, it's a matter of reacting quickly and bypassing that usual internal debate of “do” or “not do” that really makes the difference.

Here's a story: A little girl, clutching her money tightly, entered an ice cream store. Before she could say a word, the store clerk sharply told her to get outside and read the sign on the door, and stay out until she put on some shoes. She left slowly, and a big man followed her out of the store. He watched as she stood in front of the store and read the sign: No Bare Feet. Tears started rolling down her cheeks as she turned and walked away. Just then the big man called to her. Sitting down on the curb, he took off his size-12 shoes, and set them in front of the girl saying, “Here, you won't be able to walk in these, but if you sort of slide along, you can get your ice cream cone.” Then he lifted the little girl up and set her feet into the shoes. The shining eyes of the little girl could not be missed as she shuffled up to the counter and ordered her ice cream cone. He was a big man; big belly, big shoes, but most of all, he had a big heart. (Author Unknown)

Sometimes the difference between caring or not is reacting and not debating about the risk. When Jesus taught the story of the Good Samaritan he didn't teach that the two individuals who didn't stop to take care of the beaten man had no compassion. Perhaps they did. But what made the difference was that neither stopped to do anything. They may have debated the advisability but they didn't stop. God doesn't want you and I to take foolish risks when we're offering our help to others; but He is asking us to risk our own comfort and time. That goes with the turf. May it be that when others are hurting our reaction time will be quicker than our debating time. We miss so much when we debate too long.

*How to?* Practice being decisive even if it means you may make the wrong choice from time to time. It is better to be decisive and have a good batting average, than to be indecisive in quest of a perfect average.

### **A Compelling Case! (11:8)**

*“I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.”*

When my brothers and I were kids we used to travel out to the rock piles that bordered the edges of the various farm fields in the area. We looked at every pile as an adventure; who knew what might be at the bottom of it. One of our favorite activities “on the rock pile” was to look for hidden fossils and crystals. It didn’t happen very often, but on occasion we’d crack open a bland looking bolder and we’d find the imprint of a trilobite or, even better, a maze of beautiful green or purple quartz crystals. It took a lot of work to break those stones. Our method was to find a larger stone, preferably one of granite or basalt, and throw our treasure down on it until it would finally break into pieces. Sometimes the rock would break in a couple of tries, sometimes dozens. If we wanted the treasure, however, persistence was the key.

Here’s a story: Persistence paid off for American astronomer Clyde Tombaugh, who discovered the planet Pluto. After astronomers calculated a probable orbit for this “suspected” heavenly body, Tombaugh took up the search in March 1929. Time magazine recorded the investigation: “He examined scores of telescopic photographs each showing tens of thousands of star images in pairs under the dual microscope. It often took three days to scan a single pair. It was exhausting, eye-cracking work--in his own words, ‘brutal, tediousness.’ And it went on for months. Star by star, he examined 20 million images. Then on February 18, 1930, as he was blinking at a pair of photographs in the constellation Gemini, ‘I suddenly came upon the image of Pluto!’ It was the most dramatic astronomic discovery in nearly 100 years. (Today in the Word, November 26, 1991.)

If you want the treasure, persistence is, indeed, the key. I suppose that’s what kept Clyde Tombaugh going--tedious repetition. How about God? Does He find our persistent prayers, often, day after day, for the same thing tedious or irritating? I don’t believe that God finds our persistence in prayer tedious or irritating at all. In fact, I believe that Scriptures tells us that He expects us to be persistent. Each time that Tombaugh looked into that telescope or my brothers and I dropped those rocks, we made a compelling case for keeping going, trying again. Perhaps it would be that next look into the telescope or that next drop that did the trick? It was compelling and compelling persistence is one of the best ways of discovering the reward you’re looking for. Being compelled to keep going required faith that there would be an end to the work and a reward at the end. If it’s all about faith, can there ever be a prayer that is too repetitious? Be compelling. Make your case with God. He’s waiting for that last rock to drop to see if you really believe in the reward that may be waiting for you.

*How to?* If you find yourself singular in how you ask God for things in prayer, perhaps it’s time to examine whether or not you really wanted them in the first place?

### **Slow Listening! (11:13)**

*“ . . . how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”*

We’re all told that the art of good speaking is good listening. There’s little argument about the character skills that can be obtained by becoming a good listener. There’s a problem, though; how do you make that happen? I’ve always been one to speak before listening; it’s a character flaw that I’ve worked on for years. For me it’s a matter of becoming comfortable, content, if you will, with the person speaking to me. It’s a feeling that overcomes me when I do one thing in particular. It’s a simple thing, but it really, really works. How?

Here’s a story: Author Chuck Swindoll once found himself with too many commitments in too few days. He got nervous and tense about it. “I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day,” he recalled in his book *Stress Fractures*. “Before long, things around our home started reflecting the patter of my hurry-up style. It was becoming unbearable. “I dis-

tinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our younger daughter, Colleen. She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, 'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast.' "Suddenly realizing her frustration, I answered, 'Honey, you can tell me -- and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly.'" "I'll never forget her answer: "Then listen slowly.'" (Bits & Pieces)

You see, the key is "listening slowly." The real problem with listening is the fact that you and I often try to listen as fast as we speak. When we speak too quickly, we're apt to miss the truth or lose our focus. The same is true of listening. Listening too quickly makes us anxious. That makes for poor listening. The next time you're tempted to speak before listening try doing this, my little secret, tell the person you're listening to "Speak to me. I'm all ears." Try it. You may find, as I have, that a feeling of calm just settles over you and you will become a slow listener.

You know, the same thing works with God. Are you going through a tough spot in life? Confused, frustrated, burdened, maybe even discouraged? Perhaps it's because you're trying to speak before God is through telling you what He wants you to do. Are you listening slowly? It's important to hear everything God has to say, and the best way I know is to literally tell Him to "Speak Lord, I'm all ears!" When you do a calmness will push into your heart and your ears will be finely tuned to ALL the divine wisdom God has to offer. Listen slowly and speak less. It works with others and it really works with God.

*How to?* In good times or bad begin your prayers with an invitation to the Lord to "Speak for you are listening." It's a small thing, but it works in a big way.

### **In A Fog! (12:13)**

*"... tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!"*

Some time ago, a research firm did an analysis of privately owned companies through their boards of directors. They were seeking to discover what it was that kept company executives in their positions for a greater length of time. Was their ability to remain in their positions for a long time due to something that the company did for its managers or something that the managers did for the company? What they discovered was surprising although not totally unexpected when you weigh all the factors. Executives who keep their jobs the longest are the ones who suggest solutions when a problem is presented and don't dwell on the problem. Longevity, the ability to stay with one company for a long time, has more to do with what a manager gives back than what he takes.

Longevity was based on a little thing so vitally important--attitude. Companies keep managers who have an attitude of "can do" as opposed to "now what," a little thing, but so important to the success of a business. Similarly, when it comes to solving the problems in our lives, God looks for something small but very important in us as well.

Here's a story: Did you know that a dense fog covering seven city blocks to a depth of 100 feet is composed of less than one glass of water. That amount of water is divided into about 60 billion tiny droplets. Yet when those minute particles settle over a city or the countryside, they can almost blot out everything from sight--something very small affecting something very large. (The Paper Pulpit.)

Many Christians today live their lives in a fog. They allow a cupful of troubles to cloud their vision and dampen their spirit. Anxiety, turmoil and defeat strangle their thoughts. Their lives are being "choked by the cares of this world" (Luke 8:14). "God" according to the Apostle Paul, "has NOT given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). Dwelling on the problem creates a poor attitude. God presents problems in our lives

to challenge us, not torment us. To God problems are an opportunity and not a punishment. Problems are an open door to seeking God's perfect solutions to our every problem. It would be far better for you and I to dwell on the potential for solutions than the fact that a problem exists. When we bring our problems to God we need to lay them at the feet of our Savior with the attitude that whatever God decides will be good for me; that there is a solution to my problem and He has the answers. The answer to our prayer may not be the one we were looking for. If we keep an attitude of being willing to change our lives should He ask us to, that attitude will go a long way in lifting the fog of uncertainty in our lives.

*How to?* Staying power, the ability of a Christian to remain at one with His Lord and on the same page as his maker, has everything to do with how we obediently react to God's promise to act and little to do with when He chooses to do so.

### **Mud Gazing! (12:14)**

*"Jesus replied, 'Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you!'"*

Do you sing because you're happy, or are you happy because you sing? You've met the person. They always seem to have a positive attitude about everything. They're the people you see on the freeway in the midst of rush hour, bumper to bumper traffic, singing inside their car as they slowly inch their way through traffic. You glance over at them and watch their lips moving and their head swaying back and forth, oblivious to the chaos around them. Your first thought is, are they all there? How can they be singing when everyone else is pounding the dashboard and muttering under their breath? What makes some people better at coping with tension; contending with difficulties and everyday stressors that afflict us all? Are they possessed with a special gift that few people have or have they unearthed the secret to being calm when others are frantic that took them a correspondence course and several sets of behavioral modification tapes to discover?

Over the years I have discovered that people who are happy are people who have made the decision that this is the way that they want to live their lives. It's a matter of perspective.

Here's a story: "A construction crew, while building a levee along a river bank, experienced a violent rainstorm that flooded the earth-moving machinery and destroyed the work that had been done. As the crew foreman approached the work site to assess the damages, he found his crew bemoaning the mud and the buried equipment. As his workers surrounded him, he asked, 'Why are you so glum?' 'Can't you see the disaster?' they asked. 'Our equipment is covered with mud.' Smiling, he asked, 'What mud?' 'You must be kidding. Look around you. We're surrounded by a sea of mud. How can you say you don't see any?' 'Well,' said the foreman, 'what I see is clear blue sky filled with bright sunshine. Soon the mud will be dried up and then we will be able to move our equipment and start over. Sun or mud, the choice is yours.' (Speaker's Sourcebook II, page 50)

The difference between sun or mud is a matter of perspective. What we expect to see, we see. This delightful story reinforces our choice to look at any situation from more than one point of view. People who sing in cars while others are cursing are not happy because they are singing, they are singing so that they might become happy. Where others perceive obstacles, they discover possibilities and opportunities. Singing takes them there and carries them beyond perceptions into possibilities. They are driving from their hearts AND their heads; a pretty good combination. Where others see only mud, they see blue skies. It's an attitude that is hard to put down; it feels too good.

*How to?* The next time frustration puts you on the edge of losing it, try singing. It takes the edge off and puts you on a path to awareness that is often dark, except for the light of a new perspective.

### **Already In Hell! (12:15)**

*“Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions!”*

“You deserve a break today . . .”, so the jingle went! The TV was asking me to buy something to eat. And, “Well, don’t you think that you deserve it anyway?” Now it was telling me that I was a fool if I didn’t go and pamper myself with the car that already had “my name on it.” Take a little test tonight. Watch television for about an hour. Pay particular attention to the commercials. It doesn’t matter if it is cable, satellite or network programming; simply look for the similarities among almost all of them? I did this the other night and was stunned by the results. If you watch and listen closely, you will find that nearly every commercial break in the programming is all about you, your deserving something that other people already have and you’re the fool for not already having it. Whether it is a brighter smile or more satisfying sex, there’s a product out there with your name on it. You need to spend your money and get that product because, well, you “deserve it.”

The desire to have because we deserve has been around for a very long time. Jesus dealt with it in his ministry as did Clarence Macartney, who writes: “I thought of that saying of Jesus when a man came to see me about a woman—his sister, who was a member of my congregation—and demanded that I should use my pastoral office to compel her to divide the inheritance with him. When I declined to do so, on the same grounds which Christ took in similar circumstances, the man said as he went out, ‘If there is a hell, she will go there!’ But when I heard those words and saw the look on his face I thought to myself, wherever his sister may go in the next world, this man already is in hell. And what put him there was the fact the he was thinking of this world only, and that to lose everything.” (Macartney’s Illustrations, page 79)

What do we really deserve? Apart from the love and grace of God, the Bible tells us that we deserve only punishment and damnation. Deserve this or that thing? On what grounds? I no more deserve a MacDonald’s hamburger than I do a Lexus convertible. Simply, apart from God’s grace, I have no right to demand or feel a right to, anything outside of hell. When we fall for the Madison Avenue line that we have a right to eat this, wear that or drive in that, we fall for the oldest trick in the book; the same one Satan pulled on Eve with a simple apple. Perhaps the better commercial might be this, “Want a living hell? Think about yourself today and nobody else. We guarantee the result. You’ll get what you deserve!”

*How to?* Take stock of the number of times that you are told through TV and other media how you deserve this or that. When you begin to number these you’ll begin to understand how little you really deserve.

### **The Carrying Kind! (15:3-7)**

*“Whoever can be trusted with very little can be trusted with much . . .”*

Have you ever been so worn out that you just couldn’t take another physical or emotional step? I venture a guess that we’ve all felt that way from time to time. Perhaps if it hadn’t been for someone, friend, sibling or spouse, lifting our burden and carried it for us, we might still be there. Those are sweet times. There’s something unexplainably comforting when an emotional load is suddenly lifted from our hearts. There are also times when, anticipating a burden,

we turn to these same folks and ask, “Will you help me carry this load?” Are these times no less sweet? Or, perhaps, because we anticipate the comfort ahead of time, these times may be even sweeter.

Here’s a story. “George Muller and his wife launched into a daring experiment. First, they gave away all of their household goods. Next, he refused all regular salary from the small mission he had been serving. He then set out to establish an orphan home to care for the homeless children of England. Within a matter of days, 43 orphans were being cared for. Muller then adopted the following guidelines: No funds would ever be solicited. No debts incurred. No money contributed for a specific purpose would ever be used for any other purpose. All accounts would be audited annually. No publication of donor’s names. The success of the orphanage would be measured not by the numbers served or by the amount of money taken in, but by God’s blessing on the work, which Muller expected to be in direct proportion to the time spent in prayer. When the first building was constructed, Muller remained true to his convictions. The public was amazed when a second building was opened six months after the first. Eventually there were five new buildings, 110 workers, and 2,050 orphans being cared for. Muller not only counted on God to provide, but he believed that God would provide abundantly. For over 60 years Muller recorded every specific prayer request and the results. Muller was responsible for the care of 9,500 orphans during his life. These children never went without a meal. Muller never asked for help from anyone but God. \$7,500,000 came to him over the course of his life and he vows it was all in answer to believing prayer.” (Steve Shepherd. Citation: Boyce Mouton, Carl Junction Christian Church Newsletter, January 30, 1980.)

Muller lived a life of trust based on his knowledge of Christ the burden bearer. In many ways this is the sum of the Gospel, the fact that it is a “carrying” message not a burdening one. Simply, burdens are to be carried; by a loving Shepherd Savior that knows no burden too heavy that it can’t be carried by Him. So, enjoy the ride. The view up on top is fabulous as we bump along through this life always carried by our Jesus, the carrying-kind of a Savior.

*How to?* If you own a small cat or dog, make sure you pick them up occasionally. Feel how secure they look in your arms. It’s a picture of how secure you are in the arms of your Savior.

### **Keeping In God’s Love! (15:11-20)**

*“ . . . he was lost and is found.”*

The springs around my home have always fascinated me. There are many and some are quite abundant. Even in the hottest days of summer, there are one or two that almost never go dry. What’s so fascinating about them is their everlastingness. I’ve talked to the farmers who’ve lived in this area for years and they tell me that the springs have always been there as long as they remember. I guess that they’ve probably been flowing for thousands of years and, hopefully, will continue to flow until Jesus comes.

Their abundance surpasses everything around them. The Beech trees that grow around our home might live to be a hundred or so. Inevitably, they will die. So it is with the other trees, the flower gardens and even the house we live in. Eventually, everything passes. Even that half-dismantled old combine that sits rusting away in our neighbor’s field will someday be gone without a trace. Yet, the springs seem eternal. Connected to the water God put into the earth millennia ago, their gushing seems endless. In that sense they seem connected to the Creator’s hand; an everlasting reminder of His constancy and love.

Here’s a story: There was a businessman who, upon retirement, decided to build a home. However, within months of retirement, he was diagnosed with an incurable cancer. His doctors advised him to shelve the building plan in favor

of a strict, cancer-fighting regimen. He refused. Instead he had his home so constructed that he could spend his closing days in sunshine. In the morning they rolled his bed so that he could turn his face toward the East and see the rising sun; at noontime they wheeled him into the South window, where he could see it at midday; but in the evening hours they would place him in the West window, where he could behold it sinking behind the distant hills. (By J. Wilbur Chapan, "Present Day Parables.")

God's love is abundant and continuous as the rising and setting of the sun. If you are in the morning of your life keep your face toward the East window, and at noontide live in the South window, but when evening comes, turn your face toward the West window, so that throughout life's journey you may live in the sunshine, always keeping yourself in the love of God. God's love is so abundant that it conforms perfectly to every moment in your life. Like those springs, it is constant and patient as it flows steadfastly throughout our lives. It will endure when all else fails; from everlasting to everlasting. When you take stock of all the things around you that just won't last, that's a real, comforting thought.

*How to?* Nothing last forever, so the saying goes. It's not a bad idea to take stock of life around you and notice daily how things are decaying. How awesome it is that God doesn't.

### **Daredevils for Christ! (16:1-12)**

*"Whoever can be trusted with very little can be trusted with much . . ."*

If you've ever driven on the freeway between the hours of 6:00 and 8:30 AM you get a very real sense of what it means to be "driven." The early morning hours seem to bring out the daring and daunting. There was a time that I thought it was simply those who were late for that punch clock had adopted NASCAR rules, but after years of observing disappearing tail lights and a many near misses, I think there's a bit more to it than that. Many of these people are in a rush not only to "get" there but to "be" there. There is a level of adrenaline involved. I've seen it etched in their faces as they pass me by in the fast lane. Faces tight, jaws clenched and hands gripping the wheel, they have purpose written all over their faces. "Let me at 'em!" You can almost hear them thinking it as they peel by. With the introduction of cellphone checkers in the fast lane, it's gotten even worse. These are the folks who left in such a rush that they failed to check with their spouse before leaving home. I would often shake my head in disbelief as another one of these fast lane daredevils would come shooting by; amazed at their innate ability to handle steering wheel, radio, and phone with the ease of 747 pilot nonchalantly clicking here and punching there, one hand on the steering yoke and the other clutching a coffee mug.

In some sense I've come to admire not only the skill of these drivers but also their tremendous commitment to "being" there. Work certainly does seem fulfilling for a whole lot of people these days. Why else would they be so eager to get there and often so unwilling to leave? I recently read a statistic that stated that compared to workers in any other part of the world, U.S. workers put in the longest days and work the most weekends. We're now working longer hours than ever before in the history of our nation. We're starting earlier and quitting later by an average of 1.3% every ten years according to the U.S. Department of Labor. It seems to be what identifies us as a people. We take fewer vacations every year as well. Ironically, however, satisfaction on the job continues to shrink every year. We're becoming a discontent lot of work addicts always looking for another challenge, and we're in a big rush to get there.

So it is with the world. It shrewdly and consistently sets the pace for all of us. One thing you have to say about it, it's anything but lazy, even though it's often inconsiderate and bullish. As children of this world and the next, however, it would do us well to observe and adopt this much of their style--they're certainly go-getters! (Source Unknown.) So,

the next time you see some crazed person pass you by in the fast lane, remember this; if you could take but a few ounces of that energy and apply it to your spiritual life, we all might win more souls for Christ than we would have ever imagined.

*How to?* The next time you find yourself tailgating and pounding your fist on the steering wheel, ease off. Save some of the adrenalin for spiritual things. Be driven for Christ instead of being driven to speed

### **The Other Side of the Road! (17:1-4)**

*“So watch yourselves.”*

There but by the grace of God go I! From youth on I was taught the valuable resource of this adage. When something bad happened to someone else, I was always reminded not to be critical since that could be me sitting there in all that mess. What a convenient catchall this simple little nine word phrase is. Unfortunately, all too often we use this “there but” attitude as a crutch to push ourselves away from getting involved when we ought to.

Because it is far too disturbing to involve ourselves when all we really need to do is walk the other way, we often see wrong and hurt, things that need a kind word of correction in love from us, and we make the decision to walk the other way than to help. We see sin lying there but why is that any of our business? Aren't we sinners as well? No, passing by on the other side of the road is probably the safest route after all. Handling the criticism of others is one thing. Knowing when and where it is proper to give our criticism is something altogether different. Having been on the receiving end of criticism has a tendency to put us on the wrong side of the road when we're asked to lend ours to others.

Let me share a story with you; when I was a young man and just out of college I hung out with a bunch of friends who, like myself, enjoyed a great Friday night out. Since a number of us worked together at the same supermarket stocking groceries, we often got together after work in the parking lot just shooting the breeze. One of the guys in the group (we just called him Craze) however, liked to drink. A beer or two wasn't good enough for him. He'd start out with a beer and then didn't know when to stop. He wasn't much of a menace or a bother, so we pretty much left him alone. Then one night Craze fell asleep at the wheel of his Mustang and wrapped himself around a tree. He survived, barely, –the Mustang didn't. If one of us had been critical of his habit of drinking too much, Craze might not be walking with a limp today and someone might still be enjoying that classic car as well.

Jesus told His disciples that it was right to “rebuke” a brother when they sinned as long as we forgave that sin. Therein lies the key to walking on the right side of the road. When we see someone buried in sin and headed the wrong way, it's okay for us to give criticism just as long as we check our own hearts before we speak. Are we sinners too? You bet! Being critical is fine as long as we don't go into it with an attitude. Simply, out of love and the willingness to forgive that sin, apply the criticism and then let the Holy Spirit do the rest. “There but by the grace of God go I?” Probably! That's why it's probably better to stop and help. Someday it could be us.

*How to?* When you strive to put yourself in the place of others, you'll often avoid being in the place of others.

### **Interrupted Flight! (18:31-34)**

*“... Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.”*

Several winters ago a Mourning Dove collided with our Great Room window. The bird had landed on its side and I could see that it was still alive. Everyone including our dogs gathered at the window, straining to see the bird move. I carefully open the patio door to let myself out but not the dogs. The bird was stunned and badly shaken up. I picked it up gently and checked for broken bones. There were none and I could tell by the pressure against my grip that the bird was ready to be elsewhere. I placed it on a limb of a nearby Blue Spruce and returned to the house. I was greeted by my daughter who thanked me and then asked: "Daddy, why do the birds hit the window even when we have all these warning signs hanging in front it?" "I don't know." I replied. "Perhaps they just aren't watching carefully. Maybe that whack on the head will help it remember the next time. I don't know."

I don't know! Why does suffering need to happen? To watch that helpless bird flounder around I began to get an idea though. I began to get a picture of how God sees us when we fall into a pit of suffering. Floundering helplessly, battered and shaken, we are stunned, unable to function as we normally do. He then reaches down and lifts us up. Tenderly He holds us and then carefully places us back into our lives, shaken but happy to be alive, comforted for having been in His tender care. It seems that suffering has a purpose; although it is most often hidden from us like that window from the bird. Yet, when it happens our hearts are strangely comforted almost as if the hand of God was gripping them. While our minds remain focused on wondering, our hearts are stirred by a sense of inevitable reckoning.

Will we ever fully understand the need to suffer? In this life it's not likely as long as our minds and our hearts are not wholly focused on the same thing, the will of God. The disciples didn't understand what Jesus meant when He said that He must suffer so that all things would be fulfilled according to the will of His Father. Perhaps their hearts ached with a sense of oneness with Him but their minds could not accept the idea of the goodness of pain. In this life we will crash into unseen suffering. It will leave us dazed, confused, perhaps even stricken. Be thankful that the heart, moved by faith and the comforting touch of our loving God, will always grasp the meaning of such suffering even when the mind, on this side of life, cannot accept the logical benefit. A whack on the head can be painful, but, perhaps, the next time we fly into life in a hurry, that whack will remind us that when God's will is immovable, our path may come to a very sudden, maybe painful, crash.

**How to?** Make it a habit to ask God on a regular basis "why." He expects it and he will answer in his own time and way.

### **Standing and Watching! (19:8)**

*"... Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about."*

"I just can't believe that anyone could be so discourteous." I heard my coworker say as I walked by her open office door. "All I asked them to do was to send me a fax of the document. Instead they told me that I had to drive for a half hour to pickup something they could have faxed in a minute! They had a rule and that was the only way that they could help me." I stopped to find out what had gone wrong. It seems that a local government agency had a rule that it couldn't find a way of changing. The rule stipulated that the form my coworker needed had to be picked up in person because the requester was required to pay a 6¢ fee for the service. Amazingly, the rule was based on the value of 6¢. "How is that fair or even right?" She asked me. She thought for another moment. "For that matter, how is it rational?" I agreed. We together discussed several reasons why this request neither made sense nor did it espouse fairness. Discussion finished, I asked her what she was going to do about it. She look at me with a puzzled look and replied, "Well, nothing! What difference would it make?"

When it comes to your faith, are you in the battle to make a difference or just complain about the bad guys?

Here's a story: The brown sedan began its merge onto the freeway from the onramp. The merge was slow and careful; just the kind of merge that makes most freeway drivers cringe. The elderly lady at the wheel wanted to make sure that she wasn't going too fast. It wasn't long before the inevitable occurred. The sedan was rear-ended by another car just a mile or so up the freeway and the two cars came to a stop blocking both lanes. As the traffic came to a stop, someone called 911 and a few drivers ventured out to see if the drivers were all right. Suddenly, one young man got out of his car and ran over to the elderly woman's car. He began tugging and pulling at the crunched fender. While the others watched, he slowly pulled the crumpled metal away from the tire. "Help me push her!" he shouted. "Standing and watching won't clear the road!" (This Passing Day.com)

Standing and watching seems to be the national pastime of many Christians these days. We want things to change but are always telling ourselves that we aren't the ones to initiate the changes. Yet, true faith is really all about change, a change of heart on the inside demonstrated by a change of life on the outside. One motivates the other. It's not enough to follow Jesus in your heart alone. You and I need to show we belong to Jesus by the way we live our lives outwardly. True faith always results in action. Standing and watching is never an option for a people blessed by God.

**How to?** Make it a point every day to question what is not fair nor reasonable. Never get into the habit of accepting anything based solely on what you think will happen.

### **Playing It Safe! (19:26)**

*"... I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away."*

I read recently an interesting, but at first somewhat puzzling statement, from the late management consultant, Peter Drucker. He stated: "People who don't take risks generally make about two major mistakes a year. People who do take risks generally make about two big mistakes a year." Huh? Think about it, though. Drucker was saying that, in essence, people who take calculated risks are no more at risk than those who don't. Essentially, nothing ventured, nothing gained, as the old saying goes. Ultimately, however, since the mistakes really end up canceling each other out, we ought to be far more motivated to assume some risk in life to accomplish better and greater things than we ought to be content with things just as they are with no possibility of change.

When you come right down to it, is there ever any excuse for doing "nothing" when "something" is called for?

Here's a story: A young reporter wanted to get a feel for agriculture, so he paid a visit to a farmer and asked, "How's your wheat coming along?" The farmer replied, "I didn't plant any." "Really?" asked the reporter. "I thought this was supposed to be wheat country. Why didn't you plant any wheat?" "Some say it is," came the reply. "But I was afraid we might not see enough rain this year and the wheat would be stunted." "Well, what about your corn. You've planted that, haven't you? How is it doing?" the young man inquired. "Didn't plant corn this year," the farmer said. "I was afraid of corn blight, so I didn't plant corn." "Alfalfa? Asked the reporter." "Nope. Afraid the price might drop; didn't plan that either." "Well," asked the reporter, "what did you plant?" "Nothin'," the farmer said. "I just played it safe." (Author unknown)

It's been said, "Don't play for safety—it's the most dangerous thing in the world." Of course, unnecessary risk-taking is foolish. If life is to be lived fully, then saying NO to fear and taking a risk may be a necessary step to success. It

takes courage to do what you've never done and go where you've never been. That's how things get done. God's work, doing good to other people, takes our hands and feet. It takes our commitment to action. So, whatever huge decision looms before you, your best solution will likely be made from the side of courage, rather than fear, for in the end, a fearful decision is a dangerous decision. Alan Alda puts it like this: "You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. You can't get there by bus, only by hard work, risking, and by not quite knowing what you're doing. What you'll discover will be wonderful – yourself." Does that sound like a place you want to go? Don't worry about making mistakes getting there. You're liable to make as many doing nothing as doing something.

**How to?** Keep a list of the mistakes that you made yesterday. Pray over them and thank God that He gave you the opportunity to learn from them.

### **If We Had Known! (19:41-48)**

*"If you had known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes."*

Over the course of the last five decades, America has been busy doing things. Whether it was manufacturing or technology, America has been at the forefront of change and innovation. Unfortunately, this "doing" has not spread itself into every aspect of our society. Family farms have declined at an alarming rate over the past twenty years or so. Hunger and poverty continue to be an ongoing stain on our economic and social fabric. Homelessness has increased and, although we have made tremendous strides combating and even overcoming such terrible diseases like polio and tuberculosis, we continue to be a "sick" nation as cancer rates and heart disease have recently seen alarming and rapid increases in growth. Strange as it seems, the more we grow the more it seems we decline. This is especially true as we consider the spiritual growth of this great nation since the days not so long ago when prayers rose up from factory benches, classroom desks, and public places around this nation as we faced a world at war.

I was particularly struck by this the other day as I tuned into my favorite internet radio station to listen to old time radio broadcasts from the 1940s and 1950s. I happened to tune in a Lux Radio Theater production from the mid-1940s during the darkest days of the war in Europe and the Pacific. The star of the performance, Van Heflin, took a moment out from the broadcast to deliver a special message and a prayer for our troops, airmen, and sailors around the world. He invoked the name of God as he asked for divine blessings on our war effort. He talked about the terrible toll of the war and how so many were suffering so much in the nations that had been invaded and subjugated. He asked the radio audience to join in with him as he prayed, finishing with these words, "May Almighty God and His Son Jesus Christ be with us all as we face these days of uncertainty, hardship and great sorrow. Amen!"

I was struck with the application for our nation today. Once again we live in a time of great conflict and sorrow. Nations have been invaded by terrorists and subjugated. Our troops, airmen and sailors are again in harm's way. Again darkness has spread itself over our nation, but unless it is a radio preacher, you won't hear anyone on the radio or TV invoking the name of God. And Jesus Christ? Not likely! I can only imagine how our Savior must feel as he looks down upon the nation that He had ordained to take His Word to every corner of the world. He most surely must be crying out, "if you had only known this day what would bring you peace!" May the Lord grant that there is yet time to call upon His name and bring our nation's sorrows to the foot of the cross.

**How to?** If you have not shed a tear lately for your country, perhaps you do not know the times. Reckon the times and reflect; there is so little left.

## **Duets With The Tax Man! (20:20-26)**

*“They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent.”*

Taxes. Federal, state, county, sales, stadium, use and, not to forget, social security and medicare taxes. Last I heard the average person works until May 19th just to pay the tax man. That’s 138 days or nearly 38% of our working time each year. Somehow it seems unjust to render unto Caesar over one-third of our annual income. Watching the deductions add up on your check stub, week after week, year after year can be discouraging, especially when it seems that services rendered haven’t risen at the same pace. Nonetheless, a Christian knows his duty for Jesus taught that Caesar can own much and demand even more, but of the things that really count, his hands were feeble and his grasp quite short. The problem is, it’s hard to remember that when you are barely scraping by week after difficult week.

Here’s a story. “A father was trying to teach his fifth-grade son the value of tithing. The boy listened attentively only to say, ‘I still don’t understand why you have to pay taxes.’ His father replied, ‘Because the Bible says we must give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and unto God what belongs to God.’ His son looked puzzled. ‘That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Dad. Caesar died a long time ago.’ (“Life in Our House,” Christian Parenting Today magazine)

It’s true, government seems to grow fatter year after year as our wallets seem to be getting slimmer. Ultimately, however, when we remember that what we have is nothing but a loan from God and not really ours in the first place, it does tend to put a different spin on things. God chose government to fill a very special role in our lives, to provide a secure footing here, while we journey homeward to a land where there are no taxes since there’s nothing to tax. The environment is work-free; and not only will the lion lay down with the lamb but the taxpayer will sing duets with the IRS man.

I guess when you think of it, giving up a good portion of what we earn in taxes is not so bad after all. If it were that easy to fill the wallet we might not be as industrious in our pursuit of labor. Even worse, if there were little taxes or none at all the temptation to focus on our money and possessions would be all that stronger. Knowing that our paycheck is vulnerable to the tax man puts money into the perspective that God prefers. It is not our own labor that insures safety and security in this life. It’s by His grace we live in peace. Let Caesar have his due. God will also work His grace through that same government which taxes us; of that we can be assured. A Christian knows which side his bread is buttered on. The fact that we pay 38% of what we earn in taxes gives government but little hold on our lives. Our lives in truth are firmly in the grasp of God, who has paid the bill in full, taxes included!

*How to?* It may be true that there are only two things we can be sure of, death and taxes. For a Christian, though, we are assured we won’t see death; and when we cross to the other side there won’t be any taxes. So, this too shall pass away.

## **The Water Is Fine! (21:14-15)**

*“But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict”*

It’s human nature to believe that there is no one better able to judge our safety and comfort than we ourselves. You know—you go on vacation and everyone piles down to the beach. The water is there beckoning you to jump in, but everyone hesitates; except for that one person who just has to be first to do everything. They are the one brave soul who leaps right into the water without so much as testing a toe to see whether it’s warm or cold. They dive in and come up always refreshed and beckoning. “Hey! Come on in. The water’s fine! See, it isn’t cold at all.” “Right?” you

say. You know darn well that the water IS cold and that a trap is being set. You put a toe in and a shiver goes right up your spine. You know if you dive in you'll be fine. But, there's always that hesitation—that reluctance to believe the voice of reassurance. "Come on. Look at me! Trust me! The water's fine!"

Assurance. Everyone looks for it. In fact, we crave it. The funny thing is, however, we can't realize the benefits unless we're willing to trust the giver of the assurance first.

Here's a story: A climber in the Alps had come to a perilous gap in the ice where the only way to get across was to place his foot in the outstretched hand of the guide. Told to do this by the guide, the climber hesitated a moment as he looked into the gloomy depths below. For all the obvious reasons, it just didn't seem like the safe thing to do. He hesitated, looking down into the deep gap below. Seeing the hesitation, the guide said, "Have no fear, sir, that hand never yet lost a man." The guide smiled and stretched out his hand again, reassuring the climber. Tentatively, he reached out his foot to the guide who firmly grasped it in the palm of his hand and, with a lift and a pull, tugged the climber to safety on the other side of the ice gap. (Sunday School Times)

When we commit ourselves into the hands of Jesus Christ, we can be sure that we are committed to the strong, sure keeping of hands that have never yet lost a man yet who was willing to reach out. The Bible tells us that even when the world threatens us with its most dire persecutions, "Not a hair of y(our) head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life" (Luke 21:18). This is not to say that believers will be exempt from physical harm or death. Rather, he was saying that none of his followers would suffer eternal death. Jesus calls to each of us, "Come in, the water is fine!" With that assurance we can plunge into a life of good works and spiritual health; reassured that He would never ask us to jump unless the water was truly very fine. It's up to us to take the dive, knowing the water will be just fine after all.

**How to?** It's always good to remember that, like an earthly father, we can always trust God to have our best interests at heart. It makes each day less of a risk and more of a promise.

### **Tomorrow's Trivia! (22:24)**

*"... I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away."*

Anxiety. We all suffer from it from time to time. The way things are these days, anxiety seems to be a real, unneeded daily companion. Did you know, however, that an average person's anxiety is focused on: 40%— these are things that will never happen, 30% – these are things about the past that can't be changed, 12% – unfortunate things about criticism from others, mostly untrue by the way, 10% – fretting about health, which, by the way, gets worse with stress, and, finally, 8% – about real problems that will be faced?

Think about it. If only about 8% of all the issues in our lives really turn out to be something of importance, why is it that we spend so much time in worry and stress about all the rest of the "things" we can do nothing about? If we sat down and evaluated the following day everything that we were concerned about yesterday, it would, ultimately, result in an exercise of shame and embarrassment. Literally, we would look like fools because of our concern for things that we can't change or affect in any way whatsoever. What had appeared to us to be of great importance twenty-four hours earlier, for the most part, has resulted in the trivial, matters without consequence or importance.

I love this story. J. Arthur Rank, an English executive, being efficient and always concerned about using his time to the best advantage, decided to do all his worrying only on one day each week. The rest of the week he devoted to forgetting about his worries at all. For this purpose he chose Wednesdays. When anything happened that gave him anxiety and annoyed his ulcer, he would write it down on a slip of paper and put it in his “worry box” and forget about it until the following Wednesday. The interesting thing was that, on the following Wednesday when he opened his worry box, he found that most of the things that had disturbed him the past six days were already settled. It would have been useless to have worried about them in the first place. (Source Unknown.)

Sure, there are important things going on in life that we do need to pay attention to. It’s just that if we spend nearly all of our time worrying about the inconsequential, we won’t have time to focus on things of consequence that God DOES want us to be concerned about. When we are so wrapped up in ourselves, so concerned for the little things that affect us everyday, we have the tendency to miss what IS really important. The key to knowing what is worth concern and what isn’t is this: does it concern me here or in heaven? If in heaven, be concerned; if on earth, let God worry about it. He can handle the trivial just fine all by Himself.

*How to?* Try keeping a “worry box.” You may find that, in the end, you may have to change the name on the box from “worry” to “trivia.”

### **Remember! (23:42)**

*“Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’”*

I was filling my car up with gas recently, minding my own business, thinking about nothing but the numbers turning on the pump, when a man walked up to me and held out his hand. “Remember me?” he stated confidently. At first glance I was puzzled, but in a moment or two my memory was jogged. “Sure! Jim. Wow, it’s good to see you again.” Jim and I had worked together many years ago; in fact, decades ago. Although neither of us looked the same as we had back in those days, somehow he recognized me and I him. The reunion was sweet and we promised to stay in touch. Shaking hands, we chatted for a moment and then parted ways. As he pulled out of the station with a wave and a smile, my heart was warmed. There was a sense of euphoria having seen someone I hadn’t seen in years, renewing a friendship that had long since become but a dim memory.

Remembering. It’s one of those rare gifts we often don’t stop long enough to do. The moment passes and the opportunity may be missed. Looking back can be a real gift, for the giver and the given. How often I have seen someone I thought I knew but wasn’t sure. We’ve all done it. We spot someone who we think we know but we hesitate. We decide it’s too risky and let the moment pass. Even if we do make a mistake in memory from time to time, the exercise of remembering is well worth the risk; especially when it comes to remembering what God has done in our lives as the one Friend who never forgets us.

Sometimes we as Christians need to stop along life’s road and look back. Although it might have been winding and steep, we can see how God directed us by His faithfulness. Here’s how F.E. Marsh described what the Christian can see when he looks back: We see how God has delivered us in the past. We also see the ways He has led us when we were lost. If we try hard enough, we will remember the blessings He has given us even when we didn’t ask and the victories He has won for us, turning loss into gain. Finally, when we take the time to study it, we will remember how God offered encouragement when we were awash in a sea of guilt and criticism. When you and I face difficulties, we sometimes forget God’s past faithfulness. It’s easy to do that when trouble comes knocking at the door. We see only the detours and the dangerous paths. Looking back, however, we will also see the joy of victory, the challenge of the

climb, and the presence of walking with God who has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. Remembering is the key and knowing that God never forgets us even when we forget him is the door to living life to its fullest.

*How to?* “Remember me God?” Not a bad habit to get into. Of course God remembers us, but just saying the words is a comfort, especially knowing the answer will always be “Yes!”

### **Forgiving The Despicable! (23:32-43)**

*“Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.’”*

When you were a kid there were two kinds of people in the world: those you liked and those you didn’t. What determined which was simply the degree of fault you were willing to tolerate in each. Friends, even those we liked, were people certainly capable of hurting us from time to time. Nonetheless, because of the special relationship we had with them, we were always willing to overlook the occasional slight in favor of a continuing friendship. Enemies, however, were those with whom we would not tolerate even the slightest of wrongs. Since we had little or nothing to do with them ordinarily, we forfeited nothing by maintaining an unforgiving spirit toward these people. In a sense, as children, we often were quite discriminating in how we chose to use the powerful tool called forgiveness.

As adults, however, God has called us to a different spirit. It’s a spirit that finds it as easy to forgive as it is to despise; to put the act of forgiving on the same emotional level as the tendency we have to despise. Since despising comes easily, so should forgiveness. This is demonstrated in a prayer that was uncovered decades ago from the horrors of the Ravensbruck Nazi concentration camp. The prayer, found in the clothing of a dead child, says: “O Lord, remember not only the men and woman of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all of the suffering they have inflicted upon us. Instead, remember the fruits we have borne because of this suffering, our fellowship, our loyalty to one another, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart that has grown from this trouble. When our persecutors come to be judged by you, let all of these fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness . . .” (Author unknown.)

“Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” With these beautiful and simple words from the cross, our Savior demonstrated for all of us the foolishness of dividing friend and foe. Jesus could have said, “Father forgive Peter for denying me and my disciples for deserting me.” But, to include the Jews that falsely testified against him or the members of the Sanhedrin that called for his death? Certainly these were individuals worthy of scorn, not forgiveness. The fact is, however, that Jesus came to earth to bring forgiveness to all, not just His friends. It’s not easy to grant forgiveness to those who cast an unforgiving profile is it? How do we do it? There is only one way. Instead of thinking about the sin, think about the spiritual growth you will be granted each time you forgive those who don’t seem to deserve it. Let the fruits that are borne from the ills you have suffered be your compelling guide to glorify God when you forgive even those who despise or hurt you.

*How to?* Make forgiveness an every day necessity in your life. Search your heart for someone daily who might be in need of your forgiveness. Getting into the habit of forgiving makes it all that easier when necessity demands it.

### **The Devil’s In The Detail! (23:50-56)**

*“Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.”*

Recently I had my old car into the shop for major bodywork and repainting. The wear and tear of nearly four decades of driving had really taken their toll. The original paint finish had faded. In places the brown undercoating was showing through and it had become nearly impossible to tell just what color the car had been first. Surface rust had sprung up in abundance over the entire chassis. There were dings, dent and creases everywhere. Both rear fenders had been buckled due to accidents and there was a good size dent in one of the front fenders. The car looked sorry as I left it in the capable hands of the body shop. It would be many weeks before it would be finished.

Over the course of the next several weeks I had occasion to stop into the shop just to see how things were going. I was amazed the very first time that I stopped to see that all the dents, creases and dings had been eliminated. The old paint, however, remained as well as the surface rust. The car looked better, but it still looked kind of sad. The next time I stopped by I was told that the car had been stripped and readied for painting. There it sat, chrome taped up to prevent over-painting and completely devoid of color and finish. Improvement? Sure, the surface rust was gone and there were no more dents, creases and dings, but it still seemed a long way from being finished. Weeks later I finally I got call I was waiting for. My car was “finished and I could pick it up.” I rushed to the shop and there it was; gleaming, painted and smooth. As I paid my bill I asked to see the guys who had done the work. I thanked each of them and then got into my car to drive home. The first thing I noticed, however, was that there was no wax on the car and the entire interior was coated with a thick layer of dust. There was also a missing chrome bezel over the back running light. The car was finished but not complete. Several weeks later, new bezel in hand, interior cleaned, and a fresh coat of wax, it gleamed. It was the few final details that made all the difference. The devil was in the details, but the details finished the job.

The Galilean women that followed Jesus to the cross were not important enough to be pursued by the Romans as “followers” of Jesus.” They weren’t preachers or baptizers but they did what they could. They were the “detailers,” the ones who took care of the little things, like preparing Jesus’ body for burial, that on the surface did not seem that important relevant to the whole picture. Yet their deeds were works of completion and finishing. On the one hand small, on the other great. It’s like that with us as well. The devil may be in the detail, but it’s God that completes the whole picture. When serving our Lord, we need to remember that often in great tasks rest small opportunities.

*How to?* Do you sometimes feel that you don’t matter? Find joy in that since in all likelihood God is using you to be an important part of a larger plan.

### **Touch! (24:39)**

*“Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”*

My brother and his wife recently visited Holly and I for the Thanksgiving holiday. I hadn’t seen him in a while and his presence was novel in a way. While he and I were only a little more than eleven months apart in age and growing up we were inseparable, situation and time had separated us years ago. Now his voice was novel and his presence around me different. I took him for granted growing up since he was there every morning when I awoke and every night I went to sleep. We shared a room, food at the table, even cars and clothes. I hugged him when he came into the house and the flesh of my brother became real again. We had wrestled growing up; we had fought and pushed each other. There was always contact. That kept the realness of my brother alive. Now the realness had begun to grow again; merely because of touch.

Here’s a story: No more convincing evidence of the absence of the loving touch than that compiled by Dr. Rene Spitz. In a South American orphanage, Spitz observed and recorded what happened to 97 children who were deprived of

emotional and physical contact with others. Because of a lack of funds, there was not enough staff to adequately care for these children, ages 3 months to 3 years old. Nurses changed diapers and fed and bathed the children. But there was little time to hold, cuddle, and talk to them as a mother would. After three months many of them showed signs of abnormality. Besides a loss of appetite and being unable to sleep well, many of the children lay with a vacant expression in their eyes. After five months, serious deterioration set in. They lay whimpering, with troubled and twisted faces. Often, when a doctor or nurse would pick up an infant, it would scream in terror. Twenty-seven, almost one-third, of the children died the first year, but not from lack of food or health care. They died of a lack of touch and emotional nurture. Because of this, seven more died the second year. Only twenty-one of the 97 survived, most suffering serious psychological damage. (Charles Sell, *Unfinished Business*, Multnomah, 1989, p. 39.)

There is no substitute for touch. As often as I am able to speak with my brother on the phone, his voice is no substitute for his hug or his handshake. His voice reminds me, his touch makes that memory real and tangible. So it is with Jesus. If He had been but a spirit, no flesh or bones, no ability to touch us with warm flesh, how or why would we follow Him? His realness would be missing. I am glad that my brother and I could touch again. I long for that day that I will do that with my brother, Christ Jesus. Then I know I will really be home, back where I belong among those I love to touch.

*How to?* Make it a point to hug someone close to you today. Touch brings love home, where it belongs.

## John

### **Never Despair Nor Trust! (2:24)**

*“But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men.”*

Shopping recently at a local hardware store I bumped into a guy shopping for “No Trespassing” signs. As I parked myself across the aisle from him I couldn’t help but notice the concerned look on his face as he examined each sign he picked up. “Having problems with the neighbors?” I offered with a friendly chuckle. He held up one last sign and, without turning to look at me he spit out the words like hot soup. “Well, who CAN you trust these days?” It was deer hunting season and he was concerned, as it turns out, with poaching on his property. We chatted for a while. He told me about how even with the signs up he had to post additional warnings every year. Last year it was a number of “This Means You!” handmade, signs to accompany the yellow and black No Trespassing ones. He shook his head and picked two of the yellow signs up, slapping them against his thigh in frustration. “They just rip them down anyway. I don’t know why I even bother!”

It’s often like that with our relationship with God as well. It’s easy to become despaired of God when we place our trust in our own judgment over His. Here’s a thought from Sam Rutherford: “Duties belong to us, events are God’s; when we take our faith on a path to meddle with events, and then hold God accountable for whatever happens, it’s like saying to God, ‘So God, is that how you really wanted it to turn out?’ We are treading on very, lose ground; we have no business being there as it is our duty to let God exercise His office without our interference or advice, and to steer things as He see fit to do so; there is no role or possibility here for us, except to see how we did our duty and that is that.” [(adapted) Samuel Rutherford 1991, *Focus on the Family* Publishing, p. 106]

Mistrust is one thing. I couldn't blame that guy shopping for the signs for that. His problem seemed more despair as opposed to trust, however. Maybe if he tried a kinder and gentler approach to signage, I thought, he might get better results? It was his duty to post the signs. People can be expected to try to break the rules. The likelihood of compliance, however, probably had everything to do with his misplaced trust in the signs. I think that God wants us to trust no one, but never despair of anyone. Our duty is to always try to do the right thing and then trust God to take our right actions and turn them into something that works for Him. Reminding people of the rules is everyone's duty. God expects that of us. However, it's God's role to turn our reminders into His events of conscience. We can do no more than this, our duty, and He will do no less than this, turning our duty into life changing opportunities.

*How to?* Remind yourself today that events unfold as God wills; duty unfolds as we are mindful to regard it.

### **The Ask! (2:37)**

*"When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, 'What do you want?'"*

Many years ago when my Grandpa Leo was still alive and I was a young boy I got to go fishing from his pier whenever we visited him at Long Lake. His pier circled a small lagoon in which many boy-sized, pan fish thrived. In those days I didn't have a spinning rod or fancy lures to cast; I simply fished with a cane pole, bobber and worm. On one such occasion I remember fishing with my Grandpa and brothers on a sunny, summer day. We all trotted down the precarious stairway to the lagoon, poles in hand. Grandpa kept a stock of red worms in a pail inside a little shed he had build down on the dock. We trooped diligently up to the shed at which point my brothers asked for worms. (Grandpa had a rule about asking.) Grandpa doled them out. Then he did something I'll never forget. He baited his line and walked away leaving me with a bobber, lead sinker and a very lonely hook. "What about me?" I chimed in somewhat annoyed. He glanced back as he swung his line out into the lagoon. "You didn't ask." I swallowed, apologized and made the ask. I got my worm and Grandpa got his point across.

Why DO we have to ask for things, especially when it's obvious we're in need and, for that matter, the person we're asking knows what that need is? And, in the case of God, He already knows what we need before we ask. Here's a story: Among those in the court of Alexander the Great was a philosopher of outstanding ability but little money. He asked Alexander for financial help and was told to draw whatever he needed from the imperial treasury. But when the man requested an amount equal to \$50,000, he was refused—the treasurer needing to verify that such a large sum was authorized. When he asked Alexander, the ruler replied, "Pay the money at once. The philosopher has done me a singular honor. By the largeness of his request he shows that he has understood both my wealth and generosity." (Today in the Word, MBI, August, 1991, p. 19.)

My Grandpa knew what I needed and his intention was to give me that worm even as he was handing them out to my brothers. Yet, he went through the exercise of requiring the ask first. He knew that I owed him the respect that ask would bring. He also knew that my asking would help me discover when I was his age what I now expect of my grandsons. The act of asking really didn't produce the worm, rather, my willingness to respect my Grandpa, give him his due, did. God is no different. He knows what we want and need and is willing, even before we ask, to comply. He expects His due, our worship without which any gift we might receive from Him would be meaningless anyway. It's all in the ask!

*How to?* God is surely a mind reader, but that is never an excuse for avoiding the ask when it comes to what we wish Him to give. It's the least we can do for a God that is so generous.

### **Within Arms Reach! (3:10-11)**

*“I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony?”*

I was blessed with what my mother calls “deep thinking.” You know, I was always the guy who could take a light conversation and turn it into something pretty heavy. While this might always have been a good way to get the conversation headed in another direction, it isn’t one of my more endearing traits. What makes deep thinking even more treacherous is that sometimes we deep thinkers plunge so deeply into the forest of ideas that we can’t see the forest for the trees. We get lost so lost in the knowledge that we are digging into that we can’t get a good grasp on the idea. In that sense we dig so deeply into the knowledge, digging a hole deeper than we even need to dig, that we lose sight of the object of that knowledge altogether. We’re oh so close, yet so very far away at the same time.

It’s often like that when it comes to understanding how we can get to heaven. We’re told to read the Bible, get a grasp on God’s Word, meditate on it and memorize it if possible. That’s a good thing. Yet, just knowing what saves us doesn’t get us saved. We’re warm but not yet hot on the path to getting there.

Here’s a story: Several years ago a man and his wife were found frozen to death in their car. A blizzard had dumped tons of snow in the area. The couple had slid on the icy road and burrowed their vehicle into the ditch. Within a few hours the car was completely buried. Because of the intensity of the storm no one was able to get to their vehicle in time to rescue them. Before she died, the woman scribbled a note on a piece of paper and stuffed it in the glove compartment. The note read: “I don’t want to die this way.” Tragically, less than six feet from their icy grave was a stranded bus that had simply pulled over to the side of the road, whose festive passengers remained warm throughout the night. The couple had been so close to being saved, yet, at the same time, so very, very far away. (Today in the Word, October, 1990, p. 28.)

Knowing about heaven and what the Bible has to say about it is good. It puts us close to where we need to be. Nonetheless, close isn’t good enough when it comes to getting there. We can memorize every passage in Scripture about salvation, but still miss the mark if we don’t know the God whom the Bible reveals and the salvation that He offers. Just reading the words can get us into the forest, but it doesn’t necessarily allow us to see the trees. We need to pray that God would send us an understanding of what we read and hear. Opening our hearts to God’s Holy Spirit is the key to knowing Him and understanding His saving grace and plan for salvation in our lives. Anything less is nothing but an icy grave within arms reach of a warm eternity.

*How to?* Reading the Bible is like going to school. In school we had a teacher to answer our questions and help us understand the problems. We have no less in our Heavenly Father. He is waiting to hear from you; ask Him to put the Words into deeds in your life and a warm eternity will be the result.

### **God So Loved! (3:16)**

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life!”*

Yesterday was Sunday. Since it is also that time of year, it football season. I’m not a big TV viewer and watch very few football games from start to finish. Yesterday, however, I had the opportunity to tune in the TV set in for a few moments. It had been a long and rather burdensome week for me and the thought of just watching a few minutes of football seemed attractive. As the picture flicked to life I heard the sound of a roaring crowd of spectators and was greeted with the sight of two uprights in the end zone and a placekicker about to launch a field goal through them. As the ball left his foot and sailed toward the goalposts the camera, following the arc of the ball, focused between the

posts at the crowd in the end zone seats waiting for the ball to land. In the middle of the crowd was a banner, "John 3:16" is all it said. Even though I watch few football games, I was familiar with the banner. There probably isn't a Sunday Pro or Saturday college game that doesn't host someone sitting in the end zone holding that banner. It has become so common that it borders the ubiquitous. "God so love the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." I think that most people see that banner and think to themselves, "There's another one of those silly signs!" The question is, is it silly to hold a banner like this on national TV?

Here's a story: A certain medieval monk announced he would be preaching next Sunday evening on "The Love of God." As the shadows fell and the light ceased to come in through the cathedral windows, the congregation gathered. In the darkness of the altar, the monk lighted a candle and carried it to the crucifix. First of all, he illumined the crown of thorns, next, the two wounded hands, then the marks of the spear wound. In the hush that fell, he blew out the candle and left the chancel. There was nothing else to say. (Source unknown.)

"God so loved the world." I understand why people make the banners and hold them up in end zones. They do it because they want others to know about the amazing love of God. He loves you and I so much that He was willing to sacrifice even His own Son for us. There can be no greater love than that and no words can add much to make this sentence any sweeter or more powerful. This simple verse has been called "the Gospel in a nutshell" because it tells the whole story of the Bible. So, banners in the end zone? Perhaps they are silly. But for the moment as I was standing there in front of my TV set with the weight of the world pressing down on my shoulders yesterday, I was happy to be reminded. So, thank you to the banner makers one and all; it is always good to be reminded of why we are here and where we are headed.

**How to?** Make sure that a day does not go by in your life unless you are reminded of the love of God. Biblical context is also important. The Third Chapter of John is filled with a deep understanding of the love of God. Make it a priority to keep these verses close to your heart. The burdens of the day will always seem lighter.

### **Spiritual Money Tree! (3:21)**

*"But whosoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."*

Are you looking for that proverbial money tree? There have been many times in my life when my wife Holly and I have lamented that such a thing doesn't really exist. As we were doing the bills the other day it struck me that, although the bills needed to be paid, those pieces of paper with due dates and "fill in the amount paid" blanks, although important, really had little to do with defining how rich we were or weren't. They may define a balance in our bank account, but they don't define the balance of spiritual riches God has deposited into our heavenly spiritual account. Therein lies true abundance in life and no amount of spending can ever deplete the account. What a comforting thought. In fact, the more we draw on that account, the richer it becomes. It is never depleted or overdrawn. As Holly and I finished gathering up the bills and receipts, I relished the thought of that "spiritual" money tree for the moment. The thought took the sting out of paying the bills. Just to think that all I needed to do was to reach out and pick all the fruit I wanted without cost or deficit was truly comforting.

Living the abundant life. Perhaps for far too long we've equated abundance with material things?

John Stuart writes: “Christy Blanchard suffered from cancer and went through a lot of treatment programs. She had a great love of other people and even in the midst of all that she was going through, she kept thinking, praying for, and encouraging other people whose circumstances were less serious than her own, but who needed a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear, or a kind word and a smile. I constantly felt blessed each time I was in her company. I know that she was weary and anxious at times, and could have been overwhelmed by all she experienced, but she didn’t want the cancer to determine who she was. She wasn’t wealthy or successful according to the world, but she had great riches in her life – family and friends, colleagues and neighbors – whose lives were touched and greatly enriched by her courage, compassion, and care.” (John Stuart)

We enrich this earth when we display our faith, and offer others our friendship as a part of the everlasting joy and abundant life that Christ Jesus deposited in our spiritual accounts. If we’re looking for abundance, it all starts with our willingness to enrich the earthly journeys of others through our smile, our warm touch and our kindness and concern for them before ourselves. Abundance has little to do with riches and everything to do with how we live our lives, no matter how meager they are.

**How to?** Practice smiling in front of a mirror today and then take that smile out and use it.

### **Story Telling! (4:10)**

*“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”*

There’s an art to telling a story. It can’t be too short or too long. Each thought that goes into a story has to be linked with the next. Words and ideas need to build, one upon the other. Everything in a story needs to be linked, from start to finish, with the first sentence and the last. When the story is finished, the listener should be left with the satisfying feeling that their time spent listening was worth it. A good story captivates, leads and pulls the listener along. When that last thought, that last bit of information is given, the storyteller, if the story is told well, should be able to conclude with a smile, not a frown. Telling a good story is truly an art form.

What is the greatest story ever told? It is, of course, the story of the coming of the Savior, Jesus Christ. His birth, his ministry and his suffering and death are the ingredients of the greatest story that could ever be told. Yet, you and I as the story tellers have an obligation to tell it well. When we are finished, those with whom we share this story should be stirred, captivated and motivated to tell it themselves.

Here’s a story. Fritz Kreisler, the world-famous violinist, earned a fortune with his concerts and compositions, but he generously gave most of it away. So, when he discovered an exquisite violin on one of his trips, he wasn’t able to buy it. Later, having raised enough money to meet the asking price, he returned to the seller, hoping to purchase the beautiful instrument. But to his great dismay it had been sold to a collector. Kreisler made his way to the new owner’s home and offered to buy the violin. The collector said it had become his prized possession and he would not sell it. Keenly disappointed, Kreisler was about to leave when he had an idea. “Could I play the instrument once more before it is consigned to silence?” he asked. Permission was granted, and the great virtuoso filled the room with such heart-moving music that the collector’s emotions were deeply stirred. “I have no right to keep that to myself,” he exclaimed. “It’s yours, Mr. Kreisler. Take it into the world, and let people hear it.” (Our Daily Bread February 4, 1994)

Jesus knew how to tell a story. His message was sin and forgiveness, but it always came sandwiched in between love and grace. His story was an exquisite instrument of sin and grace. Jesus told that story as Kreisler played that violin. When he was finished, it spoke for itself, the love and grace so moving that the listener was compelled to know more,

want more. This Christmas season is a wonderful time for you and I to tell that story as well. To tell it well we need to play it like Kriesler. The Christmas story is all about love, grace and forgiveness. Share that and let the story speak for itself.

*How to?* When you tell the story of Christmas think of it as a song and not just a greeting. As there are verses to a song, there are story-telling steps to the Christmas story. Don't leave out sin and grace and never stop telling about the love that joins the birth of Christ to the death of Christ.

### **The Vessel is Us! (4:14)**

*"... but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*

What's your purpose? Why are you here? What is it that God wants you to do and, such purpose defined, why has he chosen you to do it? Did you ever find yourself asking those questions? Many Christians today ARE asking those questions and others having to do with their own, Christian identity. I guess it isn't surprising this is the case as we live in a culture that is all about self and the importance of knowing who and what you are all about. There are innumerable workshops and seminars on self-purpose. Recently even the church has been flooded with "purpose-driven" books and materials. It seems that these days, unless we know our purpose and are dedicated to putting that purpose into action, many of us would be left without a path to being a successful Christian. How can you or I lead others to Christ if we don't know God's specific purpose for our lives?

Are purpose-driven lives the lives that God is seeking for his church, or has God something else in mind for how he wants you and I to be driven? For that matter, how important is self at all to God?

Here's some interesting data to reveal how many Christians evaluated the importance of self these days. This poll sheds light on the paradox of increased religiosity and decreased morality. According to sociologist Robert Bellah, 81 percent of the American people also say they agree that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious belief independent of any church or synagogue." Thus the key to the paradox is the fact that those who claim to be Christians are arriving at faith on their own terms — terms that make no demands on behavior. A woman named Sheila, interviewed for Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*, embodies this attitude. "I believe in God," she said. "I can't remember the last time I went to church. But my faith has carried me a long way. It's 'Sheila-ism.' Just my own little voice." (Charles Colson, *Against the Night*, p. 98.)

As Christians I believe that God really doesn't want you and I to be asking, "Who am I?" Who we are isn't really important to God and, perhaps, that's why it ought not to be important to us. In the history of creation, whether an Abram the nomad or David the shepherd, God has always worked with the unknown, the obscure, with people just like you and just like me. He starts with little and adds much, himself. It's his divine recipe for greatness—a little bit of us and a whole lot of him works just fine. Purpose? I guess that answers the question. Your purpose and mine is just to be here; the greatness is Him, the vessel is us.

*How to?* It is good discipline to remind yourself daily of why you are here. You are here for God and not for you. With that in mind, there are no failures in life or successes. Everything is a an outcome of God in us, not us in things.

### **The Time For Joy Is Now! (5:9-12)**

*“At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, ‘It is the Sabbath, the law forbids you to carry your mat.’”*

A number of years ago I attended a funeral for an aunt. She had a large family and the funeral home was filled with sons, daughters, grandsons and granddaughters. My aunt was well loved and I knew that she would be sorely missed. The atmosphere at the funeral home however was anything but sad. As I moved from one group of mourners to another I was struck by the amount of joy that filled the room. One small enclave of children were talking about how their Mom had loved a good prank. As they looked back over her life they recalled the many pranks she had managed to pull off. They laughed out loud, little striving to be quiet. The same thing seemed to be true of each small group of mourners. Everyone was smiling, laughing and telling stories. Rather than a great deal of crying and consoling, the air was filled with chuckles, even belly laughs. You couldn't help but walk away from the funeral home that day without a smile on your face.

A funeral home ordinarily doesn't seem like the best place to find humor. Yet, when I thought about it later, it seemed so right. If there ever was a time for joy, why not in the depths of sorrow?

Here's a thought from author Leo Buscaglia. He tells this story about his mother and their "misery dinner." It was the night after his father came home and said it looked as if he would have to go into bankruptcy because his partner had absconded with their firm's funds. While it might seem normal for a family to mourn this turn of events, that was the last thing on his mother's mind. Within moments of my father's announcement as the thoughts of frugality, loss and making do were just beginning to descend on us, my Mother went upstairs to her bedroom and went through her jewelry box. Finding what she needed, she went out and sold the jewelry at a local pawn shop. With the money in hand she went to buy food, a lot of food, for a sumptuous feast. When she returned laden with bags and boxes of food other members of the family scolded her for it. "Could she wait until we knew how things were going to sort out?" Was the remark. But she told them that, "The time for joy is now, when we need it most, not next week." Her courageous act rallied the family. (Christopher News Notes, August, 1993.)

There is, of course, a proper place for sadness and weeping in life. I've come to conclusion, however, that although weeping will always be a part of the Christian journey here on earth, joy has a much broader, larger and more important role to play. A time for joy? Perhaps if we come to the conclusion, as did Buscaglia and my Aunt's children, that the time for joy is always now, we'll never feel the need to dwell in sorrow, only visit it every now and then.

**How to?** Sadness is a cup but joy is a mug. Fill each and the mug will always hold more than the cup.

### **Crossing Over! (5:24)**

*“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”*

Near misses. I've had a more than one of them in my life time. There are the near misses that you regret, like being just one number away from a lucky number on a raffle ticket. There are also near misses that you appreciate, like the time your car radiator cap pops off and misses nailing you in the middle of your forehead by inches. Life is full of near misses, good and bad. I was reminded of that myself recently as I was walking along the country road that passes by Beech Springs. It was early morning and the sun was just poking above the horizon, casting deep shadows through the trees along my route. I heard a truck coming from behind me and moved over to the shoulder. Even

though I was wearing a reflective vest I guess that the driver may have been looking the other way as he narrowly missed me with only the shadow of his truck passing over me. That was close, I thought. Lucky for me it was only a shadow and not the actual truck that I collided with.

Life is short and I am particularly reminded of that every time I experience one of these near misses in life. However short or long the span, beginnings and ends are just a fact of life.

Here's some statistics about life spans. A lightening bolt lasts 45 to 55 microseconds. The average running shoe worn by the average runner will last 350 to 500 miles. A hard pencil can write up to 30,000 words or draw a line more than 30 miles long. Most ball-point pens will draw a line 4,000 to 7,500 feet long. A group of subatomic particles known as unstable hadrons exists for only one-one-hundred-sextillionth of a second—less time than it takes light to travel a single inch. A 100-watt incandescent bulb will last about 750 hours; a 25-watt bulb, 2,500 hours. A one-dollar bill lasts approximately 18 months in circulation. And, finally, practice footballs used by professionals last two to three days—a playing life of perhaps five hours. (Frank Kendig and Richard Hutton, *Life-spans, or How Long Things Last*, 1979.)

The feeling of making it through a near miss, a span of time that may be but seconds or less in length, is euphoric. When that truck missed me and I was finally able to exhale again, a feeling of joy and relief welled up within me. That was too close and I'm happy to be alive, was my thought. Ironically, I believe that will also be the feeling when someday, perhaps because of a near miss that wasn't, I finally come to Heaven's doors. For, like a harmless shadow, death for a Christian becomes nothing more than a near miss. The truck of death can't touch us. It ran over Jesus but it can't run over us. That WAS close!

**How to?** Life is full of shadows that seem to threaten and harm. Practice standing in them and feeling the comfort of knowing that shadows always pass us by if we're focused on the One, Jesus Christ, who took on all of our fears before us and made them nothing more than passing shadows that will never harm us.

### **Weights and Measures! (5:43)**

*"I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him."*

I was pumping gas recently and I noticed a sticker on the pump that read: "Gauged accurate by the Department of Agriculture, Weights and Measures Division." After fantasizing for the moment what it must be like as an employee of that Department charged with traveling from one gas station to the next, it struck me how much faith and trust we put into the promise that when the pump tells us it has reached the ten gallon mark it has actually measured out ten gallons. I am sure that I've pumped literally tens of thousands of gallons of fuel over the course of the last five decades. A .1% difference in what the pump tells me I've been given over that time, it might account for hundreds of dollars in fuel I didn't receive. Yet, I go on trusting because it's easier than measuring out the fuel on my own.

In a very real sense, the prejudices that we carry with us through life are like that. There are certain things that we are willing to or not willing to believe and we dedicate our lives to keeping it that way. We trust we are right about these beliefs and, besides, it's too much trouble to take the time to measure the evidence for or against them. We simply trust our beliefs to be right and go on dutifully dragging our prejudices behind us, no matter the cost or wisdom in doing that.

Here's a story. For centuries people believed that Aristotle was right when he said that the heavier an object, the faster it would fall to earth. Aristotle was regarded as the greatest thinker of all time, and surely he would not be

wrong. Anyone, of course, could have taken two objects, one heavy and one light, and dropped them from a great height to see whether or not the heavier object landed first. But no one did until nearly 2,000 years after Aristotle's death. In 1589 Galileo summoned learned professors to the base of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Then he went to the top and pushed off a ten-pound and a one-pound weight. Both landed at the same instant. The power of belief was so strong, however, that the professors denied their eyesight. They continued to say Aristotle was right. (Bits & Pieces)

Prejudices invade our lives daily and, if you are like most folks, we pigeon hole them into neat little cubicles of intolerance and often leave them there. We don't weigh their possible good or measure their possible impact on our lives. We simply believe them to be true without exercising good judgment. It's always easier to trust our prejudices; measuring and investigating take so much time. When it comes to people and other points of view, however, God has provided no neat formula or agency to do this for us. In that sense we are the "weights and measure" employees charged with making sure that what we hear is true or false. Our gauge is Scripture, the job of measuring is ours.

*How to?* If you find yourself using terminology like "always" "never" and "ever" in your speech, take care that you are not consigning ideas into neat, little pigeon holes of intolerance.

### **A Fight With No Rear! (6:15)**

*"Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself."*

Back in the late 1940s Studebaker introduced a car called the Champion. In many ways the car was unique, innovative and well made. It was durable, economical, easy to service and, the best part, affordable. Although Studebaker introduced a number of very impressive firsts with this car, fully automatic transmission, filtered cabin air flow, wraparound glass and a number of other innovative options, there was something about the car that just seemed to give buyers pause. You see, the front end seemed to look a lot like the rear end. Even though the headlights identified the front and taillights the rear, the general design of the car gave the impression that it just didn't know whether it was coming or going. Although Studebaker sold a great number of Champions, by 1953 the design had been discontinued in favor of a model that gave the buyer less to think about as to front or rear, that is.

Being able to tell the front from rear in buying a car may not make that much difference when you are tempted to buy a good car. What about life and the many temptations that await you and I? Is knowing front from rear important?

Here's a story. During the War Between the States, a battle took place called the battle of Shiloh. Although there were a number of battles during the war that claimed more casualties, Shiloh will long be remembered as one of the bloodiest. Fighting was at close quarters and there were multiple fronts fighting. About midway through the fight, as the story goes, a young Federal soldier took a wound to his arm. The commanding general happened to be riding near the soldier as he sat in the field tending his wound. Seeing the soldier as a sitting duck in the middle of the field, the General yelled out: "Go to the rear soldier, away from the fighting." The young man rose to his feet, saluted the General and reported. "General, I've been fighting all day in the front and the rear. As much as I can figure, the fighting in the rear is just as bad. In fact, General, "This fight ain't got any rear!" (Adapted—Daily Walk, July 10.)

When it comes to our battle against temptation it's probably good to be reminded that this is one "fight that ain't got any rear" either. We're often tempted by the devil to believe that the front lines, where sins that appear evil from the get-go dwell, like lust, greed and hate, is the only place that matters. However, it's often the fighting in the rear that is, perhaps, even more so. In the rear are the good things that WE want, success, fame, power, that God, may not

want for us. Knowing front from back makes a difference when fighting this war. Falling back, going to the rear in this battle, may end up being more dangerous than the fighting at the front. With sin “this battle ain’t got no rear.” It’s all around us.

*How to?* Make a point each day as you confess your sins to evaluate the good things that you want. Ask God to consider whether these things are needed or not. Let God cover your rear in this fight. The front is dangerous enough

### **Leveraging Our Knees! (7:38)**

*“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”*

Life is tough sometimes. It’s easy to lose perspective on God’s grace when one bad thing after another seems to happen. This was the state of my mind recently as I wandered about the house on a Saturday looking for some task to lose myself in. Perhaps if I could get my mind off the things that weren’t working out, I could put my thoughts behind me. I roamed into the kitchen where my wife was busy cleaning something stuck to the floor; applying elbow grease and, from a kneeling position, leveraging her back strength on the stubborn mark. It struck me that I had often seen Holly get down on her knees to do that. I didn’t need some task to distract me. I needed to quit feeling sorry for myself and do what she was doing, getting the job done on my knees. How often we forget that the best prayer work comes when we leverage it from our knees, putting our spiritual backs into that stubborn problem.

Here’s a story: An old well once stood outside the front door of a family farmhouse in New Hampshire. The water from the well was remarkably pure and cold. No matter how hot the summer or how severe the draught, the well was always a source of refreshment and joy. The years passed and eventually the farmhouse was modernized. Wiring brought electric lights, and indoor plumbing brought hot and cold running water. The old well was no longer needed, so it was sealed for use in possible future emergencies. But one day, years later, the owner had a hankering for the cold, pure water of his youth. So he unsealed the well and lowered a bucket for a taste of the delightful refreshment he remembered. He was shocked to discover that the well that once had survived the severest droughts was bone dry! Perplexed, he began to ask questions of the locals who knew about these kinds of things. He learned that wells of that sort were fed by hundreds of tiny underground rivulets that seep a steady flow of water. As long as the water is drawn out of the well, new water will flow in through the rivulets, keeping them open for more to flow. But when the water stops flowing, the rivulets clog and close up. The well dried up not because it was used too much, but because it wasn’t used enough! (Ben Patterson)

Our souls are like that as well. If we don’t draw on the living water that Jesus promised would well up in us like a spring (John 7:38), our hearts close and dry up, and we find ourselves in a “dry season.” The consequence for not drinking deeply of God is to eventually lose the ability to drink at all. A life without prayer is its own punishment, its disease and its cause. When life gets tough, it’s time to consider leveraging the knee power God has built into every Christian. Life can easily trip us up when we forget to pray. It’s hard to stumble when you are on your knees.

*How to?* Make a point of praying on your knees as a matter of habit. It IS hard to stumble when you are on your knees.

### **Someone or Somebody! (7:37-39)**

*“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”*

Comedian Lily Tomlin once said, "I've always wanted to be somebody, but I see now I should have been more specific." The question is, are you someone or somebody? Someone implies a singular purpose, an identity of uniqueness. Somebody leaves us with the sense that we might be just one of a nameless mass of others. What does God want you and I to be—someone or somebody? Is He content with a whole bunch of sameness or does God have something far more specific, personal, even noble in mind for us?

Here's a story. While walking through the forest, a man found a young eagle who had fallen out of his nest. He took it home and put it in his barnyard where it soon learned to eat and behave like the chickens. One day a naturalist passed by and asked why it was that the eagle should be confined in the barnyard with the chickens. The farmer replied that since he had given it chicken feed and trained it to be a chicken, it had never learned to fly. "Still it has the heart of an eagle," replied the naturalist, "and can surely be taught to fly." He lifted the eagle toward the sky and said, "You belong to the sky and not to the earth. Stretch forth your wings and fly." The eagle, however, was confused. He did not know who he was, and seeing the chickens eating their food, he jumped down to be with them again. The naturalist took the bird to the roof of the house and urged him again. But the eagle was afraid and jumped down once more. Finally the naturalist took it to a high mountain. He held him high above him and encouraged him again, saying, "You are an eagle. You belong to the sky. Stretch forth your wings and fly." The eagle looked around, back towards the barnyard and up to the sky. Slowly he stretched his wings, and with a triumphant cry, soared away. It may be that the eagle still remembers the chickens with nostalgia. It may even be that he occasionally revisits the barnyard. But as far as anyone knows, he has never returned to lead the life of a chicken. (Theology News and Notes, October, 1976, quoted in Multnomah Message, Spring, 1993, p. 1.)

Jesus said that if we believe in Him, "streams of living water will flow from within (us)." To me that implies singularity, importance, yes, even nobility. You and I are eagles, not just another chicken clucking in the farmyard of life. Yet, how often we seem to be content with the farmyard, secure in our religion, happy in our denomination, content to occupy a pew on Sunday without ever looking up into the realm of the eagle, the brother or sister in Christ that we are. God calls you and I to be special, lifted above religion and beyond denomination. Visiting the pew is comforting, living there is not our calling. God made you and I to be someone, not somebody. Ours is to fly, not sit.

### **Foot In Mouth Disease! (7:51)**

*"Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"*

Open mouth, insert foot. There are few times in life more embarrassing than when we say something we didn't mean to say or let something slip that should not have been said. Years ago I was given the task of disguising a daughter's gift (because of its bulk) until it could be presented to her as a surprise. Dutifully, I stowed the box away in my garage and moved items in front of it to conceal it amidst the usual mess inhabiting my garage. Looking back at it I could see that it would never be spied by my daughter and I felt satisfied that I had done my job well.

Later that week, several days before the event, we got to talking around the dinner table. The conversation turned toward ability in one thing or another. Finally it focused in on an ability to straighten out a mess when called to do so. As most of these conversations go, the focus finally turned to the topic of Dad's messy garage. I complained that it was unfair to pick on me and me alone. "Hey, look at your bedroom and how about the dishes on the counter. Besides, sometimes my messes serve a good purpose. If it hadn't been for the current mess in my garage there would not have been any place to hide your . . ." Although I stopped my sermon at this point, it was too late. The cat was

out of the bag and I was embarrassed. I had been so focused on vindicating my abilities that I had totally overlooked the fact that in my zeal I had become the fool. I was met with stares and giggles from around the table.

Here's a story. "Ronald Reagan, recalling an occasion when he was governor of California and made a speech in Mexico City: 'After I had finished speaking, I sat down to rather unenthusiastic applause, and I was a little embarrassed. The speaker who followed me spoke in Spanish -- which I didn't understand -- and he was being applauded about every paragraph. To hide my embarrassment, I started clapping before everyone else and longer than anyone else until our ambassador leaned over and said, 'I wouldn't do that if I were you. He's interpreting your speech.'" (Quoted by Gerald Gardner in *All the Presidents' Wits (Morrow)*, in *Reader's Digest*.)

When we are too quick to save face, our best defense can sometimes prove to be our worst offense. The Bible gives us many examples of "egg on the face" actions that resulted from individuals too quick on the trigger when it came to defending their own, usually inadequate, actions. When we as Christians allow our pride to dictate our actions, we are often likely to end up less "defended" than when we began to defend ourselves in the first place. Sometimes the best way of keeping foot out of mouth is to make sure our mouths aren't open wide enough to receive them.

**How to?** Count to ten before you speak. It helps you to put your remarks into the proper perspective and helps keep your foot out of your mouth.

#### **What Have You Done! (9:4)**

*"As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming when no man can work."*

Over the years I've attended scores of conferences. Some of these were designed to improve my management and leadership skills. Others purposed to increase my knowledge on this or that subject. I really didn't realize how many of these conferences I've attended over the years until I recently took the time to clean out the many binders that inhabit my office bookcase. With every conference is a binder you know. I'm not sure why I saved all of these since tossing them away would have been easier. I've discovered over the years that I seldom reference notes from these binders. As I shipped them off to the recycling center I was struck by the fact that I've spent much time over the years attending conferences, meetings and program introductions that, had I skipped these, my life would be hardly changed at all. The time and effort invested in these diversions was, ultimately, somewhat purposeless.

Time is one of the most precious commodities we're given in this life. From God's perspective, how we use it matters.

Here's a story: John W. There was a cheerful old man who asked the same question of just about every new acquaintance he fell into conversation with: "What have you done that you believe in and you are proud of?" It was an unsettling question for people who had built their self-esteem on their wealth or their family name or their exalted job title. Not that the old man was a fierce interrogator. He was delighted by a woman who answered, "I'm doing a good job raising three children;" and by a cabinetmaker who said, "I believe in good workmanship and practice it." "I don't really care how they answer," said the old man. "I just want to put the thought into their minds. "They should live their lives in such a way that they can have a good answer. Not a good answer for me, but for themselves. That's what's important." (Dr. Dale E. Turner, *MSC Health Action News*, July, 1993, p. 7.)

"What have you done that you believe in and are proud of?" For my part, attending conferences and collecting binders isn't what I'm proud of. Jesus Christ never chose to attend conferences, develop programs or organize new

projects. Even if binders had been around in those days, He wouldn't have collected any. I believe that He used His time perfectly, since He was perfect. His focus was on maintaining a perfect relationship with His Father. Doing His will was all that mattered. We Christians could take a lesson from our Savior on this point. If we truly wanted to do what we can be proud of, from a spiritual perspective that is, each of us ought to strive to please God, serve Him and worship Him. If there is time after that to attend a conference or own a binder, go for it. Odds are that time will be rare.

**How to?** Clean out your bookcases regularly. You may discover that how you've spent your time in the past can always be improved on.

### **Christ's Radar Screen! (10:14-18)**

*"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me –."*

If you have ever had the opportunity to observe a rookery, a place where hundreds, sometimes thousands of birds nest and raise their young, it's an impressive sight. A number of years ago I had the opportunity to visit the barren coast of Maine where literally millions of sea birds, Puffins, terns, gulls and Gannets choose to breed each spring. It's always amazing how the birds can find their little, nesting spots amidst the myriad of other nests. In fact, it's amazing that so many bird can cooperate and coexist in such proximity. Yet, time after time, they do it without difficulty. Even with all the raucous screaming of nestlings and no matter the weather, parent birds never fail to navigate directly to their nest. In autumn, when the rookeries are changed from neatly arranged nesting sites to a confusion of squawking, screaming adolescent birds roaming all over the landscape, it never ceases to amaze me that parent and young always seem to be able to find one another despite the fact that they all look and sound alike and each parent is challenged with the seemingly impossible task of seeing or hearing one chick over another.

In a very real sense it is the same for our Heavenly shepherd and provider, Jesus Christ. Martin Luther wrote: "Who is it that knows and recognizes the sheep while they are so deeply covered up and buried with shame, suffering, death, disgrace, and scandal, that they do not even know themselves? Certainly, none but Christ alone, and He speaks to them these comforting words that in spite of all the things which lead us astray, He will know His lambs and will not forget them or desert them." (Exposition of John X. 12-16. W.A. 21. 335 f.)

Jesus knows His sheep! He knows every small and infinitely insignificant detail of our character and person. Although we are covered in sin, Jesus knows each of us individually, as surely as God knows His own son. There is no hesitation or delay when our needs are in question. Jesus swoops in with everything we need to sustain ourselves. We know this because we know that the Father could always see His Son even when He was a babe in the manger or hanging naked upon a cross. Christ was always in the mind of His Father. In the same way we can be sure that Christ knows us. Like those parent birds, He is constantly zeroed in on us. Waddle around in our sin, squawking our complaints as we might, we can never leave the watchful and ever-seeking eyes of Jesus Christ. Our faces may be dirty and tear-streaked, but rest assured, each bit of dirt and glisten of tear is individually inventoried upon the mind our Good and faithful shepherd Savior!

**How to?** Take inventory of yourself from time to time, from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet. Focus in a mindful way on how you are made and what makes you special in God's eyes.

### **Worth A Thousand Words! (10:11-18)**

*“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*

Who is Jesus? Well, He told us “I am the good shepherd.” We’ve all heard that comparison; but, what does it really mean? Jesus could have compared himself to almost anyone; a farmer, a carpenter, a good ruler or any occupation, for that matter. He chose a shepherd. Long ago when Jesus lived out His physical ministry here on earth, He knew that we would wonder just what kind of Lord He was and is. That’s why He painted the beautiful picture of Himself as the Good Shepherd. In His life He demonstrated the story of the shepherd who treats each one of us as His dear lamb. He demands nothing of us or is threatening in any way; just like a “good shepherd.” He never frightens us or stands above us menacingly. When we are hurt He carries us and will never let go of us. This is the picture He wants us to have of Him.

Dr. Lynn Anderson, in *They Smell Like Sheep*, tells this story: “Several years ago in Palestine, I was riding on a tour bus listening as the tour guide explained the scenery, the history, and the lifestyle. In his description, he included a warm portrayal of the ancient shepherd/sheep relationship. He expounded on how the shepherd builds a relationship with his sheep—how he feeds them and gently cares for them. He then explained how on a previous tour things had backfired as he was giving this same speech. In the midst of his dialogue, he realized he had lost his audience. They were all staring out the bus at a guy chasing a ‘herd’ of sheep. He was throwing rocks and whacking them with sticks. The guide told us that he was so upset that he jumped off the bus and accosted the man, ‘Do you understand what you’re doing?’ he asked. ‘I was telling my story about the gentle ways of shepherds, and here you are assaulting these sheep!’ For a moment, a bewildered look froze on the face of the poor sheep-chaser, then the light dawned and he blurted out, ‘Man. You’ve got me all wrong. I’m not a shepherd. I’m a butcher’” This poor unwitting fellow had just provided a perfect example of what a ‘good shepherd’ is not.” (Dr. Lynn Anderson)

So, who is Jesus? Jesus is what you and I show others He is. Indeed He is the Good Shepherd. He did give His life for His sheep. He is all the things that a good shepherd ought to be and more. He lived out His life in a manner that no other man or shepherd, for that matter, ever did. He’s not only the “good” shepherd; He’s the perfect good shepherd. When asked why we believe in Jesus, we can tell them the story of the Good Shepherd. Better yet, if we live that story ourselves, portraying in our lives the love and sacrifice He did, it would be even better. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words!

**How to?** Take a few minutes to research the life of a real shepherd as those who currently herd sheep in the Middle East. You may get a new appreciation for what Jesus meant by a “good shepherd.”

### **Confidence in the Light! (11:9-10)**

*“Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by the world’s light. It is when he walks by night the he stumbles, for he has no light”*

There is light, and then, there is light. I was reminded of this recently when my wife Holly had to take care of a wound that I had and could not treat on my own. Located in a difficult place, Holly consented on a daily basis to take care of the cleaning and dressing for me. Since she is a nurse the job was familiar to her. Nonetheless, she did meet with some difficulty after the first several dressings failed to hold. Holly was used to the hospital environment where the lighting was optimum, making her work easier and, ultimately, more successful. The lighting in our home however didn’t begin to compare with that. Even with all the lights turned on above and around me, she had a difficult

time seeing the wound and the dressing as well as she needed to. That's when I suggested that she try using my hiker's head lamp when she cleaned and dressed the wound. The intense and focused beam of light from the headlamp made the difference and also gave her the opportunity to use both hands while doing the work. That small but powerful light made all the difference. There were no more problems with the dressing after that.

Dealing with dressing a wound in less than optimum lighting conditions isn't ideal. It can lead to poor results as Holly found out. A similar analogy might be made when we consider our daily walk in faith. There is light, and then, there is light. We can choose to walk in the dim darkness of our own choosing or the light of God's choosing. One is dim and might result in a serious, spiritual trip and fall. The other gives us a better path to getting to where God wants us to go.

Here's a story: Making decisions in the dark can lead to some regrettable consequences. Back in the days before electricity, a tightfisted old farmer was taking his hired man to task for carrying a lighted lantern when he went to call on his best girl. "Why," he exclaimed, "when I went a-courtin' I never carried one of them things. I always went in the dark." "Yes," the hired man said wryly, "and look what you got!" (Source Unknown.)

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." When he made that statement he was talking about a light unlike any other. When Holly tried to dress that wound using ordinary light the result was predictable. Like that old farmer she could have been content with less than the best and take the risk, or she could find the best light possible. You and I have that same choice. We can ask Jesus to light our way through this life or we can try to make it on our own with whatever light we might find. I don't know about you, but like that hired hand, I'd prefer to know what I'm getting when it comes to eternal life. Less than the best is not an option.

**How to?** If you are like me you have a number of flashlights around the house. And, if you're like me, there is that one light that simply better than the rest. Label that one the "Light of the World." It will be a good reminder of the importance of the best light for the best reasons.

### **Save Me? (12:27)**

*"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour."*

Having recently passed through the fire of cancer diagnosis, surgery, treatment and recovery, I know what it is like to journey into the darkness and come out in the light. I remember getting the diagnosis and feeling totally emptied of all feeling. Was I going to die? Having never gone through major surgery before, what would that be like? The thought of chemo and radiation therapy was troubling. What would the drugs and radiation do to me? I turned to God in prayer. I started and then hesitated. What did I really want God to do? I wanted to ask God to DO something. Did I want Him to save me from cancer? I thought about that for a moment. Saving me implied being released from all the things that bothered me. Was I asking Him to allow me to skip the surgeries, the chemo and radiation and the recovery altogether? That sounded good, but it also sounded a bit unrealistic, even selfish. No, I thought. I guess I just want to get through it Lord and live to tell about it. Although I knew that God could save me if He wanted to, I was sure that He would get me through it no matter what the outcome. He did. I guess you could say He delivered me to the outcome He wanted for me. Things happened and I was able to get through them. Saving would have been cleaner, easier, but deliverance, although less fun and a whole lot more inconvenient, was, in retrospect, a beneficial experience.

Here's a story: John Paton was a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands. One night hostile natives surrounded the mission station, intent on burning out the Patons and killing them. Paton and his wife prayed during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them. When daylight came they were amazed to see their attackers leave. A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted to Christ. Remembering what had happened, Paton asked the chief what had kept him from burning down the house and killing them. The chief replied in surprise, "Who were all those men with you there?" Paton knew no men were present--but the chief said he was afraid to attack because he had seen hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords circling the mission station. (Today in the Word, October, 1991, p. 1.)

Like the Patons, asking God to save us OUT of the sorrows and troubles of this life makes more sense. They braved the night, the place where the trouble held out and threatened them. They were, in this sense, not saved FROM the dangers. They made it past them as I made it past cancer. God saved me OUT of cancer, not from it. Sorrows and dangers will continue to come in our lives. Asking to be saved FROM them makes no sense. These things have their merit and God knows they benefit us. The best we can hope for is deliverance. We ought to pray for nothing else.

How to? Be sure when you pray that you are asking God for the right outcome. Asking to be saved FROM things only opens the door to doubt and unbelief and "things" happen as a part of God's plan. Deliverance is always the better route than making sorrows simply disappear.

### **Drudgery. (13:3-5)**

*"... so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him."*

Those small and tedious tasks, the ones that just need to be done while offering little reward for their completion, tend to be boring, innocuous and just plain, down right a drudgery. Here's a little test you might want to take sometime. If you own a dishwasher take note of how you feel when you load dirty dishes into it. Most people do the loading with some gusto and fervor. The dishwasher is saving them time and making them more efficient. There's reward in loading it. Now, take stock of how enthusiastically you unload it. Typically, and manufacturers of dishwashers have gauged this, most people show far less enthusiasm for unloading as opposed to loading. The reason? Had you done the dishes by hand you would have had to put them away. There is no difference when you are unloading a dishwasher. Either way the work would have been the same and the reward no different. Unloading tends to be little more than drudgery to most people.

Here's a story: When Pat Riley coached the Los Angeles Lakers from 1982 to 1990, the team won four NBA championships. In taking over the New York Knicks in 1991, Riley inherited a team with a losing record. But the Knicks seemed able to play above their abilities and even gave the eventual champions, the Chicago Bulls, their hardest competition in the play-offs last May. How does Riley do it? He says his talent lies in attention to detail. For example, every NBA team studies videotapes and compiles statistics to evaluate players' game performances. But Riley's use of these tools is more comprehensive than that of his rivals. "We measure areas of performance that are often ignored: jumping in pursuit of every rebound even if you don't get it, swatting at every pass, diving for loose balls, letting someone smash into you in order to draw a foul." After each game, these "effort" statistics are punched into a computer. "Effort," Riley explains, "is what ultimately separates journeyman players from impact players. Knowing how well a player executes all these little things is the key to unlocking career-best performances." (Robert McGarvey, "Little Things Do Mean a Lot", Reader's Digest.)

Your best performance. Think about it, is there some drudgery in every task that ultimately provides the best in training us to be good performers? It appears that this was the lesson Jesus was giving in the manner of life he led while here on earth. Jesus often focused on the tedious, the small and the, well, drudgery to make his point. He washed his disciples feet and dried them. This was woman's work, not becoming the Savior of the world. Yet, he did it gladly. Oswald Chambers called this drudgery the "touchstone of character." Are you looking for big things to do as a Christian; things that will make a greater impact? Try setting your sights on the things that are drudgery. Unloading the dishwasher makes you an impact player, the only kind that God is really looking to recruit.

How to? Don't despise the little tasks in life. These are the things that God used most often to win the big battles in this life.

### **Don't Need, Don't Want, Must Keep! (14:1)**

*"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me."*

It's the beginning of a New Year. More than any other time of the year I find that these few days and weeks are ideal for taking stock of things. I usually begin by going through my files and ferreting out useless or duplicate folders. Then there is the bookcase. How many of these books will never be read again? What can be donated to the used book store or given to someone else to enjoy? Finally there is the storage closet in the back of the room. Things have been stuffed, stacked and pushed into a limited space for a good portion of the past year. It's remarkable what you end up throwing out, giving away and relocating. My office space is made simpler, more efficient and cleaner when I take stock of what I have divided into piles of don't need, don't want, and must keep.

Taking stock of things can take on many guises. There are materials things, like those I've now removed from my office, and there are the less tangible things that clutter our minds and hearts. Both are inventory, both need attention on a regular basis. In the end, too much of something can often lead to bad consequences.

Here's a story: A grocer had gone broke. The receivers were taking an inventory and they soon discovered to their amazement a healthy inventory of bread. There was bread in the front and bread in the back. They found white bread, whole wheat bread, French bread, rye bread, potato bread, cracked wheat bread, Roman meal bread, and other kinds of bread. They asked the grocer, "You sure sold a lot of bread, didn't you?" The grocer answered, "Oh, no; but the fellow who calls on me from the baker sure SELLS a lot of it." (Speaker's Library of Business Stories, Anecdotes, Page 29.)

Clutter. Our lives are filled with it. Whether its the stuff that piles up around us or the stuff that clutters up our thinking, our believing. Like that grocer, you and I are collectors by nature. We stock things so that we have them when we need them. The problem is that things not used are no longer stock, they're clutter. Cleaning out the physical space around us is a necessary part of day to day living. This applies to our hearts and minds as well, however. Keeping it simple in terms of the things we own because we need them is no more important than keeping the things of our hearts simple, orderly and stocked only with the necessities. When it comes to believing, Jesus has skinned it down a bit for us. "Trust in God. Trust in me also." That was it. Are there some beliefs in your heart that are just taking up space? Perhaps it's time to take inventory. What do you need, and what can you do without. There's no point in filling up your heart with beliefs that are nice but not necessary. Perhaps what your buying is nothing more than clutter?

How to? Clean out some space in your house today. While you do, think about the spaces of your heart. Is your heart burdened with too many conflicting beliefs and thoughts? Take inventory and then examine these beliefs against John 14:1. You may be surprised what you might be willing to let go of.

### **Time! (14:6)**

*"I am the way, and the truth, and the light. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

Capturing the moment; we do it with cameras and other time stoppers; all to make permanent a commodity over which we have no control. For centuries man has been fascinated by the idea of controlling time. I remember attending a lecture on nanotechnology a number of years ago. The presenter proposed that time travel, in theory, might someday be possible if we could learn how to travel faster than the speed of light, 700 million miles per hour. If that were possible, he posited, at some point in the future we might be able to overtake light reflected from events in the past. In theory, he continued, light reflections from the past are still out there traveling at light speed. All we need to do was to exceed that speed and someday we could catch up with the past. Why? It might simply be because we want to take what is fleeting and make permanent, even if but for a fleeting moment.

Here's a thought from Arnold Bennett: Time. With it, all is possible; without it, nothing. The supply of time is truly a daily miracle. You wake up in the morning, and your day is magically filled with twenty-four hours of time. No one can take it from you. It can't be stolen. No one receives more or less than you. You can only waste the passing moment. You cannot waste tomorrow or the next hour; it is kept for you. You have to live on this twenty-four hours of daily time. Out of it you have to accomplish health, pleasure, money, contentment, respect, and the development of your soul. Its good use is a matter of the highest urgency and of the most thrilling possibility. All depends on that. If you can't arrange that an income of twenty-four hours a day shall exactly cover all proper items of expenditure, you will muddle your whole life indefinitely. We shall never have any more time. We have, and we have always had, all the time there is. The passing moment of time is over before we can stop it. It is no more before or after we use it. (Arnold Bennett, *Bits & Pieces*, March 1993, p. 18-20.)

The quest to slow time or speed it up is foolish. Time will not stop for the asking and it certainly won't cooperate with our meddling. The very nature of time is fleeting. It is generous to a fault, but not beyond twenty-four hours. Since it is highly unlikely that we will ever be able to travel faster than the speed of light, capturing the past is unlikely. No, you and I must be content with the fleeting moment. I believe that God designed everything with a thought to impermanence. Why? Otherwise we would make the things we could control our gods. Only God is permanent. All else is fleeting. Wasting time thinking about how you might get less or more of it? You would be far better served finding permanence in God, knowing him and serving him, than chasing after time. It will always be running faster than you can chase it.

How to? Stop obsessing about time. You can't change it but you can lose it. It is better to embrace the passing moment than to lose the passing opportunity.

### **Do It Yourself Christianity! (14:10)**

*"Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father and the Father is in me, who is doing his work."*

I've always been a person that likes to do things on his own. Whether it's due to an independent spirit or stubborn streak a mile long, doing things my way was always the first choice. Inevitably the right way ended up being my way. I remember putting together a model car when I was a boy. It was a birthday gift and it required some difficult assembly. It was one of those models that was, perhaps, a bit out of my skill range. My Dad knew that the minute I opened the box. That's when he suggested that it would be a good idea for me to wait to put it together until he had a chance to help me. Well, it wasn't long before my impatience to put it together and my pride to do it on my own in my own way got the better of me. I laid the parts out on my bedroom floor and began assembling it, one tiny piece after another. It wasn't long before things got sticky. The small pieces were hard to handle with glue on them and quickly the cool model my parents had given me began to take on a rather shabby and slipshod appearance. I can still remember my Dad walking in the room, seeing me frustrated and angry, he scolded me for trying to do it myself. The damage was done, however. The model looked like I had put it together; the cracks, crevices and glue spots bearing witness. So much for doing it my way.

Here's a story. In the Highlands of Scotland, a sheep would often wander off into the rocks and get into places that they couldn't get out of. The grass on these mountains is very sweet and the sheep like it, and they will jump down ten or twelve feet, and then they can't jump back again, and the shepherd hears them bleating in distress. They may be there for days, until they have eaten all the grass. The shepherd will wait until they are so faint they cannot stand, and then he will put a rope around the sheep, and go over and pull it up out of the jaws of death. When asked "Why doesn't he go down there when the sheep first gets there?" The shepherd would respond. "Ah! They are so very foolish the sheep would dash right over the precipice and be killed if he did! Sheep have a mind of their own and will do it their way." (Moody's Anecdotes)

And that is the way with men; the do-it-yourself Christian, the one with all the answers, is that kind of Christian that Jesus is constantly pulling out of the pit of self-importance. Typically we want to do all we can to make things happen for good in our lives; and we want to do it ourselves in our own way. Things usually get sticky when that happens. Since our skills are limited, doing all we can usually means not enough. Jesus was content to let God do all he could do before doing it himself. Liked that muffed attempt to build my model, do it yourself Christianity makes for shoddy work. Don't wait to get rescued as a last resort; submit to God and watch things come together the right way.

**How to?** Get into the habit of releasing your tasks to God first before making plans on doing them yourself. Life isn't a work in progress when it comes to God. He has a plan if you're willing to let Him handle it.

### **Spraying Goodness! (14:26)**

*"But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."*

I had to open one of those plastic packages the other day. It has some dried fruit that I was looking forward to tasting. You know the kind; it's plastic wrapped in such a way that even Arnold Schwarzenegger couldn't tear it. Even though there is a small bit of copy on the lip of the package that tells you to, "Tear here," no amount of leverage or skill will get that package to open. Although I knew it would require a scissors to open it, I just had to try to do it unaided. There was a challenge here and, besides, it did say, "Tear here." All I ended up doing however was stretching the wrap, making it even more difficult to tear. There simply was no way I was going to open it without a scissors. Finally I surrendered and plodded off to the kitchen to find Holly's scissors. I spent the necessary 30 seconds or

so to cut along the lines and finally open the package. Nevertheless, what was inside made it worth the effort and it wasn't long before I was enjoying the contents despite the effort to open the package.

Similarly, God puts much goodness inside you and I, but sometimes its hard for us to open the package.

Here's a thought from author Judy Miller: "I use hairspray every day, and sometimes more than once a day if I am going out in the evening. I have a can of hairspray in my bedroom where I do my hair. I have a can of hairspray in the bathroom. I have an extra can of hairspray to replace one when it is empty. Hairspray is part of my life – no question about it! I have thought about the hairspray in those cans. It's a liquid, waiting to come out to be used for its intended purpose. The only thing that can make it come out is a push of the finger on the top button. Then the hairspray will serve its purpose on my hair. You and I are like those cans of hairspray. The potential is always there to do good things. Sometimes we just need to be pushed to make the goodness flow. (Judy Miller)

As Christians, we have the Holy Spirit living inside us. He has a purpose as well. He produces goodness and faithfulness in our lives. We have these inside of us – gifts from the Holy Spirit. Yet, do we always recognize that we have these fruits of the Holy Spirit living inside us? Sometimes painful circumstances in our lives are needed in order for us to be pushed to display the fruits of the Spirit that God has given us. Sometimes we really have to look at ourselves during the painful times in life to see how the Holy Spirit uses those times to push out the goodness within us. Is it easy to spray God's joy, peace, and gentleness to others? Not always. Sometimes, pain is necessary for us to give that goodness to others. There's no one like God when it comes to opening tough packaging.

**How to?** Got any pain today? Be thankful. Pain is an opportunity, not a curse.

### **The Road to Joy! (15:11)**

*"I have told you this that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."*

Years ago when I asked Holly to marry me and she said yes, I believed at that moment I was the happiest man alive. As I drove home that evening, however, I happened to tune into a radio station just finishing the news. The news was followed by an inspiring voice recited this bit of wisdom: (I paraphrase.) "Happiness is imaginary, something that the living often claim only the dead know, and often claimed by adults to children and by children to adults." That little bit of wisdom instantly burst my balloon. If getting married to the most beautiful girl in the world wasn't a happy thing, what was I thought? I turned off the radio with the comment, "Obviously that guy had never met my bride to be."

Was that little bit of wisdom just sour apples, or, was it's truth relative to age and the potential that at some point my happiness would be tempered by the many circumstances and consequences I just couldn't see because they hadn't happened yet? If getting married was one of those great oasis on the road to happiness, where would you find it?

Here's a thought from Clarence Macartney: In answer to the question, "Where is happiness?" Macartney said, "It's not found in pleasure—Lord Byron lived such a life of pleasure if anyone did. He wrote, however, "The worm, the canker, and the grief are mine alone." Happiness is not found in money—Jay Gould, the American millionaire, had plenty of that. When dying, he said, "I suppose I am the most miserable man on earth." It's not found in position and fame—Lord Beaconsfield enjoyed more than his share of both. He wrote, "Youth is a mistake, manhood a struggle, and old age a regret." It's not found in military glory—Alexander the Great conquered the known world in his day. Having done so, he wept in his tent because, he said, "There are no more worlds to conquer." (Clarence Macartney.)

Since none of these things can bring happiness, is there really anything that can? Jesus told his disciples, "I have told you this that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Notice the Savior didn't imply that he would bring happiness. He is speaking of joy. The fact is that happiness is something that comes and goes. It is never with us long. My feelings about Holly were really feelings of joy, something that is truly lasting. Joy, you see, is based on holiness. Holiness has everything to do with worshiping God and staying on the right path to glory. Marrying Holly was an oasis on the path to heaven, not on the path to happiness. At that moment I was right with my Father in heaven and I felt he was right with me. If you and I make our aim joy and not happiness, we will find it in the things of this life that bring us close to the Father. All else is merely passing happiness that will never fill us with joy.

**How to?** When you weigh your life on the scales of how you can please God, they will always be balanced and yield you much joy. Happiness, on the other hand, can never balance out a close relationship with God.

### **The Little Blessings! (15:11)**

*"I have told you this that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."*

Recently I was driving down the highway and saw this big bill board advertising Dutch Boy paint. Displayed was this father painting his house. Standing in his shadow was this little boy, maybe four or five, watching with admiration his father. Almost unnoticed, this father was getting casual paint all over his son. I smiled as I drove by thinking at first how clumsy that father must have felt when he finally looked down at that little boy to see him so covered with his own, inaccurate aim of the brush; but then it struck me. That isn't what the advertiser really wanted me to be left with as I traveled down the highway. He wanted me to see the warmth and family feel that painting your home gives you, especially when you're using Dutch Boy Paint. "I got it!" I thought. "That's an effective billboard." I was looking so intently at the spilled paint that I had missed the reverent look at that little boy's face. He was painting with his Dad!

It's easy to miss the big picture when we're so focused on the little details that distract us. When it comes to God's blessings, we should always be on alert for the little ones that might be overshadowed by life's bigger picture.

Here's a story: One day a group of young boys decided that they would dig a hole in their backyard "all the way through to China." They dug for several days, playing games in the hole, collecting bugs and worms, and attracting the attention of others in the neighborhood. After a few days, an older sibling wandered by and demanded to know what the young boys were doing. When he heard the answer, he laughed, as only "big brothers" seem to know how to do. "How ridiculous!" he trumpeted. "You'll never get all the way to China!" One of the young boys responded by picking up the container full of bugs and worms and declaring, "Even if we don't get to China, look at all the neat stuff we found along the way!" ("Proclaim," 1983 #4, p. 42.)

We should never become so focused on the "big" goals of life that we miss out on the little blessings along the way! The "spilled paint" in this life will always be there. You can bet that today, tomorrow and the day after that someone will do something to mess things up for you. You have a choice: You can choose to focus on the mess or focus on the one who made the mess. Like that little boy on the Dutch Boy Paint sign, focusing beyond the mess as opposed to the mess itself can make the discomfort, pain or just plain inconvenience not only bearable, at times it can make it, well, a blessing. There is neat stuff out there combined with all of life's messes. What a shame it would be to miss any of it because we were preoccupied with the bad when all the time the good was staring us in the face.

**How to?** When you weigh your life on the scales of how you can please God, they will always be balanced and yield you much joy. Happiness, on the other hand, can never balance out a close relationship with God.

#### **24 Carat Friends! (15:13)**

*“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”*

As a boy I often fantasized about being the hero, the person who sacrificed the most sweat, gave the boldest effort, and was even willing to put his life on the line for others. I suppose that it had a lot to do with all the TV cowboy westerns that I watched growing up. Perhaps it was the many John Wayne movies I saw as well. Even more likely it was probably that inevitable “guy wins girl because he turns out to be the bravest, most chivalrous guy ever” idea that got me dreaming. Whatever the case, I’ve never really lost the dream, at least in my deep, subconscious. I like the idea of being the hero, the guy who would be willing to be martyred so that right and truth might prevail.

When Jesus spoke about laying down one’s life for a friend, is that what he was talking about; or, was it something even more than the sacrifice of our blood that he was talking about?

Here’s a story: Jesse Owens seemed sure to win the long jump at the 1936 Olympic games. As he walked to the long-jump pit, however, Owens saw a tall, German taking practice jumps in the 26-foot range. Owens felt nervous. He was acutely aware of the Nazis’ desire to prove “Aryan superiority,” especially over blacks. At this point, the German introduced himself as Luz Long. “You should be able to qualify with your eyes closed!” he said to Owens, referring to his two jumps. For the next few moments (Owens and Long) chatted. Long made a suggestion. Since the qualifying distance was only 23 feet, 5 and one half inches, why not make a mark several inches before the takeoff board and jump from there, just to play it safe? Owens did and qualified easily. In the finals Owens set an Olympic record and earned the second of four golds. The first person to congratulate him was Long. Owens never again saw Long, who was killed in World War II. “You could melt down all the medals and cups I have,” Owens later wrote, “and they wouldn’t be a plating on the 24-carat friendship I felt for Luz Long.” (David Wallechinsky in *The Complete Book of the Olympics*.)

Knights in shining armor, willing to shed their blood for a friend, or perhaps an enemy, for that matter, aren’t what Jesus is talking about when he asks us to be willing to “lay down our lives” for a friend. He’s talking about investing our lives, as did Luz Long, all that we are and can be, for others. He’s talking about investing a lifetime, continually, in making sure that our friends see Jesus in us. To do this we need to give up ourselves, our very lives, in the exercise of giving, doing and substituting ourselves for others. It may take a lifetime, but if we do, no cowboy, John Wayne or any other superhero could compete with that effort. We will truly be heroes with a capital “H.”

**How to?** Who can you live for today? Want to be a hero? Jesus expects it of us. Look around and discover the possibilities of friendship, 24-carat friendship. Invest in others as a model of Christian love. There can be no greater goal in life than this.

#### **Spikes Up! (15:18-20)**

*“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.”*

Here's a story: I played Little League as a young lad growing up in rural Wisconsin. All of friends played Little League as well. It was one of those things that we just did in the summer. The League was sponsored by the many small, businesses in the little town I grew up in, Hartland. There were probably over fifteen businesses sponsoring teams in the league and choosing up players was done by lot. A coach could usually put his own kids on his team, but the rest of us were subject to chance. The ideal situation was when both you and your best friend got picked to be on the same team. But since there were hundreds of kids involved, the likelihood was slim.

My best friend was Billie Johnson. He lived across the street and we hung out together most of the time. Since his birthday was only ten days after mine, we were close in age as well. Over the course of the three or four years I was playing Little League ball Billie and I never were selected to be on the same team. That meant that at least twice a season we would have to play against each other and be on opposing sides. I can still remember walking together to the games, he in his Frederick's Drugstore shirt and I in my Ace Hardware. We chatted like best friends all the way to the playing field. When we got to the ball diamond, however, things changed. He went to his bench and I to mine.

I remember one game in particular when I was playing second base. Billie was up to bat and hit a line drive into left field. He rounded first base and came barreling for second. I took the throw from left and turned to face Billie hurtling down the base path. He went into a slide, spikes up, and I had to try to slap a tag on him without being bowled over or spiked. It was all competition and business on that play. We may have been best friends off the field, but on the field we were on opposing sides. The rules of the game dictated that. As Billie slid into me and pushed me off the bag I was angry, just like I would have been with any other guy sliding spikes up into me. He was safe. Standing up and dusting himself off he smirked and told me, "Better luck next time Brunner!" It was Billie, but he was altogether a different Billie when it came to playing the game.

It's very much like that for you and I as we compete in this world with many who, outside of our convictions and actions as Christians, see and react with us like our friends in the secular realm. When it comes to the game, however, the game of right and wrong, good and evil, and heaven and hell, they quickly become highly competitive, even antagonistic, sliding with spikes up in their opinions and actions. As Christians we need to expect it; secular life is just a different game.

**How to?** I keep an old pair of baseball spikes around to remind me that the "game" is always on and I need to expect there will be competition when it come to the way I live my life. An old baseball glove can serve that same purpose.

### **Come Fly With Me! (16:19-24)**

*"Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete."*

Praying with confidence! Sometimes that's hard to do when we know how little control we really have over our lives. How often have you felt hopeless as you prayed; confident God would hear you, but unsure that He would really do anything about it? More than any other factor affecting our prayers, this one stands out above all the rest. We pray, but lack any confidence in what we are saying. Like the feeling of being asked a question and thinking you know the answer but unsure when you give it, you meekly approach God with little hope and less surety. Perhaps the primary reason we often lack confidence in our prayer is that we know so much about God. Since He already knows what we're praying for and, for that matter, knows how He will answer our prayers, it's natural for us to say, "Why even bother? He's got it covered."

Here's a story from preacher Adrian Rogers: Several years ago I was asked to preach by a congregation located hundreds of miles away. I accepted their gracious offer to have them fly me there, prepared my sermon and was picked up at the local airport. Since it was a small aircraft, I was given the copilot's seat. After an hour or so in the air the pilot made me a startling offer. "Would you like to fly the plane?" I'd never piloted a plane before but the pilot convinced me that it would be fine since his controls were linked to mine. I grasped the wheel and placed my feet on the rudder. To my amazement I flew the plane never having had a flying lesson in my life. The key, however, was this: the pilot always had his hands on the wheel and feet on the rudder the entire time that I was piloting the aircraft. LIKEWISE, this is the secret of effective prayer; to pray with confidence upon the invitation of an almighty God who never takes His hands off the wheel or feet off the rudder of our lives. He's always in control but expects us to take up the invitation to join Him at the controls, taking an active part in His plan for our lives. (Adrian Rogers, Love Worth Finding, May 17, 2004.)

When we pray with the knowledge that God expects us to take control of our lives, we introduce earnestness into prayer that He's seeking and we will benefit from. Earnest prayer is bold prayer; prayer uttered from lips connected to a heart that believes all things will come to pass because our omniscient God is at the receiving end of that prayer. So, how do we pray with such earnestness? Pray like the deed is already done and the conclusion is already determined. Pray in a spirit of earnestness for it's important to take control of your life as God is looking for us to sit beside Him as he steers the right course for our lives. He'll never let go of the controls but He's asking us to have the guts to sit in the copilot's seat and fly with Him.

**How to?** Remind yourself daily that you and God are in this together. He's at the controls but He's asking you to fly with Him.

### **A Fair Exchange! (16:33)**

*"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

What's the difference between experiencing pain and going through suffering? On the surface these two seem the same, don't they? Since pain typically leads to suffering and suffering often extends pain, are they not the same thing? Although it is true these are linked, it isn't universally true that they need be. Suffering may be typical, but is it unavoidable? Must we always go through suffering after pain, or is there another place to go far better?

Here's a story. In her biography of Dr. Paul Brand, doctor to a leper colony in Louisiana, *Ten Fingers for God*, Dorothy Clarke Wilson wrote, "After a long train ride, the doctor, fearing he had contracted leprosy, found a pin and pricked the small area below his ankle. He felt no pain. He thrust it deeper, until blood showed. Still he felt nothing. He supposed, like other workers with leprosy, he had contracted the disease. All that night the great man tried to imagine his new life as a leper, an outcast. As night receded, he yielded to hope and in the morning, "with steady fingers he bared the skin below his ankle, jabbed in the point--and yelled." Blessed was the sensation of pain! He realized that during the long train ride, sitting immobile, he had numbed a nerve. From then on, whenever he cut his finger, turned an ankle, even when he suffered from "agonizing nausea as his whole body reacted in violent self-protection from mushroom poisoning, he was to respond with fervent gratitude, "Thank God for pain!" (Dorothy Clarke Wilson)

Among the many promises that Jesus gives us in his word is this, "In this world you will have trouble . . . I have overcome the world." Here is a valuable clue to the nature of pain and suffering. Note he doesn't say he has overcome the trouble. Trouble will come. Pain will always be our companion. When we focus on the unfairness of pain, the inconvenience of it, we tend to look downward toward the inevitable, the suffering that must logically lead ultimately to death. In great pain we may even long for the end. This is the realm of suffering, the neighborhood of the world. Jesus tells us he has overcome the world, so a downcast heart set on an epitaph clings to the world and not Christ. Pain need not lead to suffering. In fact it easily lends itself to promise. When you and I suffer pain it is good to remember this. Rather than reflecting on the end of pain it is far better to cast our eyes upward in hope, as pain might be nothing more than a pathway to glory and a way of understanding how God builds Christian character. You can connect pain and suffering if you choose; but you will never be thankful for it. Jesus has overcome suffering and he has done it by conquering the pain and replacing it with the hope of none in heaven; a fair exchange for those willing to fight on through.

**How to?** When pain invades your day take time to welcome it as a guest and not an enemy. Pain is nothing more than another way God reminds us of who we are and where we are going. Look up and not down. Pain will always be there, but suffering can be shown the door.

**In Not From!** (17:3)

*'Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.'*

Here's a thought from Herb Forst. "What not to Buy Your Wife: Don't buy anything that plugs in. Anything that requires electricity is seen as utilitarian. Don't buy clothing that involves sizes. The chances are one in seven thousand that you will get her size right, and your wife will be offended the other 6999 times. "Do I look like a size 16?" she'll say. Too small a size doesn't cut it either: "I haven't worn a size 8 in 20 years!" Avoid all things useful. The new silver polish advertised to save hundreds of hours is not going to win you any brownie points. Don't buy anything that involves weight loss or self-improvement. She'll perceive a six-month membership to a diet center as a suggestion that's she's overweight. Don't buy jewelry. The jewelry your wife wants, you can't afford. And the jewelry you can afford, she doesn't want. And, guys, do not fall into the traditional trap of buying her frilly underwear. Your idea of the kind your wife should wear and what she actually wears are light years apart. Finally, don't spend too much. "How do you think we're going to afford that?" she'll ask. But don't spend too little. She won't say anything, but she'll think, "Is that all I'm worth?" (Herb Forst in Cross River, NY, Patent Trader, in Reader's Digest, p. 69.)

Gifts. Sometimes they're difficult to shop for, tedious to wrap and, perhaps, stressful to give. Recently, however, my son Dan gave me a gift for Father's Day that did an end run around the problem while at same time giving a gift that really meant something. He paid nothing for it as he never went shopping. It didn't need to be wrapped, tied, hidden or, for that matter, opened. Dan's gift was the kind of gift we so often avoid giving because we undervalue its worth to giver rather than the given. It was the gift of himself. He offered to give me time, labor and whatever else I needed of his abilities to fill the woodshed with wood prior to winter. I loved that gift because it saved me time, energy and effort. I especially loved that gift because it was of Dan and not just from Dan.

What is the greatest gift ever given to mankind? Eternal life in Christ, of course. You and I are going to heaven and live in eternal splendor, peace and perfection. Now, that's a gift. Yet, what really makes this gift extra special is that it isn't something God shopped for. He didn't make it, wrap it and gift it like He has with so many of His gifts. There is the gift of time, health, and the many earthly blessings. These he made and gifted to you and I. Eternal life, however,

was different. This gift is a gift “of God” and not from God. Like Dan’s gift of himself, eternal life is a piece of God, a part of His eternal being and nature. That’s a gift that is always a perfect fit, never goes out of style, is perfectly useful and can never be topped. And, better yet, there will never be the need to exchange it or return it. Like God, it’s perfect.

**How to?** Make an effort to give gifts of yourself as often as possible. When you do you will find how truly satisfying gift giving can be.

### **Intercession! (17:6)**

*“I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world.”*

Here’s a story. A man took his small son with him to town one day to run some errands. When lunch time arrived, the two of them went to a familiar diner for a sandwich. They ordered lunch, and when the waiter brought the food, the father said, “Son, we’ll just have a silent prayer.” Dad got through praying first and waited for the boy to finish his prayer, but he just sat with his head bowed for an unusually long time. When he finally looked up, his father asked him, “What in the world were you praying about all that time?” With the innocence and honesty of a child, he replied, “How do I know? It was a silent prayer.” (Our Daily Bread)

While that may be a funny story, it’s a good description of how many of us do pray. We aimlessly repeat words and phrases in hopes that something we say might please God. We try to tune into God with our silent, heartfelt pleas for this or that, but before long we lose track of what we wanted to say and find our minds wandering, thinking about the things of the day and not the things of God. Why is that? Why is prayer sometimes the hardest thing that we do in a day? Like most things in life, when I’m presented with the problem of “why” I just have to sit down and define the term to understand the problem I’m dealing with. Perhaps if we actually tried to define what prayer is, we might better be able to understand, well, what it isn’t.

What is prayer? When I was in grade school I got into trouble and my parents were called into the office to speak with the Principal. He laid out his case against me. I can still remember my body getting warm and stressed with each sentence. I so wanted to speak out and defend myself. My Dad put his hand on my shoulder and shushed me. His look indicated that HE would be doing the talking. I stayed quiet knowing justice would be served for me and not through me. It’s like that with prayer. When we pray, whether out loud or quietly, does God hear us? I’m convinced that He hears all right, but He isn’t going to answer our prayer unless, like my father, there is a mediator to state our case more carefully, justly and soundly. That would be the Holy Spirit in Christ. Our plea is by and through them and not through us. If they don’t speak for us, we are not heard in a manner that God will respond to. Want to pray more effectively? When you pray, pray in confidence that your prayers is being edited and shaped through Christ himself. Knowing He is speaking guarantees God will answer. As my Dad took care of me, so Christ will take care of our prayers. All we need to do is be there, love Christ and let Him do what He does best, standing in the very presence of God the Father Himself.

**Meditate.** When pain invades your day take time to welcome it as a guest and not an enemy. Pain is nothing more than another way God reminds us of who we are and where we are going. Look up and not down. Pain will always be there, but suffering can be shown the door.

### **Challenge Not Big Enough! (17:15-26)**

*“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.”*

Each year I place Christmas lights on a twenty-five foot, spruce tree in our front yard. Since the tree grows about eight inches or so a year, each year it gets harder and harder to get the lights on the entire tree. Reason might dictate that there would come a time when I will have to move to a smaller tree or, perhaps, only trim it partially; but now it has become a challenge; a challenge to get one light at the very top of the tree no matter how I have to stretch or what rung of the ladder I might have to stand on. So, since I can't reach the top of the tree conventionally any more, I designed a pole with a notch on the end to lift the lights to the very top of the tree. Each year as the task becomes more daunting, it seems I find it all the more motivating to see if I can do it.

Wouldn't it be great if you and I put that much energy and commitment into the spiritual challenges God gives us?

Here's a story from Chuck Swindoll. "Several years ago I met a gentleman who served on one of Walt Disney's original advisory boards. What amazing stories he told! Those early days were tough; but that remarkable, creative visionary refused to give up. I especially appreciated the man's sharing with me how Walt Disney responded to disagreement. He said that Walt would occasionally present some unbelievable, extensive dream he was entertaining. Almost without exception, the members of his board would gulp, blink, and stare back at him in disbelief, resisting even the thought of such a thing. But unless every member resisted the idea, Disney usually didn't pursue it. The challenge wasn't big enough to merit his time and creative energy unless they were unanimously in disagreement!" (Charles Swindoll, *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity*, p.107.)

If you're looking for a challenge big enough to suit your "never say die" nature, you probably need look no farther than a neighbor down the road or a shut-in in your congregation. People in need are all around us and the challenge is great. God is asking a total commitment from you and I as His Christian soldiers. He wants more than a mere offering in an offering plate on Sunday. That anyone can do. When you come right down to it, He doesn't need your money. He does want your service, your willingness to sacrifice and your commitment to spending your time in serving others. No, He wants you and I to do what might seem impossible to the unbeliever in this world. Take care of our brother's needs even before we think of ourselves. The task may be daunting at times; but, with Jesus, the one who can and has done the impossible, as our guide, who knows what we may be capable of?

**Meditate.** Practice service by removing the word "impossible" from your vocabulary.

### **Unfinished Flower Beds! (17:17)**

*“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”*

When we moved to Beech Springs years ago, we arrived in a valley that was full of trees, trees and more trees. There was practically no lawn because the trees shaded it out. The trees fenced in the house and driveway so that there was scant room or resource with which to do much in the way of landscaping. That was to my liking, however. There would be little need for tiller, spade and wheelbarrow here. I could focus on making wood and the necessary improvements that were needed inside the house. Puttering with flowerbeds was tedious and, as opposed to making wood, slow in demonstrating any visible progress. That is, of course, until the elms around Beech Springs began to succumb to disease. Suddenly spaces were opened; spaces that beckoned my wife Holly to plant a sunflower here or nestle a poppy there. It wasn't long before a Rototiller and a wheelbarrow appeared on my gift list.

I've often thought how like those flowerbeds you and I are as we daily walk in grace. It takes work to get us ready for growth in grace; and, sometimes, the results aren't so immediately visible. But, over time, the work and effort pay off. The flowers bloom and fade and come back again the next year that much more brilliant and bountiful.

Here's a story: Phillips Brooks was a very busy pastor, yet he always seemed relaxed and unburdened, willing to take time for anyone in need. Shortly before he died, someone asked him the secret of his strength and serenity. In a heartfelt response, Brooks credited his still-growing relationship with Christ. He responded, "The more I have thought it over, the more sure it has seemed to me that these last years have had a peace and fullness which there did not used to be. It is a deeper knowledge and truer love of Christ I cannot tell you how personal this grows to me. He is here. He knows me and I know Him. It is the most real thing in the world. And every day makes it more real; and one wonders with delight what it will grow to as the years go on." (Our Daily Bread, October 14, 1994)

God promises to "sanctify" us "by the truth" (John 17:17) in our daily, walk with Him. That is, He will make us holy, set apart and cleansed through Christ Jesus. He doesn't tell us that it is a work completed overnight, however. It is something that is ongoing like my wife tending those flowerbeds. As the faithful gardener He digs, weeds, tills and transplants in the gardens of our hearts; then, when day is done, we are known to Him perfectly, as we continue to grow in our knowledge of Him. It won't happen overnight nor should it. Some of the best flowerbeds are those that are never finished.

**Meditate.** Is there something in your life that is unfinished? Perhaps it is a flowerbed. It may be that book you began writing years ago, or a scrapbook that just never seems to be completed. As long as it isn't critical to be finished it may not be a bad idea to make it your work in progress, a continual reminder of what God is doing in you.

### **Obsession! (19:12)**

*"From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.'"*

"Don't be so obsessed!" That criticism has been waged against me more than once in my life. There was a car I just had to have. Then there was the girl I just needed to get a date with; not to mention the Packer games that I watched as a teen. I grew up obsessed with many things, now that I think about it. Whether it was cars, girls or sports, most of the time it was an obsession that wasn't well founded. Not that it was unrealistic to want these things. Any car could be bought, a girl could be won, and the Packers, well, the Packers did win many games. The problem with these obsessions was this, they just weren't worth obsessing over. Nonetheless, I was never ready to give up on my ability to obsess. There were those times when following through, going the extra mile and, well, obsessing over something that WAS worth it, was a good and noble thing.

Here's a story. In the Antarctic summer of 1908-9, Sir Ernest Shackleton and three companions attempted to travel to the South Pole from their winter quarters. They set off with four ponies to help carry the load. Weeks later, their ponies dead, rations all but exhausted, they turned back toward their base, their goal not accomplished. Altogether, they trekked 127 days. On the return journey, as Shackleton records in *The Heart of the Antarctic*, the time was spent talking about food – elaborate feasts, gourmet delights, sumptuous menus. As they staggered along, suffering from dysentery, not knowing whether they would survive, every waking hour was occupied with thoughts of eating. Reflecting on that later, Shackleton commented that, "It was the thought of food that kept them going. Eating was the

goal and they wouldn't be denied the goal. It became an obsession that fueled their will to keep going." (Source Unknown.)

Obsession, like all things in life, has its bounds. Often it can lead to disappointment and dissolution. It really depends upon what the goal is. When we know something to be right and the truth must be told, the obsession to make sure that the truth is upheld is not only worthwhile, it's a Christian's obligation. Pontus Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea in Jesus' time, struggled with the truth. He knew that Jesus was innocent and that the Jews had delivered him over to death because of jealousy. He pursued the truth, but he was not obsessed with it. He allowed his fears to control what he knew was right. Sometimes when the truth IS a hot potato, it's far easier to drop it than hang on for all it's worth. The fact is this: knowing you are right only matters when your actions match your thoughts. When the truth is at stake obsession, may be just the fuel to keep the truth alive.

**Meditate.** Make a habit of searching for the truth in your relationship with others, in your job, and in your worship life. When you find it, never let go of it lest it disappear with your fears.

### **The Smallest Detail! (19:30)**

*"It is finished."*

"It's finished!" What a comfort it is to know that something is finished; I mean really finished. Now, in the case of our upstairs bathroom still lacking several pieces of molding and two cabinet drawers, I haven't yet been able to say that. The kitchen addition that I began ten years ago still lacks mopboards. Then there's the missing eave on the garden shed, the cable TV wire I was meaning to run to the exercise room, the missing concrete flooring in the garage and, well, a long list of unfinished business here at Beech Springs. To be sure, my life has been punctuated with projects that are 95% complete but not yet finished. The funny thing about it is that, with the passage of time, things even begin to look finished when they really aren't. But now, as I face a time when, due to an aging body and, let's face it, lack of will, completing unfinished projects gets harder and harder, I know I need to motivate myself to finish the projects that are begging to be completed. It's time to be done.

Experiencing closure on a project is certainly the goal each of us ought to aspire to whenever we attempt something. However, due to our own human weaknesses, that's sometimes easier said than done. Sometimes even important things in life, can lack the finishing touch. I recall seeing a picture of a Michelangelo sculpture in an encyclopedia that was half complete. The base of the statue was still in block form but the rest was completely finished. As I looked at the half-finished statute, I could see that the artist had begun to free the statue but had not been able to complete it. This was a sort of trademark for the sculptor. It was not uncommon for him to take a project to near completion and then move on to a new one. According to the encyclopedia, Michelangelo had numerous works he never finished. From that standpoint, I guess that I'm in pretty good company.

"It is finished!" How thankful we ought to be that God is not like me, or Michelangelo, challenged to completely and totally finish everything that He started. "It is finished!" Jesus could utter these comforting words from the cross because, unlike me, or the sculptor, there wasn't a detail missed or any part of the job that he could be tempted to skip over or abandon. Simply, He did it all perfectly, efficiently and completely. What He finished is a work begun in us that will also be completed when each of us stands in the presence of our Heavenly Father in our appointed hour. Thank God we don't have to confess, "I didn't get it done, Lord!" Thank God it was already completed for us, that He always finishes what He starts.

**Meditate.** Is there a project around the house that you've left unfinished? Dedicate yourself to finishing it and, in the process, be reminded of how God always follows through 100% on everything He starts.

### **A Blood Relationship! (20:10-18)**

*"I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."*

What does it mean to have a brother? Having two brothers myself, I know what it means to have them. There is something special about a brother that sets them apart from all other people in the world. We strike many bonds in life, even those that bind us to a spouse, but the bond of brotherhood brings a type of strength and courage unsurpassed by any other bond in life. There is an old Japanese proverb that says it best. "Brothers quarrel like thieves inside a house, but outside their swords leap out in each other's defense." The bonds of brotherhood are among the strongest God has built into His creation.

When Jesus rose from the dead that Easter morning, he brought with Him a new idea of brotherhood that had never been expressed so keenly as now. For years he had led a band of disciples, teaching, training and showing them the Gospel. Over time these disciples had graduated from friends and followers to brothers. With that, all things had changed. His resurrection had given birth to a new brotherhood, a new oneness that would now tie Jew to Gentile, Greek to Roman, and Samaritan to Hebrew. With that brotherhood, He also brought with Him a new constitution, the Gospel, that would make the binding unique, enduring, and, unfortunately, subject to great testing. For, like genetic brothers, each of us sharing in that Gospel would now also share a common loyalty and concern for one another despite our internal quarrels. Like brothers, we now owe each other our swords. Like brothers we would all be in this together. There just would be no way around that.

"I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God!" There is just no way of getting around it. Jesus is telling us that, with His resurrection, things have changed. We are His brother and He ours. We have the same Father and, therefore, share the same oneness with God and with those who are also sharing that bond of discipleship with us. That means we are to treat one another with the same love and respect that we would show to a brother or a sister—even our enemies. When we treat one another badly, in word or deed, it would be as if we did it to our own flesh and blood. This is unacceptable in a family; it is unacceptable in the family of Christ. "Love one another as I have loved you!" This is our divine instruction. Brothers and sisters, take up the sword for one another—to defend and not tear down. Are you ready to leap to the defense of your brothers and sisters in Christ? As a member of Christ's family, there is no other choice. Christianity is a blood relationship.

**Meditate.** Think on those believers that touch your life. Reach out to them as often as possible as you would a brother or a sister.

### **Any Fish Today? (21:5)**

*"Friends, haven't you any fish?"*

"How was school today?" My Mom often asked that question of me and my brothers and sisters as we tramped into the kitchen after a day at school. I can still see her standing next to the stove, wooden spatula in hand stirring something up for that evening's dinner. In an almost automatic tone the question would come, "How was school today

honey?" Like most kids my response was usually, "OK." Since I really wasn't interested in talking about school, I was always quick to change the subject to something more interesting like, "What's for dinner?" Nevertheless, it never stopped her from asking. She wasn't just trying to make conversation. I believe she was interested in what I had done that day. Had I been a good student? Did I learn anything? For that matter, how was your lunch? She was cultivating a fertile furrow of experience in the midst of what I deemed to be a pretty mundane existence: school. In a way, the question laid the groundwork of my labors as an adult as well. As it made me mindful of my duty as a student; I am today mindful of my duty as an employee, a husband and a father.

Sometimes the mundane is just the ticket God uses most often to work His will in us.

Here's a story. In the 1880s a young boy found employment in a pawnshop. A mundane job. Although he disliked the work, he did it faithfully "as unto the Lord" until a more desirable opportunity opened for him. To prepare himself for a life of Christian service, he wrote on a scrap of paper the following resolutions: "I do promise God that I will rise early every morning to have a few minutes--not less than five--in private prayer. I will endeavor to conduct myself as a humble, meek, and zealous follower of Jesus, and by serious witness and warning I will try to lead others to think of the needs of their immortal souls. I hereby vow to read no less than four chapters in God's Word every day. I will cultivate a spirit of self-denial and will yield myself a prisoner of love to the Redeemer of the world." That young man was William Booth, who later led thousands to Christ and founded the Salvation Army. (Source Unknown.)

Just before ascending into Heaven Jesus met several of his disciples as they were fishing on the Sea of Galilee. Preparing a meal over an open fire he yelled out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" Was his question a study in rhetoric, or was he trying to teach them and us something very important? "How is your day? Caught any fish?" You see, who we are, what we do and how we do it is our Savior's daily concern. As our days may seem mundane to us, they are anything but to the Lord. There are fish to catch today; and only you and I can do it.

**Meditate.** Caught any fish today? Baiting your hook with a smile, a kind word, or just a gentle touch on the shoulder may be all the bait needed to answer that question.

### **God Is No Leaker! (21:11)**

*"Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn."*

"Paper or plastic?" Years ago I was a bagger at a supermarket. As the food items came down the belt toward me I'd separate them into frozen or fresh, boxes and jars, shook out a paper bag with the store's symbol on the side and packed. While I often exchanged niceties with the customer as I got their purchase packed, I never asked: "Paper or plastic?" In those days the only option was paper. If a bagger didn't properly pack the bag, it wasn't unusual for the customer to find herself trying to catch items as they plummeted through a compromised, brown, paper bag bottom. Times have changed. Even an untalented bagger can leak by with plastic. Plastic is much stronger than paper. Where a sweating carton of milk can compromise a bag, it does nothing to plastic. I personally like plastic since those neat little, plastic handles allow me to carry up to five or six sacks at a time. Ten fingers in days gone by could carry two bags; now they can capture so much more. Even though the burden of weight is no different from the days of paper, plastic bags can bear so much more.

"Paper or plastic?" You know, I really don't think that God ever considered the possibility of spoil, waste, leaking or breakage when it comes to carrying His bounty. He loads it on us and then He gives us the perfect container to lug it in, Himself.

Here's a story. "One morning R.C. Chapman, a devout Christian, was asked how he was feeling. "I'm burdened this morning!" Was his reply; but his happy countenance contradicted his words. So the questioner exclaimed in surprise, "Are you really burdened, Mr. Chapman?" "Yes, but it's a wonderful burden—it's an overabundance of blessings for which I cannot find enough time or words to express my gratitude!" Seeing the puzzled look on the face of his friend, Chapman added with a smile, 'Our Father in heaven reminds me that He daily loads us with all his benefits. And then He carries the burden for us.'" (Source Unknown.)

God's blessings are by definition unique, holy and often, very generous. He likes to pile it on; in fact I believe that it's often His plan to do just that. God enjoys giving. Ask for one small thing and you're liable to get more than one. Ask for a little blessing and it isn't unlikely it will be larger than you bargained for. That's the nature of our God. You and I need to be ready receivers, confident that no matter how many or how much are His blessings, nothing will fall through His grasp. God is no leaker. It's plastic with our God; nothing else will do.

**Meditate.** The next time you go to the grocery store and you hear that question, "Paper or plastic?" it's a good time to be reminded of all of the blessings God has showered upon you in just a day.

### **Like Blind Beggars! (21:21-23)**

*"You must follow me."*

Chuck Swindoll writes. "No one has done a better job of portraying envy than the poet Dante. In his story "Purgatory" the envious sit like blind beggars by a wall. Their eyelids are sewn shut. The symbolism is apt, showing the reader that it is one of the blindest sins—partly because it is unreasonable, partly because the envious person is swept up in himself and swollen with poisonous thoughts in a dark, constricting world of almost unendurable self-imposed anguish. ( Chuck Swindoll)

Envy is one of the most insidious of sins. Take for example the story of the Apostle Peter. Jesus's ministry was nearly finished on this earth. He had visited with and met with His disciples a number of times over this period. The Gospel of John records for us this very unusual visit just prior to His ascension into heaven. Jesus is leading Peter down a "path" that he had not known; a path that would lead Peter into apostleship and eventual death at the hands of the crucifiers. They had been talking and Jesus had been feeling Peter out. "Do you love me?" He asked this of Peter three times. Each time the disciple who denied Him answered that he did. Now, after plying Peter with the question three times, Jesus simply says, "You must follow me!" (John 21:19) But, before he could take that path, Peter turns around, seeing John, the "disciple whom Jesus dearly loved," following at a distance, he asks, "What about him?"

The answer that Jesus gives Peter is one of the most intriguing passages in Scriptures. "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" (John 21:22). "None of your business!" Jesus is telling Peter that it should be of no concern to him what happens to John or anyone else for that matter. Peter's focus was to be Peter and not John. Peter's grace was Peter's grace. The fact that he would die by execution and John would not did not in any way "cheapen" the grace that God had given Peter. Envy has no place in the ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Envy blinds us to the purpose that God has given us and the grace that He has reserved for us. For some He has given much in the way of pain and suffering. For others he has given little. For some He has blessed with wealth, for others He has not. When we blindly lash out at others, especially fellow brothers and sisters in the faith, that have something we don't, when we allow the "poisonous thoughts" of envy to "constrict" the world that God has purposely, deliberately given to us, we not only cheat ourselves but we place a burden on those upon whom we have dropped our load of envy. Each of us needs to be content with what we have been given. Else we will hear those stinging words, "What is that to you?" None of your business?

**Meditate.** We all have bad days and good. There are days when we are happy, and then there are those when we are not. Every day is a good day to remind yourself that no matter the mood, contentment can be had whether happy or not. Envy hasn't got a chance.

January 28, 2013