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A WORD IN SEASON

DAILY MESSAGES ON THE
FAITH FOR ALL OF LIFE

R. J. RUSHDOONY

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A Rattlesnake's Kisses

I returned late last night from another state, where a prominent and nationally known pastor was on trial because of the Welfare Department's attempts to control his Christian school and home for delinquent girls. I told my wife with amazement of the efforts of the state, despite a state law forbidding all such controls over Christian agencies. A state spy's report was introduced by the defense, and a state official was compelled to read the stupid document. It was about a church prayer meeting, what was sung, who prayed, how many girls were in the restroom at one time, and so on and on! When I told my wife how amazed I was at the evil and stupidity of it all, she said, "Don't expect kisses from a rattlesnake."

She was right, of course. Apart from God, men are as trustworthy as rattlesnakes. St. Paul tells us of such men: their mouths are open sepulchers, i.e., their words give death, not life, and they are full of cursing and bitterness. They are quick to hurt and kill, given to destruction and misery, and aliens to peace, because "[t]here is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18).

Giving a man a high office does not make him good: it only increases the scope of his evil. No man is made a saint by man's election. To expect good from ungodly men is like expecting figs from thistles, according to our Lord (Matt. 7:16). We have been giving power for years to all kinds of agencies and bureaus without considering that it is evil to create such concentrations of power. Too much power is dangerous in any man's hands, and certainly a great source of evil in ungodly hands. We cannot breed rattlesnakes and expect nursemaids.

Trivializing God

There is an old fable about a peddler in Warsaw who had a very hard life. He lived in a miserable hut, worked long hours in freezing weather for very little money, was clothed in ragged garments, and was generally considered to be as hardworking and poor a man as the angels could find. Some of the angels pleaded with God to do something for the poor man, something wonderful and special. The Lord agreed, and, in an instant, the peddler was transported from an icy, windy, and subzero street of Warsaw to Heaven itself. He was told that God would give him anything he wanted. "Anything?" asked the amazed peddler. "Anything," said the angels. The peddler thought for a while and finally said, "I'll have a hot cup of coffee and a doughnut."

There was first a shocked gasp from the angels, and then embarrassment. The peddler had trivialized God because he himself was trivial.

We must be aware of trivializing God. John Newton, in one of his great hymns, says this of prayer:

Thou art coming to a King.
Large petitions with thee bring,
For His grace and power are such
None can ever ask too much,
None can ever ask too much.

Our Lord tells us, "[A]sk, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24).

Disinheritance

Psalm 33:12 tells us, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance.” These are familiar words, much loved by many, and rightly so. We should, however, remember their implications. Scripture is clear that the nation whose god is not the Lord is not blessed but accursed. It is disinherited by God and cast out to be trodden underfoot by men because it is “good for nothing” (Matt. 5:13).

The nations of the world today have separated themselves from God, which means they have separated themselves unto judgment. We live in a time of judgment, and there will be no change in the direction of events until men change their relationship to God.

The meek, meaning those who are tamed by God and broken to His harness, shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5). The plagues and judgments of the Book of Revelation tell us that the ungodly will be dispossessed and broken.

The forces for disinheritance are all around us. On the other hand, the rise of Christian schools, strong and faithful ministries, and a renewed dedication to God’s every Word bear witness to the forces and Spirit of blessing at work among us.

The question for all of us is a simple one: Are we moving in the world of blessing or curses?

God and Our Peace

The Puritans were a remarkable people who accomplished far more than most men ever have because they knew what they believed and were totally dedicated. They numbered perhaps four percent of the English people when they took over the country; other men lacked their determination. One Puritan pastor, Richard Rogers of Wethersfield in Essex, was told by “a gentleman,” “Mr. Rogers, I like you and your company very well, only you are too precise.” Rogers replied, “Oh sir, I serve a precise God.” For this reason, God’s every Word had to be heeded and obeyed. Christopher Love stated it this way: “If you break God’s law, God will break your peace.”

Church members now number into the millions, but they lack the old-time power. They are too often content with pious gush, not an active faith with obedience. They do not want a precise God to command them, but they want God to be precise with His blessings: God is there to serve them, not to require anything of them.

Joshua’s warning to Israel is seldom heard today. He said to a people of casual faith: “Ye cannot serve the LORD: for he is an holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. If ye forsake the LORD, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that he hath done you good” (Josh. 24:19–20).

Have you given God reason to break your peace?

Law and Order

Law and order are two realities which must go together. If we separate order from law, the result is tyranny. There is a great deal of order in the Soviet Union; in fact, no one dares even disorder the streets with a scrap of paper. But this order is not based on true law but on tyranny, on dictatorship. There is a great deal of order in a graveyard, but there is no law at work in that order. It is the orderliness of death, of a total cessation of all movement and growth. It is possible to have order without law, and it is possible to have lawless order.

Gangsters have lawless order. No principle of justice governs their order: it is a case of either obey or get shot. It is an order which despises justice and law, and it works to subvert them.

Nowadays, our courts are often working against godly law and creating an ungodly and totalitarian order. In New York City, the police are increasingly being limited and hampered in their work by the politicians and the courts. The police have been seriously handicapped in their efforts to control racial violence. But on August 17, 1966, news dispatches reported that "A city agency that used two notorious gangsters in an attempt to stem New York's recent racial violence even gave them letters of introduction so police would not interfere." Gangsters can bring order to a community, but they cannot bring law. Communists have brought order to many countries, but it is the lawless order of dictatorship, tyranny, and the graveyard. And federal officials can bring order to farmers and to farm labor, but it is not the order of law, morally based and religiously grounded.

What the United States needs badly is law and order, godly law and order. Instead, we are increasingly getting order (and orders) without law. Our greatest danger, as we face civil violence, planned rioting, and revolutionary agitation, is that order will be restored without law. Revolutionists have always staged public disorders to break down law and to lead people to demand order, any kind of order.

The revolutionists then help provide a new lawless order, sacrificing law in the name of order.

We must not, therefore, separate law and order one from another, nor can we tolerate it from churchmen or politicians. Too many people are working for laws which only create disorders, and for an order which can only destroy law. Moses said, "Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God's" (Deut. 1:17). There is thus no law where there is any class legislation, nor is there any order except the order of tyranny. Is this what we want?

Do We Need More Laws?

Earlier in 1967, a group of Black Panthers staged an “invasion” of the California assembly chamber in Sacramento. This “invasion” served no purpose for the Black Panthers; it certainly made them unpopular. But it did result in a gun law, the Mulford Act, which provides a year’s imprisonment or a \$1,000 fine for anyone found with a loaded gun in his possession on any public street or highway. This law, people were assured, was only aimed at preventing similar occurrences and would not affect innocent people.

Before the summer was over, the first arrest under the Mulford Act was made. Senator John G. Schmitz, who fought against the bill, described this arrested man:

He is a good citizen with an unblemished record who was a Republican candidate for the state legislature in last year’s general election. This man drives to work every morning at 4 a.m. His route takes him through areas of Los Angeles where the crime rate is high and riots threaten. For his own protection he carries a gun, in plain view on the front seat of his car. His ammunition is a clip attached to the gun, but he has no round in the chamber. On August 16 this man was arrested and charged with violating the Mulford Act. It was not the intention of Assemblyman Mulford and the supporters of A.B. 1591 to penalize this kind of man. But their bill has done so, just as all gun control legislation hurts good citizens. But this is not all. Assemblyman Crown now plans to secure enactment of a stricter gun law, one which will, among other things, require the registration of all guns.

The more laws we pass, the more we hinder and harm good citizens. Our problem is not a shortage of laws. We have laws enough for every kind of crime. Our problem is a lack of Christian faith and character, and no law can supply that. If passing more laws could cure our problems, then we should ask Congress and the state legislature to sit in lengthy session and pass laws to end all problems.

But laws can grow no food; yet they can hinder the farmer who grows food. Laws can make no man a Christian, but some laws can penalize godly men. Laws cannot end poverty, but some laws are encouraging the poor to be parasites. No law can lengthen a man’s life, but unjust laws can destroy a man’s peace, happiness, and life.

God cursed the land of Egypt with a series of plagues. We are now being cursed by a plague of laws, which the pharaohs of Washington and Sacramento are inflicting upon us.

Do we need more laws? God forbid! We need more righteousness, more freedom, and more godly men—and fewer laws.

Powerless Men

The Roman satirist Juvenal despised religion. He wrote, “Can’t you see how naive and comic a figure you cut these days, with your adamant belief that a man should stick to his word, that there’s really something in all this religious guff?”

Yet Juvenal spent much of his time writing against his fellow Romans for their lack of morality. His writings tell us why Rome was in trouble: neither he nor those whom he satirized had any true faith or integrity.

St. Paul saw this also, even in men within the church, whom he described as “[t]raitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof” (2 Tim. 3:4–5). Such people are better outside the church than within.

The sad fact is that Juvenal’s world and ours are very much alike. When Christian faith ceases to be the dominant force in a man’s life, then he is to all practical intents in Juvenal’s camp. He is “denying the power” of Christ in his own life and in the world, and he is sentencing himself to a contempt for life, an essential impotence. For all his intensity, Juvenal made no difference to his day: Jesus Christ, through more men like St. Paul, did.

The Contagion of Sin

In Haggai 2:12–19, God drives home a very telling point to the prophet. If we place an unclean thing together with a clean one, the cleanness of the latter will not rub off onto the former. If I rub my dirty and ink-stained hands on a clean towel, the cleanness of the towel will not rub off onto my hands: rather it is dirt that is transferred, and the towel becomes dirty.

By this means the Lord made clear to Haggai and Judah that sin is contagious, but righteousness is not. We are not Christians simply because we belong to a good church, a good family, or a fine community. Moreover, a good profession of faith does not make us holy or godly.

Sin and injustice are all around us, and they readily rub off on us if we are not careful. To stand against this requires faith: it means that, being regenerate, we are governed by the power of God, not by the pressures of the group. We go against the current rather than with it, because the currents of our time are replete with injustice and ungodliness. We do not allow our speech to be governed by tale-bearing and nonsense but by grace and consideration.

In our day, we have exalted the feelings of the group to the place of God. “Group dynamics” has replaced morality, and all too many people respond to peer pressure rather than the law-word of God. For such people, the law is what people think and not what God says. Some churches try to capitalize on “group dynamics” by using the music, fads, and currents of the world as a means of attracting youth. They forget that faith involves a break with this fallen world, not a merger with it. Faith comes by the power of God, not by merging with the spirit of the age.

Relevance

The French Revolution bears testimony, not so much to the power of the subversive forces of revolution as to the moral failure of the royalists.

Otto J. Scott, in *Robespierre, the Voice of Virtue*, has called attention to the great volume of pornography which preceded the Revolution, and to the immense rise of prostitution, gambling, spiritualism, occultism, Black Masses, sadism, fetishism, and perversions of all kind, all parading under the banner of human liberty. The law of God was despised, and a new doctrine of law was taking form, summed up later by Robespierre in the statement, "The people are the law." At the same time, a vitriolic attack was mounted against the church and Christianity.

The church at the time had grown soft because so much Enlightenment thinking had infiltrated both Catholic and Huguenot ranks. Churchmen, eager to curry favor with the intellectuals of the day, were ready to parrot every assault on Christian morality and culture and gain intellectual respectability thereby. Those who maintained the forms of orthodoxy were too pietistic to involve themselves in the affairs of their times. As a result, they became easy victims.

The parallel to our time is very real. Then as now, the problem is the same: the weakness of the forces of Christianity, their retreat into irrelevance.

The public agenda today is largely set by the left, by our modern forces for the war against Christianity. It is orchestrated by the servants of this establishment and echoed by the press. However, bad as the secular press is, the church press is worse. It is an echo chamber for every evil force. The secular press is somewhat restrained by fear of libel suits, but the so-called Christian press counts on the fact that most Christians avoid lawsuits with religious publications. As a result, modernist and evangelical publications give themselves to vindictive and libelous remarks without restraint.

But this is not all. There is a bankruptcy of Christian thinking. The implications of the faith go disregarded and undeveloped. People want pap in their church services, not solid food. Early in the 1970s, I spoke in a church in a Midwestern state, a center of old-fashioned faith. The most powerful pastor in the area came to hear me and walked out in agitation. The local pastor stopped him to ask why he was so upset; nothing I said disagreed with his own stance. The old pastor said, "Yes, but he says it differently." For him, true preaching had to echo the language of the seventeenth century. He was irrelevant to his own time, and both he and his congregation loved the safety of irrelevance.

But there is no safety in irrelevance, only death. Peoples and churches that seek personal peace and piety above serving God and making the crown rights of Christ our King relevant to our day are headed for the graveyards of history. There is no more peaceful place than a cemetery.

"Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light" (Eph. 5:14).

Blindness by Choice

A friend wrote this week about the renomination of the local assemblyman. This assemblyman has been three times arrested for drunk driving and is currently on one year's probation, with his driver's license revoked. In spite of this, he is heavily favored to win in the general election.

I had to reply that this did not surprise me. As I travel across country, I am often surprised at the tolerance of voters for offenses which make the assemblyman's seem mild by comparison.

At the same time, I must admit that it should not surprise me. I see what people tolerate in their children, without being disturbed, and what they demand that you tolerate in them, and the picture is fairly clear. I suspect that, in spite of their sins, our legislators as a whole are of better character than the people, but not too much better.

When men themselves have evil moral standards, the standards they set for their wives, children, and legislators will hardly be good ones. There will be, despite differences, a basic unity of evil faith between them.

The prophet Isaiah points this out in declaring God's coming judgment. There were many then who were ready to blame workers or masters, moneylenders, or deadbeats, one class or another, for the problems of the day. Isaiah, however, declares, "And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the servant, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the taker of usury, so with the giver of usury to him" (Isa. 24:2).

It is not popular today to say that the improvident borrower is as much a sinner as the money shark. We want to limit sin to the top man, but God sees it wherever it is.

Our problem thus, as my friend rightly saw, is with the people as a whole. The assemblyman's renomination, she wrote, is evidence of something deeply wrong in the people, an absence of Biblical faith and guidelines.

Proverbs 29:18 declares, "Where there is no vision, the people perish [or, run wild]: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he." The word "vision" here refers to the ministry of the Word of God, the teaching of God's grace and law. For lack of it people run wild or perish. Where there is faith and obedience, there we have also a happy or blessed estate.

Our foremost need is for the faithful teaching of the Word of God, which is man's surest vision. Today, however, men prefer blindness to vision.

The Gold Standard

When God listed the charges against Judah which required judgment, one of the indictments read, “Thy silver is become dross, thy wine mixed with water” (Isa. 1:22). Fraud governed winemaking: the wine was mixed with water. Fraud also governed their money: the silver had given way to baser metals, to slugs.

Repeatedly, the Biblical law calls for just weights and just measures (Lev. 19:36; Deut. 25:15), and this refers not only to scales and bushels, but also to money. The shekel was not only a measure of weight but also of money, so that a shekel of gold or silver meant a certain weight of gold and silver. The American monetary standard was built on the Biblical method, by weight. The major coin was the \$20 gold piece, called the double eagle: its weight is an ounce of .900 fine gold. The \$10 gold piece is half an ounce, and so on down. People in Asia, Europe, and Africa did not know what a dollar, pound, franc, or mark meant, but they all knew weights, and a dependable weight of 22 carat gold was to be trusted: it was real and honest money. American gold was thus very popular, as was American silver.

A \$20 gold piece used to cost the Treasury almost \$20 in gold plus labor. The paper money of today, Federal Reserve notes and U.S. banknotes cost perhaps a dollar to print \$100,000 worth. Is it any wonder modern governments get bigger and bigger since they discovered “instant money,” paper money? They can create their own money, by borrowing or by printing, and be the richest buyer in the market and the biggest employer.

The gold standard meant honest weights and honest measures. Paper money is an ever-inflating and changing measure: it gives less and less security to people who save. It is a form of legalized robbery by which a central government can have instant wealth and progressively crowd out the people and destroy their wealth. Paper money is a rubber yardstick.

But our world today is full of rubber yardsticks, false standards, because the first and foremost measure or rule, the Bible, has been replaced by man’s word, a rubber yardstick. Men preach today, not the Word of God, but man’s word, their own political beliefs and opinions, self-help psychology, pleasing and entertaining sermons, anything and everything but the Word of God. Religiously, we are off the gold standard; our silver has become dross; we are on slugs.

We should not be surprised therefore at the consequences. Every man is his own law, and the result is lawlessness, increasing anarchy and corruption. We need a return to the true measure of all things, God’s Word. “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isa. 8:20).

Christmas

Christmas is uniquely a time of joy, because it means that God became man in order to redeem us. Saint Ephrem the Syrian centuries ago declared: “This is the day that rules over the seasons. The dominion of Thy day is like Thine, which stretcheth over generations that have come, and are to come. In December when the seed is hidden in the earth, there sprouted forth from the Womb the Ear of Life.” Christmas is a time of song, because of the joy of salvation, and of gifts, because God has given us the great gift of our Savior. The season of coldness becomes the season of warmth and love.

It is no wonder that Christmas is the one religious holiday celebrated also by non-Christians. It represents a joy, a hope, and a peace that attracts people everywhere. Not all their attempts to alter Christ’s birth into a humanistic celebration can destroy the great victory of the day. The Christmas carols are more than joyful songs: they are the good news of victory and the promise of His peace. They declare, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let Earth receive her King.”

The true joy of Christmas depends on this, receiving our King, the Prince of Peace. When He reigns over us, then His spirit, peace, and power reign in us. Then too, no matter what our problems and burdens, “[W]e are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (Rom. 8:37). Christmases will come and go on the calendar, but when we are reborn in Christ, the joy of His coming is always in us. Come, live in His joy!

Christ the Head

Paul, in Colossians 2:10, says of Christians in relation to Jesus Christ, “And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power.” This sentence has an intensely personal application, although it cannot be limited to that. But, to consider that personal emphasis first, Paul says that none of us can have true fulfillment apart from Jesus Christ. He is the true and last Adam, and in Him we are a new humanity. Our potentialities are only realizable in Him.

Paul, however, adds that Christ is also the head of all principality and power, that is, He is the only rightful ruler and authority over all things. This means that Jesus Christ is not only Lord over the church but also all things else. His rule must be recognized by individuals, families, schools, civil governments, all institutions, indeed in every area of life and thought. Because “[a]ll things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3).

There is no neutral area of life and thought where Christ need not be served. When I leave the church, I do not walk out of Christ’s jurisdiction.

There is thus no completeness in our lives, or in the life of the church, state, schools, and all things else, apart from the headship of Jesus Christ. He must reign over us, and only in His government is our peace.

The Truth

Our Lord declares plainly, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). This means that for us truth can never be abstract ideas, nor can it be data. The truth for us is the very Person of the Lord, God Himself. Truth is not something separate from God, nor above or below Him: it is the Lord.

Whenever people separate truth from the Person of God, serious problems follow. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, an associate of Mahatma Gandhi, once asked Gandhi whether, given the choice, he would choose India or the truth. Gandhi took some minutes before answering and then said, “In my mind India and truth are synonymous, but if I had to make the painful choice between them, I should decide in favor of the truth.” According to Esme Cecil Wingfield-Stratford, Gandhi always insisted on seeing India and truth as identical.

Certainly the Marxists identify truth with their cause and thus become self-righteous and murderous towards all their enemies. But they are not alone.

Political parties, politicians, all of us, tend to identify our causes and beliefs with the truth. Scripture tells us, however, that truth transcends us and our causes. It is one only with the Lord, who is Truth; we can be faithful to it, but it is a ways beyond us, and more than we or our causes can approximate.

Faithfulness to the Lord who is Truth requires humility on our part, the recognition that at our best we are “unprofitable servants” and sinners saved by grace. We can best serve the Truth by humility, grace, patience, and forbearance.

Are you a servant of the Truth or of yourself?

The Christian Way

We sometimes forget what a radical change in every area of life and thought was made by Christianity. As one scholar observed, those who were the closest to the gods in Homer were not the poor nor the meek, but the strong and the powerful. Greek philosophy and popular thought did not consider the potential for goodness in the poor.

According to Professor A. R. Hand, pity was essentially linked with fear; it was something felt by the weak. Giving to another person took place only when one knew that the other person would in due time reciprocate. Envy prevailed, and men feared to appear wealthy.

Our Lord reversed the prevailing moral order. His command was, “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom” (Luke 6:38). Matthew 6:1 says that it is our Father in Heaven who will reward us by His providence. “And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same” (Luke 6:33).

Over the centuries, one of the unexpected kindnesses of Christians was that they asked people, who were unable to reciprocate the invitation, to share their dinner. The poor were thus welcomed to the table by richer believers.

We are now on the road back to paganism. We pay little attention to our Lord’s commandments concerning charity and brotherly love. As a result, we have made ourselves comfortable but poor in grace.

Follow the Crowd?

It was a church advertisement that left me more than a little sick. It read, “Follow the crowd to _____ Church.” It reminded me at once of our Lord’s words: “[W]ide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat” (Matt. 7:13).

Nowhere in Scripture are we ever told to follow the crowd, but we often see the necessity for godly men, like Elijah, to stand against the crowd. A dozen times the Gospels cite our Lord as declaring, “Follow me” (Matt. 4:19, 8:22, etc.). The difference between following the Lord and following the crowd is very great.

Why this appeal then to “follow the crowd”? In our time we tend to worship majorities. The majority rules, not the law or the right. Some even insist that the “majority is always right”! Basic to this faith in majorities is the old pagan doctrine, “The voice of the people is the voice of God.”

The Bible, however, declares man to be a fallen creature, so this makes the voice of the people at best untrustworthy and more often simply the voice of sin. In fact, God in His law specifically forbids following the crowd, because the voice of the crowd is not the voice of God. “Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil” (Exod. 23:2). God’s great praise of Caleb was that Caleb had not followed the lead of other men but had “followed me fully” (Num. 14:24).

This issue is an important one. The crowd is all too important for modern man and takes the place of God with him. Children beg and whine for permission to do evil by justifying it in the name of the crowd: “Everybody’s doing it.” This they learn from their parents, schools, and obviously, their churches as well when a church boldly advertises, “Follow the crowd.” Don’t blame your children for doing what you and their religious and educational leaders are teaching them to do. “Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye” (Matt. 7:5). Until then, you will teach your child two things: to follow the crowd, and to be a hypocrite.

Out of Step

Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:14, declares, “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly.” The word translated as “unruly” is in the Greek *ataktous*, meaning “disorderly,” or “out of step.” It has reference to soldiers who are out of step or desert the ranks.

These members who are to be warned are persons out of step with Christ. This is a very important point. Too often, we judge people by whether or not they are out of step with us, or with the church. To do so is to make ourselves or the church the standard or norm. The standard can only be Jesus Christ.

Those who are unruly, disorderly, or out of step with Jesus Christ are those who disobey the plain requirements of Scripture. The Word of God is the standard, rule, or canon of faith and life; man’s word is not.

All the unruly, the persons out of step, are to be warned, or admonished. The word here used in the Greek is “to put into mind.” They are to be told very clearly what the Word of God says about their conduct, and to be given the commandments which govern their unruliness. The Word of God is the rule, canon, or discipline whereby men must walk.

We are all out of step, not when we go contrary to other men’s ways, but when we depart from the law-word of God. Sometimes faithfulness to God, being in step with the Lord, requires us to be out of step with other people.

Paul’s words are thus a warning to us. Are we walking or marching in step with the Lord, or with men?

Changing Things

In the days before Columbus and Luther, Europe was in the midst of moral and social anarchy. Authority, in both church and state, was bypassed, and the state, to maintain itself, became more and more tyrannical. Cardinal Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II, said in 1454: “Christianity has no head who all wish to obey. Neither the Pope nor the Emperor is rendered his due. There is no reverence, no obedience. Thus we regard the Pope and Emperor as if they bore false titles and were mere painted objects. Each city has its own king. There are as many princes as there are households.”

This moral anarchy resulted in political tyranny. When men are not morally responsible, they can neither command obedience from others nor give it to those above them. They are lawless, and brute force begins to rule in their world.

Solomon tells us of man, “[A]s he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23:7). Lawless men create a lawless world, and no authoritarian power over them can make them any different in their heart. Only a reformation, the regenerating power of God, can make man into a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

We need to work for changes in our politics, economics, education, and in every other sphere. These changes, however, will be futile unless the heart of man is changed. Our moral and social anarchy comes from the heart of man, and the change must begin there.

Cutting Straight

Paul, in writing to Timothy, says, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). The Greek word translated as “rightly dividing” is, literally, “cutting straight.” Paul says that God’s Word must be very plainly presented: it must be used to cut straight with the word of truth to the heart of man’s problems. In Proverbs 3:6, we have a like meaning: “In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct [or cut a straight way for] thy paths.” Again, in Proverbs 11:5, we are told, “The righteousness of the perfect shall direct his way,” or cut a straight way.

What is meant by cutting straight the word of truth is that we do not bend the truth, or indulge in all kinds of roundabout ways to disguise its bluntness. Too often, we trust more in our tact and diplomacy than in God’s Holy Spirit. We assume that we can do better with our cautious tactics than by the Word of God. In so doing, we are saying that our caution is wiser than God’s truth. Such an approach makes us impotent. To be God’s workman, an approved one who has no reason to be ashamed, we must cut straight the truth. This is God’s requirement, and it means trusting God rather than ourselves.

Of course, this “cutting straight” will sometimes create very real problems for us. On the other hand, it will also bring about God’s results. This our way cannot do.

Coronation

In the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, a crown and an olive branch were conspicuous symbols. The early church adopted these symbols—especially the crown—for baptism. Baptism was seen as the coronation of man. Because God created man to exercise dominion and to subdue the earth for God’s purposes (Gen. 1:26–28), man was seen by believers as called to rule, to be a king under God.

By his sin, man fell from this calling, but by Christ’s redemption, he was recalled to it. In baptism, the early church used a crown to bring home to the convert his duty to occupy till his Lord returns. This meant and means bringing every area of life and thought into captivity to Christ. It means exercising dominion over education, politics, economics, the sciences, and all things else. John Wyclif declared that the Christian is the only true lord over all the earth, because “The earth is the LORD’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1), and it is the Lord’s under-lords and servants who must govern all things in His name.

This means that we must claim all things for Christ, and bring home the meaning of God’s law-word to all the world.

Baptism, the early church held, is the redeemed man’s coronation, and the coronation to them meant a calling to rule. We cannot rule the world unless we first rule ourselves and our families. As the family of the King of kings, we have a calling to rule, and God’s Word is our guide and law book for our training and authority.

The Name of the Lord

In a very interesting verse, Genesis 4:26, we are told that a son was born to Seth, “and he called his name Enos: then began men to call upon the name of the LORD.” The great Hebrew scholar Cassuto said of this verse, “There is a parallelism of both language and theme: a human being is called by a name suited to him—Enosh; and God is called by a name befitting Him—LORD (YHWH).” To understand what it means to call on the name of the Lord, we must understand this verse.

Enos or Enosh means mortal. Seth thereby defined man. He had come to know that fallen man was born to die, and he gave his son that name as a sign. It was a reminder to a loving father that the best of children are born into a world of sin and death. It was also thereby a witness that there is no hope in man, or in generation, only in regeneration. Seth thus defined all men, including himself, as a witness to his faith.

At the same time, “then began men to call upon the name of the LORD.” The name of the Lord is a name God declared and revealed concerning Himself, beginning in Eden (Gen. 2:7), but most fully to Moses (Exod. 3:13–14). It means He Who Is, the self-existent and eternal God.

This means that to call upon the name of the Lord is much more than prayer and worship. It means to know Him as He is, as He reveals Himself in His Word. Instead of approaching God in terms of our thinking, we approach Him only in terms of His Word and revelation.

Seth no doubt at times called his son, “my darling boy,” “son,” and other loving terms, but, by naming him Enos, he always reminded himself what man really is, all men, including his beloved son and himself.

Similarly, many people approach God, not in terms of His name, but in terms of their wishes. Some years ago, in the 1950s, a prominent actress spoke of God as “a living doll.” She was not calling on the name of the Lord, only her imagination.

To call on the name of the Lord is to see Him only in terms of His Word and His Son. The living God is the God who has named Himself, and revealed Himself. Call only upon Him. Or will it be said of us, as Isaiah said of the worshippers of his day, “[T]here is none that calleth upon thy name” (Isa. 64:7)?

The King in Our Lives

Paul in Romans 6:12 says, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof.” If we read this verse in isolation from the preceding one, we fail to see its meaning. Romans 6:11 requires us to be dead to sin but “alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Too often, people are negative in their profession of faith; they are against sin, which is merely common sense. Everyone is against other people’s sins, while being indulgent of their own. Even criminal gangs are hostile to having any member cheat or rob them. However, we can be against our own sins and still be far from godly.

Our faith is not negative. It is not merely being against sin; it is the positive faith in and obedience to Christ as our King or Lord. It is pharisaism and hypocrisy to see ourselves as good because we say yes to Jesus and see others as bad because they do not. Faith is more than a matter of words. It is life, a life lived in faithfulness and obedience to Christ as King. It means that Someone reigns or is king over us, even Jesus Christ, so that we live and move and have our being in obedience to every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. To be redeemed by Christ means that we are His possession and property and we live in terms of His law. It means that there is a king in our lives, and His name is Jesus Christ. To be under a king is to be obedient to Him and to serve Him. Who is the king in your life?

Sacrifices for Whom?

We hear a great deal nowadays about the necessity for sacrifices, and it all sounds noble and good, but the more basic question needs to be asked: sacrifices to and for whom? Generalizations sound good but can be dangerous. Love is fine, and wives should be loved, but the love of evil is wrong, and if it is your neighbor's wife you are loving, you are in trouble with God and man.

David taught us something about sacrifices. He and his men were in a stronghold, and the Philistines had captured his hometown, Bethlehem. The water in their fortress was poor drinking, and David, on drinking it one day, longed for the good waters of home, saying, "Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!" Three of David's loyal soldiers broke through the enemy lines, crept into Bethlehem, and drew a canteen of water from the well. The next day they gave it proudly to David, who was deeply moved. "[N]evertheless he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the LORD. And he said, Be it far from me, O LORD, that I should do this: is not this the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives? therefore he would not drink it" (2 Sam. 23:14–17). In other words, while David was greatly moved by the devotion of his men, he felt that only God could be the object of such a sacrifice and risk, and he poured out the water as a religious offering to God.

This fine sense of proportion and faith is lacking in our modern talk about sacrifice. Does any politician have a right to ask sacrifices of us which only God can ask? When necessary for the defense of our country, God's law does call for military duty and protection, but the extent to which the civil government can ask us to sacrifice ourselves does not go beyond that. Too many politicians are asking more of us than God asks.

What a man sacrifices for above all else, that is his true object of worship and his god. Whenever a politician, reformer, business executive, husband, wife, or anyone else demands sacrifices of us above and beyond the due service God requires of us, he is playing god. The idea that we are not really living right unless we are miserable and are sacrificing ourselves for and to everyone under the sun is ridiculous and anti-Christian. While ungodly prosperity is condemned, godly prosperity is given as the worthy object of prayer by the Bible: "Save now, I beseech thee, O LORD: O LORD, I beseech thee, send now prosperity" (Ps. 118:25). The Bible says to the believer that "the whole duty of man" is to "[f]ear God, and keep his commandments" (Eccles. 12:13). Thus, when anyone asks sacrifices of us which only God can rightly ask, we can with justice and true holiness respond: we will do our duty under God, but more than that, you cannot ask. The Lord alone is our God, and we offer sacrifices to none other.

The Unblemished Sacrifice

Our second best is never good enough for God. Again and again, in the laws of sacrifice, an unblemished offering is strictly required (Exod. 12:5; etc). This is not all. Among the clean animals listed by Moses is the deer, but the deer could never be offered as a sacrifice. There was a very important reason for this: man's work on a continuing basis did not go into a deer, whereas a calf, lamb, or kid represented work, time, and money. The gift must cost the giver something.

God tells Asaph, "For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills" (Ps. 50:10). God does not need what we give Him, but we need to be givers for our own growth.

Man's gift to God must be his best possible offering. Too many people excuse poor or shoddy gifts or workmanship for the Lord's work with the words, "It's for the Lord," as though this sanctifies cheapness on our part. Others insist, "It's the thought that counts," as though a pretended good thought can cover up stinginess or sloppy workmanship.

Many people seem to believe that they deserve the best, and God should be happy with their leftovers! One successful commercial of recent years told television viewers, "You deserve the best." It was a profitable advertisement because most people do believe that! Their premise is, "Nothing is too good for me."

A world in which men feel they are more important than God is going to have troubles. We are having them.

“Where Your Treasure Is”

The trouble with most of us is that we do not really read the Bible with any desire to understand it. Take our Lord’s familiar words from the Sermon on the Mount: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21).

If you think as you read this, it will suddenly strike you that this seems altogether backward. Most people believe that a man will put his money where his heart is, that where his heart is, there will his treasure be also. Our Lord, however, reversed this common and ancient opinion: a man’s heart will follow his money, so beware of unwise investments (Matt. 6:19–20), because your heart will become unwise with them. If we lay up treasures on earth, if we pin our material hopes on man, then our hearts will be wrapped up in humanistic goals rather than God and His Kingdom.

Let us look at three examples of our Lord’s words. A man who had spent his life building up a company saw it go into other hands and into immoral courses of action when he resigned as chairman of the board. He was, of course, unhappy about the new policies, but, because he had a few million dollars tied up in the company, and because the profits were better than ever, he steadily became belligerently hostile to any criticism of the company. His heart had followed his treasure.

Another man had been an early champion of unionism in his field of work, and one of the first officials of the new union. Later on in life, he saw the union perpetrate as many evils against the workers as the old bosses had, but, because the union had been his life’s work and treasure, he refused to break with it or attack it. His heart had followed his treasure.

Still another man took pride in his church. His family had helped build it. Many of the stained glass windows and furnishings, as well as a chapel in the beautiful collection of buildings, represented memorials to members of his family. But the church became a flagrantly unchristian and evil congregation, the pastors mockers of the faith, and the buildings a center for every reprobate cause. Everything the church now represented went against this man’s professed faith. However, although all his friends left, he remained. His real treasure had always been, not Christ, but the buildings and their furnishings, that which his wealth had built up as a memorial, and his heart could not break with his treasure.

Beware of what you invest in with your time, wealth, and work. Your heart will follow it to your ruin. Lot’s wife could see Sodom burning, but it represented her life and work, everything she prized, and she turned back into it to be destroyed with it.

Priorities

An old saying has it that a demon is at home with demons, and an angel with angels. Another proverb tells us that a man is known by the company he keeps.

The Book of Proverbs, over and over again, gives us this same counsel from the Lord. It tells us, moreover, that the company we keep is determined by what our heart craves to learn. “He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed” (Prov. 13:20).

Let us apply this to our own lives very specifically. Most of us have time for everything but even the briefest reading of the Bible. We can spend two or three hours daily (the average is actually much higher) watching television, but five minutes to read the Bible is more than we can spare.

We may persuade ourselves that we are too busy or too tired to take time out for a chapter of Scripture, but, while we can easily fool ourselves, God cannot be fooled. Look at it this way: how much respect do you think God will have for you, and for this country, when we have so little respect for Him? If we have trouble giving Him even the leftovers of our lives, time, and money, why expect anything from Him except contempt and judgment?

A companion of fools is a fool. Is our life taken up with foolishness?

We cannot take God lightly: He is the Lord. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He demands more than priorities. He demands our lives, everything that we are and have, for His service, so that we must serve God in whatever is our calling.

We are told to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33), and this means that our lives must be governed by God’s Word and calling. We are thus not our own, but the Lord’s, whom we must serve with all our heart, mind, and being.

In serving Him alone do we have peace. As St. Augustine saw, in terms of his own experience, “Our hearts are restless, until they rest in Thee, O Lord.” This is our calling, to serve and glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

The priorities in our lives should come from God and His Word, not from men, nor from us.

Love

One of the problems created by scientism is the belief that everything can be measured and viewed quantitatively. For example, a common complaint on the part of some wives, or their husbands, is, “You love your work, or the children, or this and that, more than you love me.” Can this be true? Is it possible for us to give 50 percent of our love to our job, 20 percent to our wife, 20 percent to our children, and so on down the line? The best that can be said for this idea is that it is stupid; even more, it is morally perverse.

Scripture tells us, “Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deut. 6:5). Our Lord confirmed this commandment (Matt. 22:37); does He mean thereby that all our love, being given to God, cannot flow towards our family, or our work? On the contrary, He tells us that we lose both life and love if we do not give the Lord priority (Matt. 10:32–39). By giving all our love to God, we cease from sinful self-love and become capable of loving all the blessings God gives us.

In other words, by giving all our love, with all our being, to the Lord, we are thereby able to give all our love also to all that the Lord blesses us with, our work, our family, and our loved ones. We do not then rate our loved ones as if they were contenders on a hit parade, depending on how they please us. Loving God, we love all that He gives us in terms of His Word.

Fools and Sin

A couple of years ago, we had a serious drought, and I heard a child of six propose a simple solution to the water shortage. “If people need more water, why don’t they melt ice cubes?” Now that boy has a great future in politics, the governorship, or maybe even the presidency! With answers like that, he will go far!

It was, of course, a foolish statement, and foolish statements are all too common every day. But at the heart of all this folly is this fact: “Fools make a mock at sin” (Prov. 14:9). Failure to take sin seriously is at the heart of all folly.

We live in an age when all too few people take sin seriously. In fact, many regard it as a mark of being out of date and irrelevant to regard sin as an important matter.

Sin, however, is any want of conformity to, or violation of, the law of God. Failure to take sin seriously is failure to take God seriously, and this is at the heart of our problem.

A friend, the Rev. Grae Brian Gannon, in a study of the church scene, calls attention to the fact that great numbers of people are content to stay in churches whose apostasy is obvious, even though they disagree with their church. Their faith is not important enough for them to make a stand in terms of it. It is more important for them to be where their friends are than where the Lord is. In other words, they are fools: they do not take sin seriously.

What are your priorities, and where is God’s place in your life? Fools are self-made. What have you made of yourself?

Sin and Prayer

I have a three-year-old granddaughter who has suddenly developed an ear for big words and phrases, which she loves to use, although she does not always understand what she is saying. The results are sometimes garbled. The other night, at bedtime, she was saying her prayers. Besides her usual thanksgiving, she brought in some phrases and petitions used by daddy and the pastor. As a result, out came this strange thanksgiving: “I thank Thee, Lord, for all my sins!”

Now, Mary did not know what she was saying, although her mother quickly corrected and instructed her. However, all too many churchmen might as well be praying the same way: they seem so contented with their sins, and unhappy over their duties. A seventeenth-century poet commented about man’s habit of prizing his sins rather than his duties, and he spoke of us as cherishing “our darling lusts.”

Much better was the prayer I heard some years ago, by a man who had paid a painful price in the courts and prison for his rebellion and sin. Now a quiet, faithful Christian, he prayed, “I thank Thee, Lord, for tripping me up, laying me out, and stomping me down in my sin, and for then making me a new man in Jesus.”

The confession of sin is an important part of prayer, especially private prayer, but it must be specific. People are ready to make a vague confession of sin, but never a specific one. They will not confess to being stingy towards God, mean to their family, ill-tempered towards loved ones, careless with the truth, or anything else. In other words, they confess to being vaguely a sinner, but a sinner without any specific sins!

We must not treasure our sins, nor be grateful for them, but confess them by name, and ask God’s grace to cope with all of them. How many specific sins have you dealt with in your prayers? How can you overcome a problem or a sin you do not acknowledge and confess?

Never Alone

In Hebrews 12:4–29, we have a very strong statement about the necessity of God’s chastisement. When we become the sons and daughters of God by the adoption of grace, we are then subjected to correction and chastening. We are told that it will be “grievous,” but it is the only way to productivity in Christ, “the peaceable fruit of righteousness,” or justice. God, we are plainly told, “is a consuming fire.”

Fire can be used to destroy, or it can be used to purify and refine. God is always “a consuming fire.” The question is whether or not He comes to us in judgment, or as a refiner and purifier.

After telling us these things, Hebrews goes on to say, “Let your conversation [or behavior] be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” The Lord tells us that we are indeed going to undergo very serious and even grim problems. Our correction and chastisement will be anything but mild at times. In such circumstances, it is very easy for us to feel sorry for ourselves and to feel alone.

God, as our Heavenly Father and the source of our discipline, assures us that He will never forsake us. Like a true Father, He is using all these things to further our growth and to draw us closer to Himself. The more we mature, the nearer we are to Him. In all these things, we are never alone.

Loneliness

There is an important difference between being alone and being lonely. Being alone is often relaxing and restful. All of us need a time now and then to be alone. Our Lord took time to be alone, in prayer. We are told that “he went up into a mountain apart to pray” and that “he was there alone” (Matt. 14:23). Someone told me recently, “I need to be alone awhile,” a feeling I could appreciate and share!

To be lonely is another matter. We can be lonely if we are in a crowded room, surrounded by friends and acquaintances. One man told me of his loneliness at a business convention where all his associates were involved in activities and interests he detested. To be lonely means to be without communion or community. In a moving poem, Charles Lamb wrote, more than 150 years ago, about “The Old Familiar Faces,” saying, “All, all are gone, the old familiar faces.”

To be alone thus can be a luxury and a pleasure, but to be lonely is painful. Scripture speaks to our loneliness, declaring, “Let your conversation [or, behavior] be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (Heb. 13:5–6).

The cure for loneliness begins with a renewed relationship of faithfulness to the Lord. We then live without covetousness, and therefore with the Lord. We live in godly contentment, and therefore with a holy peace and security. The abolition of loneliness begins with the abolition of the sins God condemns, and with communion with Him.

Praising the Wicked

Proverbs 28:4 tells us plainly, “Those who forsake the law praise the wicked” (NKJV). To abandon God’s law and Word is a way of praising evil men.

Closely tied to this is Proverbs 29:18, “Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law happy is he.” The word “vision” can be translated as prophecy or revelation. “Perish” in the marginal reading is very literally “is made naked.” Without God’s revelation, without the Bible, a people are left stripped or naked, defenseless, therefore ready to perish, “but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.”

What we are here told is that God’s Word is our true armor and covering. Without its protection, we run coverless, naked, in the face of life’s problems and our enemies. We perish.

Thus, to abandon God’s Word is in effect to praise the wicked, to justify them in their contempt for God and His Word. Having thereby praised the wicked, we ourselves run naked; we strip ourselves of our only true defense, and we make God our enemy.

As against this, all who live by God’s law-word are happy or blessed.

Psalm 1 gives us a commentary on these verses, as well as introducing the Psalter. It tells us the future of those whose “delight is in the law of the LORD,” as against the future of the ungodly. As individuals and as a nation, we had better listen.

The Way to Justice

There is a strange requirement in Scripture that is very important to know. The Biblical word “righteousness” can be rendered also as “justice.” A righteous people will be those who are justified and just, and who work for justice. Our Lord, in the beatitudes, refers twice to those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, and are persecuted because of their dedication to justice (Matt. 5:6, 10).

We are blessed if we work for justice, and also if we suffer injustice for the Lord’s sake. It is when we do both that we show God’s grace.

Injustice offends many people. Those who work for justice, however, are not necessarily just themselves. Whether it is the person in the street, a judge, or a member of Congress, people want exemptions for their own sins and a judgment made on all other sins. Such individuals are prone to unjust ways of gaining demands. The result is lawlessness in the name of rights, justice, or freedom.

God’s way, however, is regeneration and grace, not violence and revolution. There can be no justice in society if there is no righteousness in one’s heart. Violence, demonstrations, and pressure tactics make no one good.

In other words, power tactics cannot change society for the better. Only the grace of God unto salvation can.

A Faithful Saying

Paul, in writing to Titus, sets down certain requirements for Christians in Titus 3:1–7 and then calls what he has written “a faithful saying,” continuing, “and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men” (Titus 3:8). The phrase “faithful saying” means, as Ernest Gordon pointed out years ago, “a statement of the faith.”

Let us then examine Paul’s very practical statement of the faith. *First*, we are to be obedient to all authorities, for our way is regeneration, not revolution. *Second*, we are “to be ready to every good work.” *Third*, we are “[t]o speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men.” *Fourth*, we who were once unregenerate and ungodly have been justified by God’s grace and made heirs of His Kingdom, and hence we live serving not our “divers lusts and pleasures,” but the Lord. *Fifth*, we have been saved by God’s mercy and grace “through Jesus Christ our Saviour.”

Paul ties work and faith together. Notice how practical Paul’s statement of the faith is. “Hating one another” gives way to a life of grace towards all men. “Malice and envy” are replaced by a readiness “to every good work.” Paul’s statement of faith needs more attention in our time.

Wisdom as Foresight

The Bible uses several Greek and Hebrew words for what in English is translated as “wise.” Some of these words mean skillful and understanding, and one of them, as in Exodus 23:8, means “seeing.” The wise are the seeing ones. They can make logical connections, see consequences, and look beyond the surface.

Scripture often speaks of wisdom as foresight. Thus, Ecclesiastes 8:5 says, “a wise man’s heart discerneth both time and judgment.” The wise are provident, because they look ahead, we are told.

Wisdom is not to be identified with learning. Learning is the accumulation of information and data, and many a man is full of knowledge or information and yet is totally devoid of wisdom. As one exasperated mother remarked of her over-educated son, “He has degrees in everything except common sense.” Learning is a great advantage with wisdom, but foolishness apart from it. As Solomon observed, “Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser: teach a just man, and he will increase in learning” (Prov. 9:9).

The Bible never downgrades learning, but it makes very clear that “[w]isdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding” (Prov. 4:7).

It is wisdom that our age lacks. For example, with respect to one policy after another, Viet Nam, the war on poverty, land control, smog devices, and the like, no lack of learning and data has been in evidence. Very learned men have written legions of reports to flood us with data, but in all of this, wisdom, or seeing, foresight, has been lacking. We have been full of knowledge and blind in sight.

Where does wisdom come from? Not from books, clearly, or else wisdom and learning would be identical, and they are not. According to Scripture, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10). To fear God is to know that His Word and His laws govern all things, that the wages of sin are always death, and that what men sow they also reap. Men who deny God’s law deny wisdom: they blind themselves. Our age has blinded itself by denying the Word of God.

As in every age, where men declare that God is dead, it is they who die. It is the fool who says in his heart, “There is no God” (Ps. 14:1).

Without God, Without Hope

Two doctors in two different cities have told me of late how many of their patients are suicidal. They come in with no symptoms except an intense listlessness and melancholy, and after an examination shows nothing, questioning reveals that they feel they “have nothing to live for.” One doctor said that he saw more and more of this kind of patient nowadays, whenever things grew worse economically or socially.

This should not surprise us. St. Paul writes, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable” (1 Cor. 15:19). These people have no hope in Christ in this life or the next. These are people “having no hope, and without God” (Eph. 2:12).

Some of these people are very well off and very “happy” by some of our standards. They travel widely, live comfortably, have many interesting and notable friends, but they are still hopeless. Without God, nothing has any meaning for them. Their cynicism and hopelessness is like that of the late Lord Keynes, the moral degenerate and atheist whose economic theory governs most of the world, including the U.S. Asked about what his theories would do to the world’s future, he answered cynically, “In the long run, we are all dead.”

The same despair will overwhelm men and nations everywhere unless they can say with St. Paul, “For to me to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21), then he adds, “and to die is gain.” St. Paul could not despair or feel hopeless about either life or death, because in Christ all things have a glorious meaning. Our God is He who makes all things work together for good to them that love Him, to them who are the called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28).

Thus, if we are hopeless and despairing, it is because we choose to be so, because we prefer to be our own god and without hope, than to acknowledge the living God and live in faith and hope.

Moreover, as Christians we can from time to time turn our backs on Christ and wallow in self-pity and feel hopeless. Our actions are then more stupid than that of the ungodly. We are then like rich men who turn our backs on our wealth and are afraid to spend a penny lest we starve. To be with God means to have hope, and to act on it.

Worry and Unbelief

The Bible forbids us to worry. Our Lord Himself speaks of it as foolishness and sin (Matt. 6:25–34). Peter tells us to cast “all your care upon him; for he careth for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

Worry and faith do not go together; they are, in fact, in contradiction to each other. To worry is to lack faith.

Consider this: God cannot worry. He is the Maker of heaven and earth, and all things therein. All things were made by Him, and all things are under His omnipotent hand and control. Moreover, as James declares, “Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world” (Acts 15:18). Not an atom can ever escape God’s government and control.

This means that God has nothing to worry about, because everything is under His full control and accomplishes His purpose. If the Lord be our Lord, then Romans 8:28 is true for us: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” If the worst that happens to us is made to work for good in the Lord, we cannot lose.

This is why anxiety and worry are a sin. They mean a distrust in the Lord. They mean, moreover, that we insist on playing god and on trying to run our lives according to our plan. We then sinfully refuse to take hands off our lives to commit them to God’s keeping.

When our Lord says, “Take no thought for your life” (Matt. 6:25), or “do not worry, or be anxious, about your living,” He is summoning us to faith. If we refuse to have faith in the Lord, how can we expect Him to care for us? And if we refuse to have faith and insist on worrying, then we will have something to worry about: having denied the Lord, we will not have His care or providence. Take your choice: God’s care or your anxiety.

The Driver's Seat

Have you ever been a passenger in a car driven by a very poor or reckless driver? It can be an unsettling experience. We all react in more or less the same way: we want to take over and drive it ourselves. We find ourselves pushing hard on the floorboard as if the brakes were under our feet. We do all the looking, keeping an eye on the traffic, instead of leaving it to the driver. We cannot relax. We are more tired at the end of the trip than we would be if we were driving.

It is just as irritating to have a distrustful passenger. I know a man whom no one likes to drive anywhere. His sight is bad, and he assumes yours is worse. If you drive faster than a crawl, he gets upset and nervous and is sure you will crash into somebody. Every car which comes near you, he feels is going to smash into you. By the time you go very far, his jitters make a nervous and shaky driver out of you.

My point is this: most of us are bad passengers who treat the Lord as though He were a bad driver. The Bible makes clear that God is in the driver's seat. This is what predestination is all about (Rom. 8:28–39). There is no question about God's perfection nor about His ability. We are the question mark. Do we act as though some fool, or some careless person, is in the driver's seat of the universe? Are we bad passengers who are trying to second-guess God, put on the brakes for Him, and to correct His every step? Are our prayers really insults? Do we pray as though God has to be corrected, or nagged into doing the right thing? Or do we pray with confidence to the perfect Lord, knowing that He delights in our trust and welcomes our trusting prayer?

If a bad passenger annoys you, do you imagine God is not annoyed at your distrust? What your distrust is saying to the Lord is simply this: you are declaring that you yourself would make a better god than He is. Such praying is not a prayer, but an insult. The basic premise of prayer is faith and trust. However great our needs and griefs, our trust must be greater.

After all, if the Lord is in the driver's seat, what have we to fear?

God with Us

When Joseph was told that the Virgin Mary would give birth to a son, he was also given a name for the child, Jesus, meaning “savior,” for “he shall save his people from their sin.” Joseph was also told that this would be in fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, and this child would literally be the Emmanuel, “God with us” (Matt. 1:21–23).

The child would be miracle-born, but His birth would not be as miraculous as Adam’s, who was totally created by God out of the dust of the earth. The conception of the Christ child would be miraculous, but not His birth, in that He was woman-born.

The modern focus is on the virgin birth because of the skepticism of many. Scripture rather concentrates on the fact of incarnation, of which the virgin birth is an aspect. The Christ child is God with us, God incarnate, very God of very God, and very man of very man.

This is a fact of incalculable importance. It means that not only does our omnipotent and omniscient Creator know us totally in our every thought and in every atom of our being, but that in the second person of the Trinity we have God the Son, who has experienced all the problems and griefs of our lives. Neither our lives nor our problems are alien to Him. This is why prayers in Jesus’ name can be so open and intimate. He not only knows us totally as Creator, but as the incarnated Son, He has shared our lives. Moreover, He has experienced sorrows and torment far beyond anything we have. In Him, we are present at the heart of God.

This is why Christmas is so joyful a season. Our nearest loved ones cannot know and love us as the Son of God does. Therefore, rejoice!

Be Yourself

The more learning a man has, the more material he has towards being either a wise man or a fool, and it is very easy to be a fool. Just be yourself. We are sinners, and foolishness is basic to our fallen nature, so that, when people say, “I want to be me,” they are demanding the right to be fools. The Book of Proverbs speaks about seventeen times of the fool as a scoffer and cynic. He is skeptical about everything and everyone except himself and his opinions, and he is thus a source of trouble (Prov. 22:10). Such fools are destroyers (Prov. 29:8). Unable to be constructive, or to do good, they hate all who are able. As a result, they work continuously to undermine, negate, and discourage. The scorner’s great joy in life is to sit on the sidelines and criticize all who are actively trying to accomplish something for the Lord.

Such fools thus have a very high opinion of themselves, and they try to be opinion makers, shaping the minds of men to their own cynicism and contempt. They are the do-nothings and evil-thinkers, who work busily to promote themselves and those like unto them as the wise men of the age.

It is God’s opinion which prevails, however, and God the Lord tells us that He repays such fools with their own coin, scorn: “Surely he scorneth the scorners: but he giveth grace unto the lowly. The wise shall inherit glory: but shame shall be the promotion of fools” (Prov. 3:34–35).

There is a beauty about the justice of God: the scorners are scorned, but those who turn to the Lord with a humble and believing heart, receive grace, become wise in Him, and receive the inheritance of glory.

The question God raises is a very simple one: do you want to be yourself a fool, or a child of God and wise in the Spirit of the Lord?

Who Is There?

St. Peter's first letter was written to believers whom he called "strangers" or sojourners "throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (1 Pet. 1:1). Their previous character had been bad; before their conversion, they had been drunks, spendthrifts, and idolatrous and lascivious men. Now people were surprised by their conduct. "[T]hey think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you" (1 Pet. 4:4).

Thus, Peter tells us, *first*, that the changed lives of the new Christians seemed strange or surprising to their friends and neighbors. They were shocked that these recently wild men were now so different. *Second*, instead of being happy about it, these observers spoke evil of the new Christians. The godliness of the convert does not please the ungodly; instead, it creates resentment.

But notice this important fact: they could see the difference in these new Christians, whether they liked it or not. When I was in high school, a prominent California pastor died suddenly of a heart attack, and the next day the newspaper published an account of his career. One shocked reader of the obituary was a man who worked in the mountains nearby in the spring and summer as a guide for trout fishermen. He said, "I've taken him fishing for years, and I never knew he was a minister!"

If people cannot see a difference in our lives as Christians, then something is wrong. If Jesus Christ does not make a difference in our lives, it is because He is not there. Your mirror will only reflect your face; your actions will reflect the presence of someone else, if He is there. Who is there in your actions?

Hearing God

One of the saddest things about so many devout Christians is their refusal to hear God. They go to church faithfully, they are much given to prayer, and they are superior people in many ways, except that they have a hearing problem when it comes to listening to the Lord.

I was vividly reminded of this recently on hearing a mother scold her young son for failing to heed her call to carry out the garbage. His excuse was, “I didn’t hear you, Mom.” “You hear perfectly well when I ask you to lick chocolate frosting off my beater,” she answered. Very true!

How common it is for Christians to concentrate on their favorite chapters in the Bible! They are ready enough to hear the Lord say the kind of thing that pleases them, but not the rest of His Word.

We need to hear all of God’s Word. The Psalmist says, “I will hear what God the LORD will speak: for he will speak peace unto his people, and to his saints: but let them not turn again to folly” (Ps. 85:8). When we as individuals and as a people hear all of what God has to say, and we obey Him, then indeed He will speak peace unto us.

Blindness Versus Growth

It is sometimes startling to see people repeat their sins and mistakes over and over again, without learning anything or changing one iota. Twice in the past year I have sat down again and again with two people having serious problems; the answers to their distress were obvious ones. They had created their own problems and were busily aggravating them. Each time they thanked me earnestly for my counsel, and then proceeded to repeat their sins and blunders without variation! I heard from one of them by mail last week. His previous folly had cost him about \$12,000; he was now in the process of repeating the same thing.

I was reminded of Solomon's words: "The way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble" (Prov. 4:19). To be teachable, one must have a teachable heart, and this comes with regeneration. The dead cannot be taught, and the wicked will not cease from wickedness, nor fools from their folly.

On the other hand, Solomon observes, "But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Prov. 4:18). Their life is like a growing light: they are marked by a capacity for growth, because they are alive. It is an impossibility for a man to be a Christian and not to grow. Regeneration means that the principle of life and growth is now his governing and motivating force and power.

I no longer advise the two people who are repeating their sins. The dead cannot learn, nor the blind see, and these two are unwilling to be anything other than what they are. They have no desire to change or to grow, only to talk, as though talk constitutes action. They cannot see why it is that they stumble, because their way is marked by darkness.

But we are called to life and righteousness in Jesus Christ. We need to ask ourselves: am I growing, and do I want to grow? Is my life grounded upon God's truth, and is my growth in terms of Christ, or am I grounded upon myself? We cannot belong to Christ and refuse to grow in terms of His Word and calling. We cannot be members of Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God, and at the same time continue as self-satisfied fools and sinners. God's Word counsels us concerning our every problem; do we heed Him, or do we go on repeating our sins and errors?

Growth

The Psalmist tells us of the godly man, “And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water” (Ps. 1:3). It is very important to understand why the Bible compares us to trees. The language of Scripture is not accidental; it is deliberate and inspired.

The significant fact of life about trees is they grow until they die. When they stop growing, they start dying. But as long as they are alive, they keep growing and increasing in size and strength. I recall as a boy how huge were some of the great old oaks, which then dotted the valley.

A dead tree is an unsightly thing and, in some cases, dangerous. Branches can fall, or the whole tree can come down to damage things under it. We try to cut down our dead trees as soon as possible to improve the appearance of our home or to make room for new growth in our orchard.

But what about dead trees in the church? Remember, the Lord compares us to trees, and, as long as the trees are alive, they grow. Over the years I have seen many problems develop in churches, and almost always no-growth members are a major part of them.

A tree that does not grow has lost the capacity to draw up life-giving water out of the ground. A churchman who does not grow is receiving no life from the water of life, Jesus Christ. He may be planted by the rivers of water, but he is dead at the roots and can gain no sustenance.

We have an obvious alternative: grow or die!

Contrition

Contrition is not a word we hear much today. In fact, it has an old-fashioned ring to it, and some people are vague as to its meaning. The word “contrition” means being penitent for our sins. The root of the word comes from the Latin and old French, from a word meaning to bruise or to grind. In other words, our sins hurt other people (and offend God). There is therefore no true repentance, no contrition, until what we have done begins to hurt us, to pain us, as we realize what we have done.

Now God says something amazing about contrition: “I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit” (Isa. 57:15). God equates His two great dwelling places: the heaven of heavens and “a contrite and humble spirit.”

This is why true contrition is so remarkable. It brings the Almighty into the spirit of a man who feels contrition, who is hurt, because of the hurt he has caused to others, and the hurt he renders to God’s cause and Kingdom.

This is a time when personal and national contrition is very seriously needed. Pride and arrogance have ruled too many; to hurt others has become a goal for too many. Humor has changed from being happy laughter to savage hostilities, and our comedians vie in trying to demean others. Our youth delight in “put-downs” and insolence, and ugliness has become a way of life for many.

It is time for contrition.

Contentment

Insatiability is one of the most common sins of our times, and too few see it as a sin. The insatiable person is never contented; he never has enough of anything. No matter how much his income increases, it is never enough for him; he always wants more. However good his house is, he wants a better one. Such persons may have very good wives or husbands, but they always wish for a better one. Some are adulterous and are never satisfied; they keep looking for the perfect lover. For the insatiable, there is no peace. They can never enjoy what they have, because they are insatiable for something more.

Paul, however, tells us that there is a greater gain than getting the things we want. That greater gain is contentment. “[G]odliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out” (1 Tim. 6:6–7).

If you have no contentment, you have nothing, because the discontented person always despises the blessing already in hand. To be discontented means a radical lack of appreciation for every good gift God has given us.

I was deeply moved recently, when I spoke to some poor Christians from minority groups, to see their radiant joy and gratitude for God’s blessings. For what others would consider as nothing, these people were joyfully grateful and praising God.

Deliverance from Egypt

When God sent Moses to Pharaoh with the message, “Let my people go,” He added, “And I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not by a mighty hand” (Exod. 3:19). Why then did God order Moses to deliver the message?

The confrontation served two purposes. *First*, it hardened Pharaoh’s heart. He became all the more determined to resist Moses and His God, and he punished Israel for God’s demands. Thus, things very definitely took a turn for the worse. Only God’s judgment broke down Pharaoh’s resistance.

Second, Pharaoh, in punishing Israel, compelled the Israelites finally to stand with Moses. The people were cowardly and ready to continue in their slavery, but step-by-step they were driven to stand with Moses.

The Lord’s dealings with us are often the same. Before He delivers us, He increases the problems and the evils in order to make us more fully aware of the moral problem, and to drive us to make a stand.

Thus, God’s intervention, before it brought deliverance, brought greater problems. The Israelites at first turned against Moses, not Pharaoh, as though Moses were their oppressor (Exod. 5:20–21). They were unwilling to believe that freedom does not come easily. Step by step, the Lord prepared them for their departure from Egypt.

The people grew enough to leave the land of Egypt, but Egypt remained in their hearts. For this reason, God left them to die in the wilderness and took their children into the Promised Land.

Before the Lord can deliver you to your Promised Land, He must remove Egypt from your heart also. Are you too wedded to Egypt to lay hold of God’s promises?

Problems

Problems have solutions. Non-problems do not. When I was a student, I was told that squaring the circle was a non-problem and to be avoided.

In our everyday life, we spend too much time with non-problems. Most of our politics is concerned with non-problems, and the result is a growing disaster. Equality is an impossibility: people cannot be compressed into one level. Absolute freedom is also impossible: it means anarchy and not freedom to attempt it. Our political situation grows increasingly worse because we are more and more concerned with non-problems.

The same is true in the personal realm. One of the most common remarks heard by a pastor from rebellious youth, husbands, and wives is “I want to be myself.” The trouble is, they are already themselves, and they are imagining that a break from responsibility will make them a new creation, their imagined self. Most of our self-styled personal problems are non-problems.

The basic problem, whether in the political or personal spheres, is sin. This is the problem we hate to admit to, because it means admitting that we are sinners and have sinned. We evasively invent non-problems, and, as a result, we have no solutions. Sin has a solution, and He has a name, Jesus Christ. What our imagination cannot do, He can do, to make us a new creation, but a new creation according to His purpose, not in terms of our will.

When we follow Christ, we do not eliminate problems. Instead, we face them for the first time, and we have the solutions in and through Him. We move from the realm of non-problems to the realm of problems and answers. He is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). There is none other.

“Yea, Hath God Said?”

Certain religious people are the church’s biggest problem. They can be devout and very faithful, but only up to a point. They are in the church for what they want, not for what God says they need. They go to the Bible, sometimes daily, for personal needs, but not to hear and serve God. They are humanists, and they are themselves the focus of their lives.

We are not told in Genesis 3:1–6 that Eve disbelieved everything God has ever said, only that she rejected God’s word at one critical point. When the tempter raised the question, “Yea, hath God said?” Eve was ready to believe that her personal desires or needs could set aside God’s law at one point and all would be well. As our Lord’s brother, James, says: “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10).

Obedience is a total fact; the same is true of faith. Either we are faithful or we are not. Adultery is adultery, whether committed once or a hundred times. God does not measure sin by the gross but by the fact that all sin is rebellion against Him. The heart of all sin is to say, “My will be done”—not God’s.

The Shortest Verse

In my childhood, very often in Sunday school or in some like meeting, we were asked to memorize and recite a Bible verse. More than a few lazy smart-alecks would recite the Bible's shortest verse, John 11:35: "Jesus wept." The adults in charge quickly forbade the use of this verse to fulfill the memorization requirements.

I think many of those lazy ones are still in church, filling pew after pew and still guilty of the same offense, how to get by with the minimum effort. They provide warm bodies for the church, but not much more. They can be depended on to give as little money as possible for any cause and to complain about any mention of tithing. The pastor can count on them to be critical while always expecting much of him. They are dependable as members with a minimum commitment and with maximum judgment to pass on everyone.

I can remember the adult teachers and leaders finally saying, sharply, "Enough!" to those boys who thought it was smart to say "Jesus wept" as their Bible verse. Now God's patience is greater than man's but so too is His wrath and judgment.

Examine yourself. Are you one of those "Jesus wept" class members, trying to get by with a smart-aleck attitude? Isn't it time to grow up?

On Being a Sourpuss

I do not normally use recent translations of the Bible, which are often paraphrases rather than translations, but once in a while I find a fresh insight in one of them. An example of this is Moffatt's rendering of Psalm 73:21–22, "When my heart was sour, when I felt sore, I was a dull, stupid creature, no better than a brute before Thee."

What Asaph tells us in the psalm is that when he was in distress because of what was happening, he almost slipped from God's way; he nearly lost his footing. Asaph was so overwhelmed with his grief and unhappiness that his heart, mind, and being became sour. In modern English, Asaph says, I became a sourpuss and a sorehead.

This was a way of leaving God, of being far from God, but Asaph came to realize that "they that are far from thee shall perish" (Ps. 73:27).

Asaph does not say that he had done wrong. Instead, he tells us that his sourness or bitterness came from seeing the wrongs done by others, to him and to many other people, as well as to the Lord. All this embittered him until he came to realize that his sourness had not changed the ungodly. It had instead changed him and harmed his relationship to the Lord. For a time, then, Asaph's godliness had been undercut by his sourness.

Years ago, I heard an old pastor say, "There is no such thing as a sour saint." He made this statement when someone tried to excuse a prominent member whose sourpuss ways were troubling the church.

Are you a sourpuss in your relationship to your family, your coworkers, your fellow Christians, and the Lord? Remember, no matter what the cause, being a sourpuss changes nothing—except your relationship to God and to man.

All Men Have Not Faith

When Paul asked the Christians in Thessalonica to pray for him, he made a request quite different from prayer requests today. He wrote, “[P]ray for us ... that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith” (2 Thess. 3:1–2). It is an obvious fact that all men do not have faith, but Paul here means that not all men who profess to have faith possess it.

He describes them in two words. First, they are “unreasonable,” in the Greek, *ataktos*, literally, men “out of place.” They do not belong in the church nor in church offices, but they are there to make trouble for the men of faith like St. Paul. An unreasonable man in this sense gums up the works; he is a troublemaker and in the way of useful men.

Paul also calls them “wicked,” a term that can also be translated as perverse, or malicious. In the Greek, it is *poneros*, and, in 2 Thessalonians 3:3, the same word is used for Satan. When Paul declares that the Lord will keep the Thessalonians “from evil,” it is, literally, from the “evil one,” Satan.

Unreasonable and perverse men are often a major problem to Christian pastors and leaders. Paul tells the church in Thessalonica to pray for his deliverance from all such men. They had been a continuing problem to him, quite obviously.

The question for us is a simple one. Are we praying for all who are working faithfully in any capacity to further the work of Christ’s Kingdom and rule that they be “delivered from unreasonable and wicked men”? If not, why not? Look around you: such prayers are very much needed!

Sleep

Are you having any problems breathing? Not if you are alive and well. Breathing comes naturally; it requires no thought on our part. If we try to hold our breath, after a certain point, we fail, and we go on breathing.

The same is true of sleeping. To sleep is as natural as to breathe. No man can hold out against sleep more than a while; finally, sleep takes over.

Then why do so many have sleeping problems? The reason is often a failure of faith, a lack of trust in the Lord. If we insist on keeping the government of our lives on our shoulders, and in rehearsing all our problems instead of surrendering them to the Lord in prayer, we will most certainly be sleepless. Someone has to be in charge of things. If I believe that the Lord is in charge, then I know I am in safe hands, and will sleep readily. As David says, “I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety” (Ps. 4:8).

Sleep thus is a religious matter. It is a barometer of our faith, of our trust in the Lord. Psalm 127:2 states the matter clearly: “It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.”

We like to dignify our sin. If we are sleepless, we tell ourselves that it is because we are sensitive souls, while our sleeping husband or wife is an insensitive clod. Our lack of trust, instead of being a sin, is converted into a merit and a proof of character.

But David tells us the truth. Ready sleep in time of trouble is a mark of faith and trust: “I laid me down and slept; I awaked; for the LORD sustained me” (Ps. 3:5). You will never overcome your sleeplessness as long as you dignify the sin behind it and claim it is a virtue.

The Restless Heart

I have nine keys on my key ring. Living as I do out in the country, in the hills, I have no streetlights to see by when I come home in the dark. Some of my keys are almost identical, and yet, when I reach the door in the dark, my fingers have automatically found the right key for our front door. If my wife asks, as she does now and then, “How can you find the right key in the dark, with all the keys you carry?”—then I cannot find it! However, if I do not think about it, I have the right key every time.

The Lord God tells Israel, “The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider” (Isa. 1:3). Without thinking, the ox and the ass know their place. Because God created us, of all of us it is true, as the Psalmist declares, “[M]y heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God” (Ps. 84:2). As St. Augustine stated it, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” However, because of sin, we resist becoming what God created us to be, His faithful covenant people.

My fingers know the right key on my ring, until my mind intervenes. St. Paul says that every man knows all that may be known of God, because God has revealed these things clearly to all men, but, because of man’s unrighteousness or injustice, man’s sin, men “hold [or better, hold down] the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18–20). Men suppress the truth, because they are sinners, and they hate God’s truth. Professing thus to be wise, men become fools.

Our hearts, however, are always restless, until they rest in Him, because He is our peace.

Learning Patience

The words of James 1:2–4 are hardly popular. Few people memorize or try to be governed by them. James, the brother of our Lord, tells us how God teaches us patience. He does this by trying our faith! If you are impatient and dissatisfied with your lot in life, then, says James, the Lord will send you troubles enough to teach you patience.

Does this sound ridiculous, or contrary? Well, how many of you expect to develop a muscular body doing nothing but watching television? Muscles come the hard way, and so does patience.

A baby is impatient. When it is hungry, it cries loudly. As the child matures, it is taught to conform its demands for food to the regular meals.

Why all this testing? That we may be “perfect and entire,” says James. God’s goal for us is our maturity. Too many people are really praying to God, “Baby me, please, Lord, I need babying!” But God wants us to be mature men and women in Christ. Life is much better for us if we accept God’s ways and grow in terms of them.

Gratitude

One of the things commanded by Scripture is gratitude, a thankful spirit towards all men, but especially the Lord. For example, Psalm 100:4 says, “[B]e thankful unto him, and bless his name.” Concerning the reprobate, Paul says,

“[T]hey glorified him not as God, neither were thankful” (Rom. 1:21).

My wife Dorothy recalls with pleasure a black woman, a hospital worker, who exclaimed joyfully and gratefully, “You saved me, Lord, and you’ll never hear the end of it!” Such is a thankful spirit.

What about yourself? Does the Lord hear any exuberant thankfulness from you, or does He rather hear sourness, discontentment, bellyaching, and complaining? All too many church people look sometimes as though they were sucking lemons before they walked into church! Such people dishearten a pastor before he opens his mouth.

More important, they do not please God. The church was not created to be the international society of lemon-suckers, but the joyful fellowship of the redeemed of the Lord.

How about changing your membership from the lemon-suckers to Christ’s congregation? Begin by feeling and showing thankfulness to the Lord. Lemon-sucking is more likely to do harm to us than a grateful heart.

There is an old hymn, based on Psalm 138, which should prompt us to gratitude:

With grateful heart my thanks I bring,
Before the great Thy praise I sing;
I worship in Thy holy place

And praise Thee for Thy truth and grace.

White Hairs

Recently, on a trip to another state, I met a man who was over fifty but looked about thirty-five. He had never held a job in his life: a relative had left him an income which gave him a better-than-average standard of living. He was a kindly man, an earnest believer, but he lacked maturity. I was reminded of a couple I knew slightly, both now dead, who were wealthy, never worked, and traveled all over the world. They too were surprisingly youthful in appearance almost to the last. Neither of them seemed really to age. I realize that it was in part because they had never worked, and so their appearance never gained the set look of maturity. I felt sorry for them.

Scripture tells us, “The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness” (Prov. 16:31). When white hairs go hand in hand with God’s righteousness, they mean wisdom and understanding in the Lord. They are an evidence of experience in and with grace in life’s battles. They are then, God says, “a crown of glory.”

To age in grace is thus an honor and a privilege in the sight of God, whatever some men and women may think. Youth is good, but we overvalue youth nowadays, because we undervalue maturity with grace. Maturity means responsibility, whereas our youth culture prizes irresponsibility.

Unless we die young, old age and white hairs will come to virtually all of us. We can regard it with distaste and horror, lie about our age, dye our hair, and pretend to be forever young, but the years do not cease coming for all of that. We then grow old in foolishness, and our years bring us misery, because we are not in grace. A crown of glory is a better choice.

The Fear of Death

Some years ago, Andre Gide wrote in his *Journals* of a man whom a single thought could plunge into the deepest melancholy. That single thought was the knowledge that he would soon have to buy a pair of new shoes. This is startling, and it sounds insane. Why should such a simple fact plunge a man into a neurotic nightmare? Gide tells us: "What he felt was a sort of distress at not being able to stand on anything lasting, definitive, absolute." In other words, seeing his shoes wear out reminded this atheist that he too was wearing out and would one day die.

In this existentialist age, such neurotic fears are very common among the ungodly. People lie about their age and refuse to face the fact that they are aging. They turn to escapist routes, to liquor, drugs, and a fast-paced life to blot out the approach of death. Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, spent five million dollars, partied endlessly, and entertained a great number of much younger men to cram in all the "life" possible before she died in 1966, a little before her eighty-seventh birthday.

A few years ago, a saying popular among college youth was, "Never trust anyone over thirty." I was on many a campus in those days, and the temper of some went further. For them, there was no life beyond thirty, and a few toyed with the idea of suicide.

Scripture tells us, "[I]t is appointed unto men once to die" (Heb. 9:27). The fact is that the unbelieving and the doubting will die daily in their fears of death. Their life is turned into a living death because of their fears. Instead of enjoying life, they are haunted by fears. A friend who was dying, but still able for some time to continue part time with his work, told me that the hardest part of it all was that people avoided him. He himself was not afraid to die; as a Christian, he knew the glory it would open up for him. Too many of his friends, however, did not want to see him, because being the same age, it reminded them that they too would die. One person at work actually told him in supposed concern that perhaps he would feel better if he stayed at home, meaning out of sight, and out of mind.

You and I will die someday. Will it be a horror for us, or the promise of victory (1 Cor. 15:55)? Our honest answer makes a difference. Beginning here and now, we live with either fear and death, or Christ and victory.

The Promise of Life

In England, March 1966, the case of a ten-year-old girl became a national scandal. The girl, according to the AP news release, had only one offense, her habit of wiping “her knife and fork with a table napkin before meals ... Headmaster William A. Mason told the child she should not wipe the cutlery. He said other children might do likewise using handkerchiefs and this would not be hygienic.” But the girl wanted clean cutlery and persisted. She was then barred from the lunchroom, and so her mother refused to send her to school. Mother and child were summoned to juvenile court; the mother expected to be fined, but also to have a chance to register her protest. Instead, the judge ruled her an unfit mother and committed the child to a children’s home on no other ground than this simple disobedience.

Now let us jump to the American scene. James Bryant Conant, former president of Harvard and an educational “reformer,” wrote in *Education in a Divided World* (p. 8):

Wherever the institution of the family is still a powerful force, as it is in this country, surely *inequality* of opportunity is automatically, and often unconsciously, a basic principle of the nation; the more favored parents endeavor to obtain even greater favors for their children. Therefore, when we Americans proclaim an adherence to the doctrine of equality of opportunity, we face the necessity for a perpetual compromise. Now it seems to me important to recognize both the inevitable conflict and the continuing nature of the compromise.

In other words, the roadblock to democratic education is *the family!* Every parent is anti-democratic and is aristocratic because he or she wants the best for his child and does nothing for, say, the poor children of Africa and Asia. To many educators, the family is now the enemy. Conant sees an “inevitable conflict.”

Let us turn next to *For the World*, the study book for the 1966 General Assembly of the National Council of Churches. Some interesting questions are raised. The tribe is now an obsolete form of social organization. Has the family as the Bible presents it been also outgrown? We are told that changes are taking place, and we need to “update” our thinking “in areas such as sex ethics, homosexuality, divorce and remarriage,” and so on.

The Ten Commandments speak plainly: “Honour thy father and thy mother, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee; that thy days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with thee, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee” (Deut. 5:16). This, said St. Paul, is the “first commandment with promise” (Eph. 6:2), and its promise is a simple one: life! God promises a long life to the nation and to the people who honor parents and live in terms of the Biblical family law.

In the Bible, the farm family is seen as the backbone of a nation, and in history this has usually been true. A society which works to destroy both its family life and its farming peoples is thus working doubly hard to commit suicide. But the promise still stands: will we heed God’s call to life?

Nagging

When I went to school, *Aesop's Fables* was read by children with delight. We need to remember some of their wisdom.

Do you remember the fable “The Crow and the Swan”? Its conclusion is “You may change your habits, but not your nature.”

We are spending billions of dollars and much time trying to change the exterior of things, but not dealing with the heart of the problem. No matter how much people change their habits, they remain sinners as long as they deny Jesus Christ.

We have too many people in the church and out of it whose solution is to demonstrate, talk, nag, and protest. There is the gospel according to nagging—nag everybody until the world and men are changed! Doesn't anyone believe in prayer and conversion anymore? Many church members seem to believe that the good works of faith require criticizing their pastor and other members. How will we be remembered?

Advice

Beware of giving advice to people who are really not interested in it. Over the years, I have learned that all too many people who ask for advice do not really want it. They have already decided what they will do, and they come to you for confirmation, not contradiction. If all goes well, they take the credit for their “wisdom.” If things go badly, they blame you for the bad counsel.

Just recently, I heard that both my name and that of another man were being used by someone to justify a course of action. Neither of us gave any such counsel! The man simply told us what he planned to do, and all we did was to listen politely. When he ran into criticism, he cited us as his advisers and his justification!

All of us, however, need advice, and the best place to get it is clearly from Scripture. The necessary word for us all to heed and take to heart is God’s Word. Of all fools, God says, “[t]hey would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof” (Prov. 1:30). If men will not hear God, they certainly will not hear us.

This is why good advice gets nowhere in our time. Men who block out the Word of God make themselves open only to ungodly and foolish counsel. In every generation, this is finally a reason for the downfall of ungodly men and tyrants. Absalom failed in his revolt, because God blinded him to astute counselors, and he listened readily to a man working for David (2 Sam. 17:1–23).

Our reason for refusing to listen to God, or to godly men, is our greater love for our own will and way. We say, in effect, my will be done, and any advice which goes against our will is rejected. We follow our word and then blame God if we run into trouble!

For the worst possible advice, listen to your own will and heart. For sound counsel, hear the Lord.

Words

There is an old saying to the effect that, if we talk, people will know that we are fools, but, if we are silent, people will think we are wise. The truth is, this fits most of us. We talk too much, because we are too much concerned with ourselves and too little with others. We talk to impress people, or to hurt them, to make them think well of us, or to love us, to retell gossip or to wholesale it, and so on.

Words reveal us. Words, in fact, are revelations. One of the greatest terms used to describe our Lord is *the Word*. Christ the Word is the expression of God, and, more, God Himself incarnate. The Bible, the inscriptured words of God, is the revelation of His salvation, plan, law, and purpose. Words and revelation are inseparably connected.

The Word of God, the Bible, reveals God, and Christ the Word is God (John 1:1). Your words reveal you.

Well, what kind of revelation are your words? A petty, trifling person? A self-centered individual who hurts others freely but is extra-sensitive to what others say? Someone who runs at the mouth and whose words reveal a basic emptiness or foolishness?

Do I sound too harsh? Remember, it is our Lord who says, “[E]very idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment” (Matt. 12:36). Someone objected to this verse once, telling me that most people would go crazy from loneliness and silence if they were barred from “idle” or careless words. The fact remains, however, that God, who gave to man the great gift of speech, places a high value on it. Throughout Scripture, He speaks strongly against any and every abuse of language. One of the Ten Commandments speaks of false witness as a great offense (Exod. 20:16), and still another commandment forbids taking the name of God in vain (Exod. 20:7), so that two of the ten refer to language or words.

Very obviously, God takes words seriously and plans, among other things, to judge you by your words. How seriously do you take your words? And how seriously can others take you?

Christmas

One of the most loved prophecies of Christ's coming is Isaiah 9:6–7, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end.”

Jesus Christ is God incarnate. He is “the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15). Christmas is the celebration of God's invasion of history through His Son. We rejoice that, although the war is far from over, our King shall prevail, and that, in due time, all men and nations shall be brought into a joyful allegiance to Him.

Christmas is inescapably a time of victory and of “joy to the world.” The joy of His coming and progressive triumph should light up all our days. We are the people of victory because we are the people of the king.

I once heard a child say, “I wish it were Christmas every week.” The fact is, on every Lord's Day we celebrate His coming, His victory over sin and death, and the growth of His Kingdom. Christmas, like Sunday, is a holiday or holy day. God's purpose is that all days, all of life, and all things shall be holy (Zech. 14:20–21), for “[o]f the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end”: therefore rejoice!

Religious Buildings

A very common argument is that it is sinful and wasteful to spend too much money, or any money, on church and religious buildings. A pastor whose congregation was meeting in rented facilities lost members and half his board when a \$60,000 building was purchased.

Those who left were men of means. One was a retired admiral who lived in a lovely home, had always enjoyed excellent quarters in the navy, but still regarded a modest church building as wasteful.

However, the Bible repeatedly makes clear that God regards it as wicked to live well while His house goes neglected (Hag. 1:2–9). To be rich towards ourselves and poor towards God is a sin.

The source of this argument is from anti-Christians of the Enlightenment on, and the Marxists also have made heavy use of it. Why, they have said in Russia and elsewhere, should the church have all these beautiful buildings, when people live poorly? So the church buildings were mostly confiscated.

Why, it was then asked, should a farmer have five or fifty acres, when all he needs for himself is a garden plot? So the farms were seized and collectivized. Why too, it was held, should a man or family have 500 or 1500 square feet to live in when fifty would do? And why should each family have a private kitchen, which it uses a short time each day, or a private bathroom, when it stands vacant twenty or twenty-three hours a day?

You see the direction of the argument. It never changes. The starting point is the church. The final goal is your life.

Meanwhile, of course, in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, state buildings have become more and more monumental, and taxes higher and higher. The logic is very clear: God and man mean nothing, and the civil government is everything. Little or nothing in the way of buildings, money, and time belong to God, and everything to the state.

The argument that money spent on religious structures is wasteful is thus a dangerous and evil one, and the men who use it are either foolishly echoing what others have said, or are themselves sinful men.

Oh, yes, one more thing. That retired admiral and the other board members who resigned were all living in homes worth more than the church that was bought, and far better than the pastor. What was good enough for them was obviously too good for God, or for His servants.

Biblical “Guidance”

I recently sat in on a meeting where the majority coolly and deliberately violated a verbal contract and stole assets amounting to half a million dollars. They all professed to be Christians! Two of us protested earnestly, but in vain.

Each time the moral issue was raised, someone claimed they were seeking “divine guidance” as they proceeded on their sinful course.

That phrase alone is a red flag to me, and can too often be a warning of hypocrisy and deceit. The Lord gives us divine guidance in His Word. His moral law is clearly and plainly stated. To bypass God’s plain commandments in the name of some higher guidance means to commune with one’s own self to justify a course of action obviously condemned by Scripture. Those who really want God’s guidance get it from His Word, in black and white, clearly written for all to read.

Those who want to bypass the Word of God too often claim a “divine” guidance known only to them. A fine Christian layman told me yesterday that, when he hears such talk about “divine” guidance apart from Scripture, he expects the next voice to be the devil’s. I can believe that.

I remember the young mother who tried to justify leaving her husband for a married man (who abandoned his family) by saying she had sought “divine” guidance before taking the step. I referred her to the Ten Commandments for divine guidance on the subject.

The Bible speaks to our total life. The Lord makes clear throughout Scripture what He requires of us. We are plainly and richly guided. The question is this: will we obey? Will we be guided?

Sinning is bad enough, but to bypass the Word of God and to call our often sinful wishes divine guidance can only compound sin. The next time someone claims “divine guidance,” ask him where in the Bible he got it. If he has no scriptural authority, his guidance is not of God.

Pastors

A recent study reported some very sad facts about the church. The average American pastor's pay is \$10,348 a year. (The poverty line is said by federal authorities to be at least \$15,000.) This means that many pastors or their wives must work to supplement their income. Fourteen percent of all pastors earn less than \$6,000 and only five percent earn more than \$15,000.

A few comparisons tell us more, *Christianity Today* reported. Truck drivers average \$18,300 a year, electricians \$18,000, lawyers \$25,000 plus, and dentists over \$40,000.

Obviously, American church members do not think highly of their faith, their church, or their pastors if they pay only five percent of them more than the poverty level per year. They demand the best, and they pay the least.

If a minister is incompetent or not morally or intellectually fit for his calling, he should be asked, for Christ's sake and the church's sake, to demit or drop out of the ministry. If he is an able and godly pastor, he should be given the honor which is his due. As a matter of fact, the Bible requires even more. All who are able and strong in the Word and doctrine are to be counted worthy of "double honor," which means double pay (1 Timothy 5:17–18). It is significant that the Bible uses the word "honor" to mean "pay." What we are paid either honors or dishonors our work and services. A pay scale is also an honor scale, according to the Bible.

This means that dishonorable pay shows contempt for a pastor, and for the pastor's Lord. If we pay out dishonor to Christ's faithful servant, we are dishonoring Christ. Think about it.

By the way, every now and then, someone writes to ask permission to reprint one of my columns in a church bulletin. I wish some would use this one!

Grunters in the Pew

One of my favorite passages in the writings of Spurgeon, from “John Ploughman’s Talks,” is his description of many church members, whom he compared to his neighbor’s pigs, as “all grunt and no bacon.”

Now admit it! This is all too true a description of very many church members. Their usefulness to Christ and His Kingdom is virtually nil. About their only activity is an occasional sour grunt. I remember, when I was quite young and new to the pastorate, the sad remark of a country pastor concerning a member: “He is such a roadblock that, if he joined the devil’s church, hell would begin to crumble!” About all that poor pastor got from this member was cold water on every effort and a critical grunt.

Now let us look at ourselves. Are we all grunt and no bacon? Do we manifest the fruit of the Holy Spirit, of which Paul speaks (Gal. 5:22; Eph. 5:9)? Are goodness, righteousness, and truth always apparent in us, or are we grunters? Where does Paul say that grunting is an acceptable substitute for love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance? Now some of our modern Bible versions read a little strangely, but none of them say that!

Well, perhaps your pastor is not the best man for the job, and you would like to get rid of him. Stop grunting. Be loving, thoughtful, and helpful. The shock may kill him! But the change won’t hurt you.

The Author

Rousas John Rushdoony (1916-2001) was a well-known American scholar, writer, and author of over thirty books. He held B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of California and received his theological training at the Pacific School of Religion. An ordained minister, he worked as a missionary among Paiute and Shoshone Indians as well as a pastor to two California churches. He founded the Chalcedon Foundation, an educational organization devoted to research, publishing, and cogent communication of a distinctively Christian scholarship to the world at large. His writing in the *Chalcedon Report* and his numerous books spawned a generation of believers active in reconstructing the world to the glory of Jesus Christ. Until his death, he resided in Vallecito, California, where he engaged in research, lecturing, and assisting others in developing programs to put the Christian Faith into action.

The Ministry of Chalcedon

CHALCEDON (kal-SEE-don) is a Christian educational organization devoted exclusively to research, publishing, and cogent communication of a distinctively Christian scholarship to the world at large. It makes available a variety of services and programs, all geared to the needs of interested ministers, scholars, and laymen who understand the propositions that Jesus Christ speaks to the mind as well as the heart, and that His claims extend beyond the narrow confines of the various institutional churches. We exist in order to support the efforts of all orthodox denominations and churches. Chalcedon derives its name from the great ecclesiastical Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), which produced the crucial Christological definition: “Therefore, following the holy Fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man...” This formula directly challenges every false claim of divinity by any human institution: state, church, cult, school, or human assembly. Christ alone is both God and man, the unique link between heaven and earth. All human power is therefore derivative: Christ alone can announce that, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Matthew 28:18). Historically, the Chalcedonian creed is therefore the foundation of Western liberty, for it sets limits on all authoritarian human institutions by acknowledging the validity of the claims of the One who is the source of true human freedom (Galatians 5:1). The Chalcedon Foundation publishes books under its own name and that of Ross House Books. It produces a magazine, *Faith for All of Life*, and a newsletter, *The Chalcedon Report*, both bimonthly. All gifts to Chalcedon are tax deductible. For complimentary trial subscriptions, or information on other book titles, please contact:

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