

CHARACTER FOR CHRIST



Presenting
The Aroma Of Christ

Biblical Research Library

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CHARACTERS FOR CHRIST

On Friday evenings in Cape Town, South Africa, one can drive through some communities and smell the luscious aroma of lamb chops being cooked on coals in backyards. The scent of a feast is in the air. It is a smell that is most welcoming, so much so that one is encouraged to rush home and do the same. There is such an appeal to the aroma that one can sense the community of those who are participating in the feast, desiring to join in the fellowship.

Paul wrote, *“Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ and manifests the aroma of His knowledge through us in every place”* (2 Co 2:14). When one is filled with the aroma of the knowledge of God, there is an appeal to his character that draws others. It is an appeal that is so strong that when others get a sniff of the aroma, they are drawn to its origins. They are so drawn that they seek to be as that to which they are drawn. We understand, therefore, what Jesus meant when He said, *“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven”* (Mt 5:16). When God is working in us, He is appealing to others to come His way through us. The aroma of Christ that goes out from our behavior encourages others to seek that which makes us who we are.

The scent of Christ should be so strong in our character that others should be driven to inquire concerning what makes us who we are. This was certainly in the mind of Peter when the Holy Spirit moved his hand to write, *“But sanctify Christ as Lord God in your hearts and be ready always to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you ...”* (1 Pt 3:15). When we make Jesus holy in our characters, we move others to come our way. And when they arrive, they are driven to inquire. This is the power of the sanctified character for Christ. This is our ambition, our struggle, our victory. We seek to manifest in our lives the aroma of our Lord Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION

When the word “character” is used in literature, writers often use it more in the negative sense. It is often said, “He was some character,” meaning that his personality was different, if not an anomaly of correct social behavior.

But we would use the word in a positive sense in reference to defining the temperament or mentality of a particular person, particularly in reference to our “transformed disposition” in Christ (Rm 12:2). This transformed disposition would identify the nature of Christ insofar as our disposition manifests the character of Christ. The transformed Christian must emulate the nature of who Jesus is.

Dictionaries define character to be the mental and moral qualities that are distinctive to a particular individual. We would use synonyms as personality, nature or psyche in order to be more specific in reference to the character of an individual. In fact, we have found that there are at least fifteen synonyms in the common dictionary that would refer to the mental and moral qualities that define the personality (character) of any individual. All synonymous words define the mental characteristics and behavior of each person in a society that makes him or her unique as a person. When we apply this definition to the Christian, we seek to define an individual after the character of Christ that makes one unique in the world in which we live.

The word “different” would be a good word to use when identifying the character of each individual of society,

for we are all unique in our character. We are all “different” according to our character when we compare the diversity of personalities that make up the human race. Among all the individuals of a society, Christians are to be “different.” They are to be so different that others should be moved to inquire concerning their “difference.”

God did not make us clones, neither did He intend that Christianity would clone us into a legal religiosity. If we were clones, we would be a cult. The fact that we are set free in Christ, and are under a mandate never to be brought into the bondage of cloning (Gl 5:1), means that God intends that our characters be transformed into the image of Christ.

Each of us seeks to exemplify the maximums of Jesus’ character in our lives, depending on our background and uniqueness. Christianity is reflected differently in every Christian simply because we were not created with the same personality. However, when we all seek to manifest Christ in our lives, we are brought closer together as we follow the same road map to character building.

All Christians are focused on transforming their characters after the image of Christ. He is the norm around whom we mold our personality. Paul wrote,

And be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Rm 12:2).

President Abraham Lincoln said many years ago, “Character is like a tree, and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.” As Christians, we might look at ourselves as “shadows” of Christ. When people see the transformed character they witness in our lives, they must be drawn to the real thing, that is, Christ. This is what Jesus said of Himself in reference to His character being the reflection of the Father: *“Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God. He has seen the Father”* (Jn 6:46). And more specifically, He said, *“He who has seen Me has seen the Father”* (Jn 14:9). It is not that we see a physical image of the Father in Jesus, for God is spirit (Jn 4:24). Jesus revealed the character, personality, nature, divinity, etc. of the Father. Jesus gave up the “form of God” in His incarnation, but He did not give up the character of God. And since He manifested the character of God, we read our Bibles in order to understand who God is. We look to Jesus in order to discover the image of the One who sent the model for character building.

Since our character is what we are, and our reputation is what one is thought to be through the eyes of others, then we must make sure that our reputation reflects the aroma of Christ. Paul wrote of himself and other Christians, *“Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ and manifests the aroma of His knowledge through us in every place”* (2 Co 2:14). Our lives must manifest to others *“the aroma [of Christ] from life to life”* (2 Co 2:16).

Because we are to reflect the character of Christ, we should give all heed to protect our character from being stained by the world. Joel Hawes said, “Character is like white paper; if one is blotted, it can hardly ever be made to appear white as before.” If one would flaw his character by sin, then he has damaged his reputation. He will reflect a flawed image of Christ to his friends. Lord Chesterfield said it correctly: “Your moral character must be not only pure, but, like Caesar’s wife, unsuspected.” We seek to have a character that does not move people to question our motives, and above all, to question the authenticity of Jesus as the Son of God.

Translators often used the word “virtue” to identify the character of the Christian as revealed and explained in the New Testament. By using the word “virtue,” the Holy Spirit was challenging each disciple of Jesus to develop continually his character after the image of Jesus.

Consider 2 Peter 1:3 in view of what God has made available for us in order to develop our characters:

... His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who has called us to glory and virtue” (2 Pt 1:3).

The commentary of this statement would be 2 Timothy 3:16: *“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”* In view of this statement of Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16, we can better

understand in the following statement Peter's exhortation to grow our character spiritually:

... giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge self-control, and to self-control patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love (2 Pt 1:5-7).

The Christian life is a transforming adventure to develop our characters after Christ in order that we become spiritual residents of eternal heaven. It is always our challenge to transform every area of our character in order to correct dysfunctions in our personalities and behavior. When we consider our present character, we must always conclude that we are all in some ways dysfunctional. We are flawed with humanity. We need direction and molding from One who is not of this world. We thus pray that God

will lead us into circumstances, or encounters with other characters, in order that we discover those areas in our personalities that need to be fine-tuned. Our relationship with others is the opportunity to discover ourselves.

In the following chapters we seek to set forth some areas where one can focus on important points of character in order to build one's personality to be more profitable for God. We do not presume to cover the subject in its entirety. We simply seek to establish a foundation upon which we can aid in the transforming of our minds so that we better reflect the aroma of Christ. Our goal in this process of transformation is to generate that about which Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:15:

*But sanctify Christ as Lord God in your hearts and **be ready always to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, yet with meekness and fear.***

Chapter 1

Character Through Wisdom

We remember in the early years on a Kansas farm when we first started to study the Bible. The very first oracles we were instructed to read by our mother was Solomon's wisdom in the book of Proverbs. Wisdom is so precious to the desires of a young man. In one's years of maturing, it should be the desire of every young person not simply to seek wisdom, but the wisdom that is from above, which wisdom God freely gives.

Solomon personified the greatness of wisdom in Proverbs in order to help those who were young as ourselves who desired so much to grow in wisdom. Solomon counselled,

My son, if you will receive my words and treasure my commandments within you, so that you incline your ear to wisdom and apply your heart to understanding, yes, if you cry out after knowledge and

lift up your voice for understanding, if you seek her [wisdom] as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God (Pv 2:1-5).

Youth is a time in life when we do not know that we do not know everything, and thus, we often parade ourselves as fools in our own foolishness. So we arrogantly proceed in life to the point that we humbly realize that we do not know, and thus, we somewhat conquer our youthful arrogance and then open ourselves to be taught. It is then that our faith must drive us to the Divine teacher. It is then that we “*understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God*” (Pv 2:5). Maybe it is our youthful insecurity that drives us to seek that which would help us overcome our lack of self-esteem, for Daniel wrote, “*And those who are wise will shine as brightness of the firmament*” (Dn 12:3).

Our faith must be in Him who knows all things, and thus, we must know enough to go to the source of all wisdom. We trust in James’ promise: “*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all liberally and without reproach. And it will be given to him*” (Jas 1:5). It is often the case that we have a great deal of knowledge, but little wisdom to apply to life that which we know. Our first need, therefore, is for wisdom, for it is wise to seek knowledge that will allow us to be successful in life. It is wisdom that puts our knowledge to work for our success.

In our younger years we must know enough to realize that the road to maturity is paved with the wisdom of God. If we are to behave wisely, then we need to be on our knees for that which we so covet. The first step on the road to gaining wisdom is made after coming from our knees in prayer.

James again instructed, “*Who is a wise and understanding man among you? Let him show by good behavior his works in meekness of wisdom*” (Jas 3:13). It is not a coincidence that wisdom makes one meek. Through wisdom we understand that we are human. Wisdom is thus the enemy of arrogance, and for this reason, the more we grow in wisdom, the more opportunity we have to correct our ways. The wise are not judges of others. They realize that that about which they would judge others, they too are guilty. The wise will “*first remove the beam*” that is in his own eye before considering the speck that is in his brother’s eye (See Mt 7:3-5). James explained this wisdom in the following manner:

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy (Jas 3:17).

A. Heavenly wisdom that is pure.

Remember Paul’s advice to Timothy? “*Now the purpose of the commandment is love out of a pure heart ...*” (1 Tm 1:5; see 2 Tm 2:22). What

better advice could an older man of God give to a young evangelist? Paul continued by encouraging Timothy to hold “*the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience*” (1 Tm 3:9). “*Keep yourself pure,*” he continued (1 Tm 5:22). The wisdom of Paul’s advice rests on the truth that “*to the pure all things are pure*” (Ti 1:15).

A truly wise person will first seek to keep his life pure. For this reason, and especially for a young person, one should make every effort to flee that which would endanger one’s purity (1 Tm 6:11). Paul instructed, “*Flee also youthful lusts. But pursue righteousness ...*” (2 Tm 2:22). Our character for Christ will shine through our pure behavior. Those who have corrupted their behavior with the impurity of sin, and yet claim to be Christian, have manifested the nature of a dysfunctional spiritual character.

The wisdom from above is manifested in the life of the one who has enough sense not to endanger his reputation by hanging around youthful lusts. The wisdom from above, therefore, is smart to do that which is right. The wisdom that comes from above leads one to keep himself from all immorality, and even those situations wherein one’s morals might be compromised, or even questioned. Characters for Christ know how to flee.

The wisdom from above is generated within the minds of those who have focused their thinking on the instructions that come from God. No man of God is complete without feasting on the word of God. He is incomplete unless his think-

ing is formed and controlled by God through His word (See 2 Tm 3:16,17). When one allows himself to be instructed by God through a study of God’s word, then he is transforming his mind into godly thinking (See Rm 12:2). He becomes wise in determining what is the work of the flesh and what is the fruit of the Spirit (See Gl 5:19-23). Being able to make a decision between the flesh and Spirit comes only through a study of the word of God. Correct decisions can be made only when one has a correct standard by which to make a decision. Therefore, we must never forget that the truly wise person has God in the teleology of his life.

B. Heavenly wisdom seeks peace.

It is always true that trouble makers make fools of themselves. It is a wise person who maintains his silence when he is in times of possible confrontation with a trouble maker. Jesus gave the divine dictionary on defining the children of God: “***Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God***” (Mt 5:9). For this reason, the Hebrew writer identified the children of God with this exhortation: “***Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man will see the Lord***” (Hb 12:14).

Since the wisdom that originates from God is full of peace, then one should not expect to be in the eternal presence of God if he is not a peaceful person. This is why Paul exhorted the Roman disciples with the words, “... ***let us follow after the things that make for peace ...***” (Rm 14:19). No wise person generates strife.

Peace must define the relational atmosphere of the fellowship of the children of God. The social atmosphere of the body of Christ must be conducted in a way that brings individual members of the body into contact with one another in order that each member may learn how to live in peace with others. If we cannot live in peace with one another on earth as a family of peacemakers, then there should be no expectation to live in the presence of the God of peace. If the fellowship of the body is not close enough to fine tune our ability to learn how to live in peace with one another, then it is a dysfunctional body that is not preparing each member to dwell in the presence of the God of peace.

Jesus does not intend to be a policeman of peace in heaven. Peace must be the nature of those who get there. Each candidate for heaven is a peacemaker, and thus there should be no need for any “peace police” among the members of the body. If some members of the body cannot be peacemakers on earth, then certainly they should not expect to be eternally in the presence of those who have learned to live in peace with one another on earth. So when Paul exhorted the Thessalonian Christians to “*live in peace among yourselves,*” he was giving them a mandate that would qualify them for eternal dwelling (1 Th 5:13). Isaiah would conclude: “*And the work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever*” (Is 32:17). Characters for Christ know how to live in peace with one another.

C. Heavenly wisdom is gentle.

We live in a world where there is a famine of kindness. It seems that the more urban the culture, the more the citizens are indifferent, and even harsh with one another. Jesus forewarned His disciples, “*Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents and harmless as doves*” (Mt 10:16). “Harmless as doves” defines the character of those the wolves seek to devour. Because of the harmless nature of the sheep, the wolves snarl.

In the midst of wolves, it may be very difficult to remain harmless and benevolent and kind. Nevertheless, we must never forget that this world is an environment in which God is molding our character for eternal dwelling. We must see wolves, therefore, as an opportunity to behave after the One we call ourselves a disciple. It is this One who said to the Father in reference to the wolves who snarled at Him on the cross, “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing*” (Lk 23:34).

We are thus to be led by those who have mastered their kindness enough to deserve the right to be our shepherds. Shepherds must be “*self-disciplined, sober-minded ... not violent, but forgiving, not contentious ...*” (1 Tm 3:2,3). We seek to follow those who are gentle in the midst of snarling wolves.

Our shepherds reveal to us the fruit of the spirit of kindness (Gl 5:22). Paul again instructed Timothy on the wisdom of a kind spirit: “*And the servant of the*

Lord must not quarrel, but be gentle to all ...” (2 Tm 2:24). In a world wherein people are starving for kindness, we can understand that the character of a kind disciple is manifested as a brilliant light (See Mt 5:16). The wisdom that is identified by a relational environment of kindness is identified by the Holy Spirit’s following instructions:

Therefore, put on as the elect of God, holy and beloved, a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another and forgiving one another. If anyone has a complaint against any, even as Christ forgave you, so also should you (Cl3:12,13).

Many years ago, a missionary to Mozambique, Ira Gillet, reported an interesting statement that was made in reference to the mission hospital with which he and other Christians worked. Someone observed that the local people often passed by the government hospital in order to go to the mission hospital. When some were asked why, one patient made the statement, “The medicines in both hospitals are the same, but the hands are different.” It is like the pain going away from a skinned knee when touched by a loving mother’s hand. Heavenly wisdom reaches out to others with kindness in order to release the aroma of our loving Father.

D. Heavenly wisdom is reasonable.

Someone was certainly right when

he made the statement, “There is no fool like the wretch who will not reason or arbitrate a problem.” One of the beautiful cultural qualities by which the Venda people in northeast South Africa are known is their desire and ability to negotiate. It was not unexpected, therefore, that when South Africa was negotiating a new constitution for the rebirth of the nation in 1994, that a Venda official was named to negotiate the new constitution of the nation with the previous government.

The church should be known for being people of negotiation because they are a community of peacemakers. We do not mean compromise between good and evil, but negotiation in areas of personal conflict. Here is an example:

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. And I ask you also, loyal companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel...” (Ph 4:2,3).

God seeks to bring all men unto Him on the basis of the fact that He is God, and thus, we the created, should come to Him on His terms. Isaiah recorded the plea of God to Israel, “‘Come now and let us reason together,’ says the Lord” (Is 1:18). We must bring this desire for negotiation into the realm of Christian character.

Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave there your gift before the altar and

go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Mt 5:23,24).

When Jesus continued with the statement, “*Agree with your adversary quickly,*” He meant that we should negotiate with our enemies lest they turn on us. It follows, therefore, that the wise person will always seek for terms of peace with his adversaries. Standing firm on our beliefs, and working with people, does not assume that we must compromise our principles. It simply means that the Christian must never be the one who would stir up strife in areas where compromise is allowed. Being a bully in areas of opinion does not mean that one is in the right.

Our inferiority complexes or low self-esteem often hinder us from going to our brother to negotiate peace. We remember that “*God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind*” (2 Tm 1:7). This does not mean that our character should be identified as one who seeks his own way first. In matters of opinion, we must always allow one another freedom. And freedom means that we do not always get our way.

In order to have the courage to negotiate, while guarding one another’s freedom in Christ, we must forget our own inhibitions and do that which is wise. The wisdom from above is manifested in the one who has the desire to settle matters of difference in a spirit love and a sound mind. Wisdom that defines the godly character of one who seeks to mold his personality after Christ will always be iden-

tified by one’s desire to be reasonable.

E. Heavenly wisdom is full of mercy.

Here are some sweet words: “*Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy*” (Mt 5:7). There is something wonderful about showing mercy to others. Mercy is always returned. When we loan out mercy, the debt is always repaid.

Our mercy toward others manifests our understanding of how much mercy God has extended to us through Jesus. And in view of the judgment to come, we need to store up a great deal of mercy. James stated, “*For judgment will be without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy*” (Js 2:13). Every mournful sinner who cries out to God for mercy is guaranteed the answer to his prayer by extending mercy to others.

Someone wisely said, “When you see the fear in another’s eyes, be sure that he sees the mercy in yours.” Merciful people are approachable because others do not fear approaching them. An approachable person is identified as one who is known to be merciful to the faults of others. We approach those from whom we seek counsel when we know that we will receive understanding and not judgment. It is for this reason that mercy is the glue that sustains the relationships that people have with one another. It is the key character trait that continues the unity of the body of Christ.

Mercy was the drawing power of Jesus that flowed from the cross. During His ministry, Jesus said, “*No one can*

come to Me, except the Father who has sent Me draws him” (Jn 6:44). At the time Jesus made this statement, He did not reveal how the Father would draw people to Him. The drawing power would later be manifested through the mercy of the cross. After making the preceding statement at the beginning of His ministry, Jesus explained, “*And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Me*” (Jn 12:32).

This is nothing short of wonderful. We are drawn to Jesus because of the love and mercy that glows from the cross. The same is true of ourselves in our relationships with others. Mercy will draw others to us because they will receive mercy for their offenses against us and not judgment. It is for this reason that “*mercy rejoices over judgment*” (Js 2:13). Those who offend us may rightfully deserve judgment, but mercy will set condemnation aside in order to restore relationships. God sets our condemnation aside through the cross in order that we have a covenant relationship with Him.

So Peter inquired of Jesus, “*Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?*” (Mt 18:21). Peter’s math was bad. Jesus responded, “*I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven*” (Mt 18:22). When we mold our characters after Christ, we are into multiples of forgiveness. Mercy and forgiveness become the identity of our personality because there is an unlimited supply of both in our hearts.

F. Heavenly wisdom is full of fruit.

James wrote, “*What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?*” (Js 2:14). We know the answer to the question. Faith without works (fruit) profits nothing. It is dead!

Jesus made a profound statement in Matthew 7:16: “*You will know them by their fruits.*” This statement was made in the context of bad fruit. So Jesus added, “*A good tree cannot bring forth bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bring forth good fruit*” (Mt 7:18). Good trees bring forth good fruit (Mt 7:17). It is the wise thing to do. Those who manifest the wisdom that is from above, not only manifest fruit, but they manifest good fruit. True godliness is not fruitless.

Those who have wisdom from above have a faith that is “*working through love*” (Gl 5:6). They are into the lives of others in order to seek the good of others. “*Let each one not look out merely for his own interests, but also for the interests of others*” (Ph 2:4). This is the ministry of the wise disciple who is full of the wisdom that is from above. God looked out for our spiritual needs, and in turn, we look out for the spiritual needs of others. This is the behavior of the disciples of Jesus (See Gl 6:1). Wisdom from above is manifested in their lives through their good fruits.

G. Heavenly wisdom is impartial.

In James’ explanation of the wisdom

that is from above, he identified those about whom the word “impartial” would refer. “*My brethren,*” James explained, “*do not show favoritism and hold the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ*” (Js 2:1). This statement was made in the context of showing favoritism to the rich. Unfortunately, we are often guilty of showing favoritism in our relationships with others. James poses a question as to what we would do “*if there should come into your assembly a man with a gold ring in fine clothing, and there come in also a poor man in filthy clothes*” (Js 2:2).

In those churches that are led by leaders who are greedy for money, they often seat the rich on the front seats. If we would do such, James judged that you have made “*distinctions among yourselves and have become judges with evil thoughts*” (Js 2:4). We often condemn ourselves in our seating arrangements.

The wisdom that is from above is revealed when one emulates in his life that which God did toward us. “*But God demonstrates His love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Rm 5:8). Jesus did not check bank accounts before He went to the cross. And neither should we in reference to our relationships with others. If we would emulate the wisdom of God in our lives, then we do not have the right to show favoritism toward the member dressed in the expensive suit, while at the same time show disrespect toward the beggar who walks in off the street in rags. We must never forget that Jesus went to

the cross for those who were dressed in the rags of sin (Rm 5:8).

H. Heavenly wisdom is without hypocrisy.

If we show favoritism, then we are hypocritical in our relationships with others. We are not genuine or sincere. There is a hidden agenda to all our relationships. We often wear masks to disguise our true selves. We hide behind false impressions. But we need to remember that as disciples of Jesus, we are to be “*laying aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisies ...*” (1 Pt 2:1). It is imperative to remember the words of Jesus concerning the fake religiosity of some of the religious leaders of His day: “*Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy*” (Lk 12:1).

The Pharisees did not manifest in their lives the wisdom that comes from above. James wrote, “*This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic*” (Js 3:15). Anyone who behaves without focusing on God first in his life is behaving with earthly wisdom. His decisions, therefore, are limited to earthly conclusions (Compare Mt 6:33).

We know that we need to be taught the wisdom that comes from God simply because we are of this world. And the wisdom that is from this world has a lot to be desired in reference to treating everyone with equality. We should be as someone said of an old wise owl.

A wise old owl sat in an oak;
 The more he saw the less he spoke;
 The less he spoke the more he heard;
 Let's try to imitate that bird.

James said it simply: *"Therefore, my beloved brethren, let everyone be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath"* (Js 1:19). One will never be taught the wisdom that is from above if he cannot be quiet long enough to hear God who speaks quietly through His word.

To become wise we must make ourselves available to experience life. Wisdom comes from experience, and thus we must not be shy about experiencing life. We can learn a great deal of knowledge through schools of education, but unless we use wisdom to take our knowledge from our heads into our behavior, our knowledge is of little value. A hermit may have a great deal of knowledge, but he will lack in wisdom because he has not allowed himself to experience life with others.

Wisdom ignites our knowledge for the benefit of living the abundant life. The wise person, therefore, does not allow the crowd to determine his direction. The

wise person sees things from outside the box of conformity in order that he might excel to the heights of conquest. He wisely takes risks that are guided by the wisdom that is from above. Once we have acquired knowledge through the learned schools of education, it would be good to remember the statement of the great scientist Max Born, "I'd be happier if we had scientists with less brains and more wisdom."

So we would continue to be disciplined in the wisdom that is from above. Of Jesus, Luke recorded, *"Now Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man"* (Lk 2:52). We conclude that because of the great wisdom that He manifested, Jesus had great favor with God and man. It is simply true that the wise are followed, but the foolish are forsaken. And so, it is the wise thing to do to ...

... let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ has also forgiven you (Ep 4:31,32).

Chapter 2

Character Through Knowledge

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Pv 1:7).

The prayer of every disciple of Jesus should be as Solomon's request of God:

"Give me now wisdom and knowledge so that I may go out and come in before this people" (2 Ch 1:10). God's inspiring answer to this request excites our desire to utter the same prayer, for God answered Solomon:

*Because this was in your heart and you have not asked for riches, wealth, honor, or the life of your enemies, nor have asked for long life, but have asked for wisdom and knowledge for yourself so that you may judge My people over whom I have made you king, **wisdom and knowledge is granted to you** (2 Ch 1:11,12).*

Throughout his years of reign, Solomon gained a worldwide reputation for being wise above all men and a man full of knowledge. He subsequently wrote many proverbs in order *“to give prudence to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion”* (Pv 1:4). In his opening instructions concerning the acquisition of knowledge, he admonished, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge”* (Pv 1:7; see Pv 2:5).

When one humbles himself before God, he has put himself in a position to access the greatest source of wisdom and knowledge, *“for the Lord gives wisdom. Out of His mouth comes knowledge and understanding”* (Pv 2:6). King Hezekiah encouraged the Levites *“who taught the good knowledge of the Lord”* in order that the people of God continue in the counsel of God (2 Ch 30:22).

If a chemist or physicist made it his full-time job to sit down and read only all the scientific journals of the world for an entire year, by the end of the year he would be far behind by several months in his reading of new information. We live in the information age because man is daily making new discoveries of what God

embedded in the natural world that He created. Because of the massive information flow through the Internet alone, our access to information can almost be overwhelming. The input of information into our brains has wearied us to the point that we sometimes become “information exhausted.”

It is a time for wisdom to be the governor of the amount of information we have accessed. We cannot help ourselves, but to learn more and more. And because we learn, we must have wisdom to apply that which we learn. It is simply a characteristic of humanity that we learn. And since we continue to learn, we must continue to make wise decisions concerning what we learn. Solomon wrote, *“The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouth of fools feeds on foolishness”* (Pv 15:14; see 18:15; 21:11). We must always remember the words of Solomon who wrote at the end of his lifetime of searching for knowledge: *“For in much wisdom is much grief. And he who increases knowledge increases sorrow”* (Ec 1:18).

The Jewish Talmud was correct: “He who adds not to his learning diminishes it.” We add to our knowledge in order not to be ignorant. We seek to grow in wisdom in order not to use our knowledge foolishly. Solomon was right: *“Wise men lay up knowledge, but the mouth of the foolish is near destruction”* (Pv 10:14). So we seek not to be the son of ignorance, for in knowledge we understand that we can escape the destruction that comes with foolish behavior. Unless

we grow in wisdom as to how we would use that which we learn, our learning will often lead to our own demise. It is great to know about atomic energy. But without wisdom, the unwise can easily go from electricity to power homes to atomic bombs that destroy homes.

We have observed throughout the world that an ignorant people can never be a free people. The people of any free democracy, therefore, are challenged to learn and make wise decisions. A people who are left in ignorance cannot make wise decisions. There is always a race within every society between freedom and the bondage that is the child of ignorance. Freedom can win out only if the people are educated. Centuries ago, Solomon may have had this principle in mind when he wrote, *“The godless with his mouth destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the just will be delivered”* (Pv 11:9).

A. Knowledge that sets us free from sin.

It is the same in reference to our freedom from the bondage of sin. When Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, he said through the Spirit that the mission of Jesus would be *“to give knowledge of salvation to His people ...”* (Lk 1:77). It would be through this knowledge that the people would be set free. It would thus be the mission of Jesus *“to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace”* (Lk 1:79). It is knowledge of and obedience to the ways of God

that sets us free from the bondage of our own selves. But the person who thinks that he knows everything, is the one who has the most to learn. We would not, therefore, assume that we can invent our own ways in order to deliver ourselves from the bondage of sin.

Jesus came with knowledge of the truth that would set men free (Jn 8:32). He came into a religious environment where there were religious lawyers who became an obstacle to the people in their efforts to learn the way of the Lord unto the salvation that He brought. He said to these religious lawyers, *“Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge”* (Lk 11:52).

The “key of knowledge” is one’s free access to the knowledge of salvation by which one can be delivered from the bondage of sin. The religious lawyers stood between this knowledge (truth) and the people. Jesus continued, *“You entered not in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered”* (Lk 11:52). Through their rebellion against the One who brought the key of entrance into the kingdom, they were not able to enter. But they also stood at the door of eternal opportunity and hindered those who sought to enter. Jesus judged them, *“For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men, for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in”* (Mt 23:13).

Those who would either refuse the knowledge of salvation, or allow others to stand between them and such knowledge, are doomed to continue on a road

to destruction. Paul wrote of such people millennia ago who refused to have a knowledge of God in their thinking.

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a depraved mind to do those things that are not proper (Rm 1:28).

These and others who refused to follow the knowledge of God unto salvation, were given over to suffer the consequences of their bondage in ignorance. It was on the foundation of this understanding that God said, “*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge*” (Hs 4:6).

The problem with most folks is what Paul said of those Jews who created a religiosity after their own desires: “*For I testify of them that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge*” (Rm 10:2). Such people had forgotten the exhortation of Isaiah: “*And wisdom and knowledge will be the stability of your times, and strength of salvation*” (Is 33:6).

When we search in our hearts for the light that would deliver us from the bondage of darkness, we must be driven to the word of God. And once we have consumed ourselves in the oracles of His wisdom, we will declare as Paul, “*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God*” (Rm 11:33). It is certainly a joy to be “*enriched by Him ... in all knowledge ...*” (1 Co 1:5). When we are enriched with His knowledge, we too will be thankful as Paul wrote, “*Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in*

Christ and manifests the aroma of His knowledge through us in every place” (2 Co 2:14). It is His wisdom and knowledge in us that allows us to be triumphant over all things. It is as Paul wrote:

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Co 4:6).

B. Knowledge sets us free from ignorance.

When we are filled with the knowledge of God, it is then that we are able to cast “*down imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God ...*” (2 Co 10:5). We can understand, therefore, why it was Paul’s prayer “*that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment ...*” (Ph 1:9).

For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that you might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding (Cl 1:9; see 2:2).

We will always contend that only in Christ can one truly establish a correct worldview that is based on the knowledge of God, for in Him we escape “*the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ ...*” (2 Pt 2:20). If one leaves God and Christ out of his thinking, then he can

never attain unto a full understanding of that which is true. We must come to this conclusion lest we deprive ourselves of salvational opportunities. It is as Paul wrote concerning our *“full knowledge of the mystery of God, that is, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”* (Cl 2:2,3). It is for this reason that we are on guard against the false knowledge that would be set forth by those who do not feast on the wisdom that is from above. Paul warned Timothy, *“O Timothy, guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings and opposing arguments of what is falsely called knowledge”* (1 Tm 6:20).

Because they have allowed themselves to be deceived by worldly knowledge that is void of God, some are simply *“always learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth”* (2 Tm 3:7). Therefore, we would heed the exhortation of Paul to Timothy lest we be led astray by the false knowledge of men. We would conclude as Peter when he introduced his second letter: *“Grace and peace be multiplied to you through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord”* (2 Pt 1:2).

We will not forget that God’s *“divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who has called us to glory and virtue”* (2 Pt 1:3). Therefore, we heed the exhortation of Peter: *“add to your faith ... knowledge ...”* (2 Pt 1:5). In doing this, we will not be *“unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (2 Pt 1:8). Peter

could not have concluded his last letter better than with the following statement: *“But grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”* (2 Pt 3:18).

C. Knowledge sets us free from unbelief.

When it comes to knowing the incomprehensible knowledge and wisdom of God in whom we believe, we are like adventurers walking on a beach. We walk along looking at the smooth stones that have been polished by centuries of restless waves. We see old sea shells. In all our marvel of the wonders of the beach, we have difficulty comprehending the awesome sea by which we walk, failing to understand the magnitude of its power throughout its thousands of years of restless activity. And with such limited appreciation for the eternity and awesomeness of God, we walk throughout life. In observing the created things of this world, we often struggle to see the *“invisible things of Him since the creation of the world”* (Rm 1:20). When we begin to be struck by the evidences of our awesome God, it is then that we are driven to seek for knowledge and wisdom from Him. We are thus driven to His word.

When we thirst for knowledge from Him, we are driven to the source by which we can understand Him. We open our Bibles daily in our efforts to discover small pebbles that He has fashioned by His creative work throughout millennia. And thus, when our knowledge of those

marvels He created overwhelm us with the necessary conclusion that we are not here by chance, then we begin to seek earnestly for His instructions that would bring us into His eternal presence.

When Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1726), the renowned physicist, commented on Daniel 12:4, by asserting that since the Bible said that “knowledge will be increased,” then we must assume that it might be possible in the future that men could go fifty miles an hour. Newton’s contemporary, Voltaire, lived up to his reputation as a skeptic concerning the Bible by criticizing what he presumed was a fantasy of Newton. Voltaire mocked Newton by saying that when he looked through the Bible, he concluded that Newton was a “poor dotard” for believing in the Bible. Now that we live in a time when men have left footprints on the moon, we ask who was really the “poor dotard”?

When great men of history discovered gems of knowledge in the Bible, they were sent on a quest for discovery. And so will the wise men among us today. God made us to seek knowledge, for in the acquisition of knowledge we are set free from the bondage of ignorance. But if we forget God in our quest to know, we will never understand how little we know.

It is unfortunate that we live in an era wherein mankind is cursed with those in some world societies who fear knowledge. Some leaders in these societies are so insecure about their own manhood that they refuse even their women to learn in schools. We would assume that the lead-

ers of such societies know the power of knowledge. As long as they can keep their people ignorant in some wilderness of the world, and away from a world of knowledge, they can keep the people in bondage through ignorance.

We must not conclude that the statement, “the truth will set you free,” is to be understood only in a religious context. When a society seeks knowledge, then the people of such a society are delivering themselves from living in the caves of ignorance, being led about by those who profess some distorted religiosity. Ignorant leaders can lead only by keeping the people ignorant.

Centuries ago men lived through what was called the Dark Ages. The ages were called “dark” because the Roman Catholic Church sought to keep the people in ignorance of the word of God. When some brave men started to translate the Bible into the language of the common people, the Catholic Church rose up to burn the translators at the stake and the Bibles they had translated.

We are now living in another “dark ages” because of a class of self-proclaimed religionists who know no Bible, and thus, are keeping the common people in ignorance of the Bible because they do not study their Bibles. Is there really any difference between a Catholic priest who sought for Bibles to burn during the Dark Ages, and the self-proclaimed religionist today who keeps the people ignorant of the Bible because he himself does not know the Bible? In either case the people remain ignorant of the Bible.

When church leaders understand

that their own existence as leaders of the people often depends on the ignorance of the people, then there is no freedom of the people. There is no desire on the part of the leaders to lead the people into a greater knowledge of the word of God. Any society that exists upon the foundation of ignorance has doomed itself from the brotherhood of humanity. Any church of people who do the same in reference to the word of God, have doomed themselves to eternal destruction (See 2 Th 1:6-9).

People often wonder why the West has become so developed throughout the centuries. The answer to this economic wonder is simply in the fact that Chris-

tianity brings freedom to humanity. It is then in a culture of freedom that individuals are set free to explore, to discover, to invent. When men's minds are set free from the bondage of sin and ignorance, the development of society results. But when societies bind themselves with traditions in ignorance, they will not develop.

The bondage of tradition can be broken down only by the axiomatic truth, "The truth will set you free." Truly free men seek knowledge, especially the knowledge that flows from God through His word. And when men bask themselves in the realm of God's knowledge, it is then that they will put away ignorance for a better way of life.

Chapter 3

Character Through Peace

When Jesus said, "*Blessed are the peacemakers,*" He was giving an identity character trait of those who would be His disciples (Mt 5:9). Christianity is about peace between God and man, man and man, and man within himself. Those who would be Christian in their thinking and behavior, therefore, must manifest a spirit of peace.

When astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin landed on the moon with the Apollo 11 mission, they left a plaque on the surface of the moon that will last until the end of time. The plaque read, "We come in peace for all mankind." When Jesus "landed" on earth as a babe in Bethlehem, He was God's plaque on earth that read, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on*

earth, peace toward men of goodwill" (Lk 2:14).

The peace that Jesus brought forever established the character of those who would be His disciples. How could we ever forget the following comforting words He spoke to His disciples?

These things I have spoken to you so that in Me you might have peace. In the world you have tribulation. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world (Jn 16:33).

Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be afraid (Jn 14:27).

Men thirst for peace on earth. A League of Nations, United Nations, Africa Union, documents of armistices, peace treaties, and all such unions of peace are constructed and signed by men on earth in order to satisfy the craving of all men for peace. And often, because of the fallibility of worldly characters, such agreements are often ignored, broken, and as a result, wars break out to destroy all our efforts to live in harmony.

Peace demands idealism and self-sacrifice. But when men unleash their most base desires for either control, domination or wealth, peace pays the price. After World War I when President Woodrow Wilson addressed the United States Senate in 1919, he stated, "The League of Nations is the only hope of mankind." Unfortunately, that hope was dashed when the world once again engaged itself in the most destructive war of all human history, World War II. It was a war that the film documentary *The World at War* estimated claimed the lives of over fifty million people.

When Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, he prophesied of John's mission to come, which mission was "*to guide our feet unto the way of peace*" (Lk 1:79). So when the angels announced the birth of Jesus, finally in all history we heard the comforting words that there would be "*on earth peace toward men of goodwill*" (Lk 2:14). Throughout history, we have often failed to fulfill that pronouncement. But we can be assured of one thing. We have peace with God through the announced babe in Bethlehem that no man can disrupt with war. Re-

gardless of what happens in the affairs of this world, the Christian will always have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

A. Peace between God and man:

Our most desired peace is the satisfaction that our Creator is pleased with us. We are not of those who have foolishly said in their hearts that there is no God (Ps 14:1). We believe. But in our belief there is often guilt and fear because we know that we are human. Guilt and fear, therefore, have driven us to the divine Peacemaker. And so we find awesome comfort with our Creator because He offered an atoning sacrifice for our frail humanity. We go to bed tonight with peace of mind.

As His children, we yearn for His approval. But when we take a reality check of ourselves, we realize that we formerly placed ourselves in a frightful situation in reference to our relationship with Him. We were all prodigal children who were checked in at the Hog Hotel, yearning, as the prodigal son, for the comforts of home (Lk 15:11-32). We had all forsaken our natural abiding with Him, sinned, and having run away into the world (Rm 3:23). In our rebellion, we fell short of His approval (Rm 3:9,10). And because sinful rebellion cannot exist in His presence, we had through our rebellious behavior banished ourselves to pig pens that were far from His presence (Is 59:2). We cried out as Paul, "***Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?***" (Rm 7:24).

In our despair, there was hope. *“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Rm 5:1). Glory hallelujah! Those who have struggled through the wilderness always appreciate the paradise of God in Christ.

Because it is not in us to direct our own ways (Jr 10:23), God has always delivered unto man instructions (law) by which we would not digress to the state of all humanity about which Moses wrote in Genesis 6:5:

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

The problem with law, however, is that it becomes our opportunity to sin. *“For without law, I was alive,”* Paul reminded the Roman Christians. He continued, *“... when the commandment came, sin revived and I died”* (Rm 7:9). The good news is that with law **there is always grace**, for our Father knew that we could not keep law perfectly in order to make ourselves right before Him, and thus live in peace with Him. When we seek to live in peace with God, law is never what we expect it to be. Law is always as Paul said, *“But when the commandment came, sin revived and I died”* (Rm 7:9).

Every honest person knows that perfect keeping of God’s law is an impossibility. Therefore, we must conclude with Paul, *“that a man is not justified by works of law, but by the faith of Christ*

Jesus” (Gl 2:16). We can never have peace with our Creator if such peace depends on our ability to keep law perfectly. Law, therefore, necessitates grace in reference to our relationship with God. **There is no peace in law without grace.**

In order to sleep at night with any peace of mind, we have all cried out to God for mercy. Through our sins, we have all fallen short of the glory of God (Rm 3:23). We need the long extending arm of God’s grace. Because He does not wish that any of His creatures should perish (2 Pt 3:9), God has lovingly responded to our pleas for peace with Him. We thus have peace of mind in that we are continually ...

... being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God has set forth to be an atoning sacrifice by His blood through faith in order to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins ... (Rm 3:24,25).

Because Jesus brought peace between God and man through the remission of sins that flows from the cross, we are cleansed, no longer having *“feelings of guilt for sins”* (Hb 10:2). We all rejoice with Paul who thanked *“God through Jesus Christ our Lord”* (Rm 7:25).

Our peace with God was realized at the cross. As long as we live under the shadow of the cross, our peace with God remains the foundation for our security on which we stand (See 1 Co 15:-

14). Our peace remains because we find confidence in the cross, not in our efforts to live perfectly before Him according to law. Therefore, our human imperfection in reference to law demands the cross. The atoning sacrifice of the cross was necessary for peace to prevail between God and man. Those who would build their characters for Christ must continue to build their knowledge of the effect of the cross in reference to our peace with God.

B. Peace between man and man:

When God made a covenant with the seed of Abraham at Mount Sinai, and then delivered the conditions (law) of the covenant, He knew that the Israelites would be separated as a nation from the rest of the cultures of the world. And rightly so, for God sought in Israel to preserve a segment of society on earth in order to bring the Messiah into the world. Since it is not possible for men to develop their own moral laws to preserve themselves socially (Jr 10:23), law had to come with the Mount Sinai covenant. But with the covenant and law, came the necessity of separating the children of Israel from those who did not have a written law to keep them close to their Creator.

The law and covenant thus brought a social “middle wall of separation” between Israel and the rest of humanity. In the courtyard of Herod the Great’s temple in Jerusalem there was a “middle wall of separation” beyond which no Gentile was allowed to go. This wall became the signal that the Jews kept themselves sepa-

rated from all other nations.

But something marvelous happened with the coming of our Peacemaker. Paul reflected on the great work of our Peacemaker with the statement, “*For He is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation*” (Ep 2:14). Jesus broke down the “middle wall of separation” by abolishing it through the offering of His incarnate body. Jesus admonished “*the enmity, which is the law of commandments contained in ordinances, in order to make in Himself of the two one new man, thus making peace*” (Ep 2:15). He made peace between Jew and Gentile by reconciling “*both to God in one body by the cross ...*” (Ep 2:16). And now, we “*are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus*” (Gl 3:26). The breaking down of this wall of separation is still happening today as the gospel goes into all the world.

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither bondservant nor free. There is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gl 3:27,28).

When those of any race of the entire world today come into Christ through obedience of the good news of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection, he or she is added to a universal fellowship of all those who have likewise obeyed the gospel. It took some time for the early Jewish Christians to figure this out. But eventually Peter confessed, “*Of a truth I per-*

ceive that God is no respecter of persons. But in every nation he who fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (At 10:34,35).

Think of it in this way. When we come into Christ, we will often have left-over ethnocentrism (race pride). But we must get over it. After all, when we peel off the skin of every individual, we are all the same color. Our cultures may vary, but we are still one man in Christ. The purpose of the fellowship of the church on earth is to get us on the way to breaking down cultural barriers in preparation for eternal dwelling with one another in heaven.

When Jesus comes again, we will receive a “new habitation” (new body). Paul wrote, “*For in this house [body] we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our house that is from heaven ...*” (2 Co 5:2). We groan in this body in hope of the new body to come. We groan that when the new body comes, our new bodies will no longer give any indication that we can be identified to belong to a particular race. If one would enjoy heaven, therefore, he should start now in the fellowship of the one body into which all races are baptized.

In this one spiritual body, we start breaking down in our minds any “middle walls of separation.” Will it not be a marvelous thing to experience in the resurrection to come the commonality of our new habitation that will give no indication of race or culture? And will it not be an exciting experience in heaven not to judge someone by the appearance of their skin color? We need to think about this for a

moment the next time we meet someone and judge (profile) that person by the color of his or her skin.

Those who form their characters after the peace that Jesus brought between God and man, and between men and men, experience the oneness of the body of Christ. The oneness that we have in Christ is more than a doctrinal unity. It is more than a peace we have with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a unity in cultural diversity in Christ. The character of those who are in Christ is above racial differences.

C. Peace within men:

When the psalmist wrote, “*The Lord will bless His people with peace*” (Ps 29:11), more was meant than peace from war. In the context, the Lord would bless His people with inner peace of mind. They would “*walk through the valley of the shadow of death*” and fear no evil (Ps 23:4). Regardless of the circumstances that surrounded His people, they would have an inner peace that would surpass all understanding.

Among God’s people it would always be as Paul wrote: “*And the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*” (Ph 4:7). This was the peace that Jesus left with His disciples (Jn 14:27). And this is the peace that changes the entire demeanor of our character. It is something that is seen on the faces of God’s people and carried out in the behavior of their lives. Peace is always manifested in the behavior of those

who possess this virtue.

The story is told of two artists who were asked to paint pictures that would portray peace. One artist painted a picture of a calm lake that reflected mountains in the background with a calm lake in the foreground. The other painted a picture of a rushing river that cascaded over a long waterfall. Just before the river came to the waterfall, the artist painted a leaning tree in the midst of the river on which a bird rested and sang. There were no worries in the mind of the bird as he sang his cheerful song of the day. If the tree gave way, his wings would carry him to safety. The bird was at peace within himself regardless of the circumstances of his environment.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth is removed and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea, though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling (Ps 46:1-3).

Christians have the peace that passes all understanding of this world. It is a peace that the world cannot figure out. When in trouble, their God lifts them up on high.

... those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They will mount up

with wings as eagles. They will run and not be weary. They will walk and not faint (Is 40:31).

Remember what David said? *“Though an army should camp against me, **my heart will not fear**”* (Ps 27:3). Victor Hugo wrote,

Be like the bird,
Who halting in his flight,
On limb so slight,
Feels it give way beneath him.
Yet sings,
Knowing he hath wings.

We live in a world where too many people allow too many concerns to bring too much depression in their lives too many times. It is a world that is starving for an inner peace of mind. It is a world that harkens for the call of Jesus: *“Come to Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”* (Mt 11:28; see 6:25-34). Therefore, we must give ourselves a break. Jesus admonishes, *“... do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will care for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble”* (Mt 6:34). This is the character of those who have given themselves to the origin of all peace. It is He who is truly the Prince of Peace. We must remember, however, that there is no peace within us until we make Him our Prince above us.

Chapter 4

Character Through Hope

If there were no life after death, then no truer words could have been said of the Christian than these: *“If we have hope in Christ only in this life, we are of all men most to be pitied”* (1 Co 15:19).

Because of the perils of sailing ships around the southern tip of Africa, the storm-tossed seas by winter winds gave birth to the name, “The Cape of Tempest” or “The Cape of Storms.” Throughout the centuries, many sailors came to their doom as the tempestuous seas took their floating security to a watery graveyard where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans collide. The seas around the southern tip of Africa certainly gained a reputation for being an area for treacherous sailing.

One Portuguese seaman, however, sought to change the unfortunate destiny of too many ships by finding a sea route through the treacherous waters around the southern tip of Africa. He found a safe route and time when the seas were the most friendly, and then changed the name of the area. He subsequently named the land, “The Cape of Good Hope.” The name stuck, and since we live in the area, the first natural land monument for which we search the horizon on our return from a long trip is Table Mountain. Once spotted, our hopes are revived for home and soon realized upon our arrival to the warmth of the Cape.

There is something romantic about Table Mountain that no nonresident of the

area understands. It has been the “mountain of hope” for thousands of weary sailors throughout the centuries who understood that the mountain meant a final rest from a tempestuous journey. And so will our heavenly home be once we are there (See Hb 4).

God knew that life without hope would lead to a fatalistic worldview by those who struggled to survive until they met their fate in death. The desire to hope is so strong within man, that in the absence of all biblical knowledge among animistic peoples, some concept of hope has always been conceived in the minds of all men. Hope for something after life was imagined in order to bring peace of mind in life. We want to believe that this world is not all there is.

For the Christian, we understand that a faith without a resurrection is simply a hopeless fantasy of an imaginative mind. If our Savior were still in some tomb that was lost somewhere outside Jerusalem, then we are truly to be pitied as a people who have generated a mental fantasy in order to deal with the harshness of life and the darkness of death. But we have witnesses of a resurrected Savior. We trust the testimony of these witnesses who have testified that He is still living.

These witnesses did not walk by faith in the Firstborn in resurrection. They walked by **sight**. They actually experienced the resurrected Savior. And just

in case we might forget that they walked by sight, many years after Jesus' ascension into heaven, one of them wrote:

That which was from the beginning, that we have heard, that we have seen with our eyes, that we have looked upon and our hands have handled, we proclaim concerning the Word of Life (1 Jn 1:1).

Cephas (Peter) was one of those witnesses with John who had heard, seen, looked upon, and handled the resurrected Savior. He too wanted to reconfirm our hope with comforting words:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has **begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead ...**" (1 Pt 1:3).*

John wanted to reassure us that he and the other disciples heard, saw, looked upon and handled the resurrected Word of Life. Likewise, Peter wanted us to know that he and the first disciples had at the death of Jesus lost hope. But after the resurrection, he, John, and the other disciples were "*begotten **again to a living hope.***" And it is this hope that we have because of their personal encounter with the resurrected Jesus. We have not seen our resurrected Savior, but we have believed the testimony of those who

walked in His presence.

Our hope is based on the foundation of two facts: (1) God does not change. (2) God has promised with an oath that our end will not be when we breathe our last breath. The Hebrew writer reflected on these promises, and thus wrote ...

... that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong encouragement, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us (Hb 6:18).

The Hebrew writer continued, "*This hope we have as **an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast ...***" (Hb 6:19). We live with a hope that is the emotional foundation of our most inner self. Though the stormy waves of life seek to cast us to and fro, our souls are anchored in the promises of God. So we live "*in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began*" (Ti 1:2).

Our hope is beyond the resurrection. It is a hope that we will continue in the presence of our Creator throughout eternity. It is this hope that motivates us to develop our characters for Christ. It is the motivation to keep our minds focused on those things that are above and not on those things that are on the earth (Cl 3:1,2).

Chapter 5

Character Through Hope Of Eternal Life

There has always been great discussion among theologians concerning the “possession” of eternal life. Some have argued that it is yet in the future, while others claim that we have it now in this life. It may be only a difference in how we understand the possession of eternal life, but the fact is that eternal life is both a present reality and a future possession.

Before we listen to some words from the Holy Spirit, consider the definition of the phrase “eternal life.” It is a phrase that refers to “duration”—if we can use this word—and not simply an environment. We will have eternal life in a heavenly environment.

From the day of our birth into this world, we were given a spirit from the Father (Hb 12:9). It is a spirit that has eternal possibilities. However, the eternal possibilities can be realized only if we remain in the presence of the Father of our spirits. Our eternality is based on His eternality, and thus, outside His eternal presence we cannot assume that we will exist for eternity. We are not, therefore, inherently eternal within ourselves when we are born into this world. We can be snuffed out of existence by the One who brought us into the world.

Unfortunately, sin separates us from the only One who is eternal, and thus, as long as sin is in our lives, we are headed to the One who has the following power over our spirits:

*And do not fear those who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul. **But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell** (Mt 10:28).*

In an environment wherein we have the opportunity to sin, we also have the opportunity to lose our eternality in the presence of God. The environment of sin in this world offers us the opportunity to lose our possibility of eternality. This is so because sin separates us from God (Is 59:2). And when in sin in this environment, we are destined for destruction (See 2 Th 1:6-9). We will experience a second death that will result in our separation from the only One who has the power of eternal existence.

We would say, therefore, that our spirit and soul only have eternal possibilities. Therefore, in an environment where the possibility to sin is real, God had to introduce an opportunity for eternal life. He had to take care of our problem of sin in order that we in this life could walk in a realm of eternal existence. Our eternal life is realized in this life, but possessed in actuality when we experience a paradigm shift that is yet to come. This is the shift from this physical world into the new heavens and earth wherein we will dwell for eternity. Our hope, therefore, is not simply for eternal existence, but for the environment of a new heavens and earth wherein we will enjoy eternal life in actuality in His eternal presence.

Our hope is for this new paradigm of existence wherein we will live in the eternal presence of God. Paul explained this in the following words:

For we are saved by hope, but hope that is seen is not hope, for what a man sees, why does he still hope for it? But if we hope for what we do not see, then with perseverance we wait for it (Rm 8:24,25).

So we are “*in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began*” (Ti 1:2).

There is an eternal life in a new paradigm of existence that is different from the eternal life that we now possess in this earthly paradigm that offers the opportunity to sin. It is our desire to be transitioned from this earthly paradigm into the presence of God. We seek the new and heavenly paradigm wherein the temptation to sin will have been taken away. But before we reach the paradigm of heaven, we have eternal life now only through the cleansing blood of Jesus. Our walk in this cleansing blood gives our soul the opportunity to continue life into the new paradigm of heaven.

Now we must step back into the earthly ministry of Jesus when He was making these promises to the audience of His ministry. We must take another look at His promise in Mark 10:29,30. In the historical context of this promise, Jesus was speaking of those who would in a time after He made the statements of Mark 10:29,30, forsake fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and lands for the sake of the gospel that He was preach-

ing. The “age to come” about which He spoke would begin after His earthly ministry, and thus, **after His resurrection**. The sacrificial offering of one who committed himself to Jesus during His ministry would result in eternal life **after His resurrection** (Mk 10:30). If His statement, “age to come,” refers to the time after the cross—He made the statement during His ministry—then those who made the sacrifices during His ministry, would have eternal life after His resurrection. They would have eternal life because of the blood offering of the cross that was yet to come at the time Jesus made the promise.

There is no reason to place the historical fulfillment of the promise only to a time after the cross, and thus make the phrase “age to come” to refer exclusively to this time. It is also true that those who make the sacrifice of family and lands now have life now, but also the promise of eternal life that is yet to come. Jesus’ statement was in real time after His resurrection. But in reference to those who now live after His resurrection (this would be us), they too would have eternal life now because they would be walking in the cleansing blood of Jesus (1 Jn 1:7).

In view of the cross, Jesus spoke of eternal life as a promise and a possession throughout His ministry. “*Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has everlasting life*” (Jn 6:47). “*He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me, has everlasting life*” (Jn 5:24). Notice the tense of the verbs. The possession of the eternal life existed at the same time one believed. And since

one also believes in Jesus at this time in life, then he has eternal life.

The possession of eternal life was conditioned on belief in Him. These promises of Jesus were made during His ministry. The fulfillment of the promises was realized when men first believed, and as a result of their belief, they did that which would wash away their sins (See Mk 1:4; At 22:16). We must be careful not to skip over the time of fulfillment. This is the time in which we now live. We must not skip over our present time by assuming that the fulfillment of Jesus' promise of everlasting life would be realized only when He comes again. He was making the promise of eternal life during His ministry that would be fulfilled when the gospel would be preached and obeyed. It was during this time of preaching that the blood of the cross was effective in the lives of those who obeyed the gospel. And since we have obeyed the gospel, then we have eternal life, though it is conditioned on our faithful walk in the light.

This moves us to John who wrote after the cross and resurrection. He wrote to Christians these encouraging words: "*And this is the testimony, that God has given us eternal life and this life is in His Son*" (1 Jn 5:11). Everyone who has been "*baptized into Christ*" now has the life about which Jesus promised and John stated we have (See Rm 6:3; Gl 3:26-29). John wanted to reassure those to whom he wrote that they were in possession of eternal life, but not yet in possession of the environment wherein the life could be fully enjoyed: "*He who has the Son has the life.*

He who does not have the Son of God does not have the life" (1 Jn 5:12). We can be assured that we have the life because we have both the Father and the Son through our obedience to the gospel.

Because we now have the Son, we now have the life that comes from Him. Now concerning the sin and separation problem, John reminds us that "*if we walk in the light as He is in the light, ... the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin*" (1 Jn 1:7). As we walk in the light of His word now, the cleansing blood of Jesus continually keeps us clean of our sins. We thus have eternal life in prospect now, though we are in hope of the actuality and environment of eternal life in the presence of God to come.

We are the children of God on earth in hope of a new existence wherein we will be in the presence of God. John reminded his readers that "*it has not yet been revealed what we will be*" (1 Jn 3:2). But we need not worry. We will be clothed with a new body, a new habitation (2 Co 5:1-5). John promised, "*But we know that when He appears, we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is*" (1 Jn 3:2). So we are as Peter stated, "*But we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*" (2 Pt 3:13).

We look for the new environment wherein we will thoroughly enjoy the eternal life that we now have in Christ. And as preachers of the gospel, we are as Paul: "*Therefore, I endure all things for the elects' sake, that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ*

Jesus with eternal glory” (2 Tm 2:10). We preach Christ because we seek to take those with the possibility of eternity

on into the environment of our eternal God.

Chapter 6

Character Through Assurance

We must never underestimate the emotional and mental security that hope works in our souls in order to give substance to live the abundant life (See Jn 10:10). Our character as a Christian is defined by our hope. It is what a lighthouse is to a sailor on a storm-tossed sea. As someone said, “Hope is a freshly worn path to a lost pilgrim.” We would add that it is a life preserver to a drowning soul, an oasis to a desert traveler, and Table Mountain to a true Capetonian. Some wise person surmised, “Hope is like the sun, which as we journey toward it, cast a shadow of our burden behind us.” Hope is the basic substance that gives us assurance through all our struggles and trials of life.

When we are filled with hope, we seek to share it with the hopeless. Nothing relieves one of the stresses of life more than the fact that there is hope for better times. One of the greatest motivators to spur on the evangelist is to be motivated with a deep sense to aspire to that which is before us. It is his mission to take hope to the hopeless. And in his desire to accomplish his mission, he seeks to take others with him into a realm of assurance. The serendipity of our own assurance, therefore, is the salvation of others.

Paul wrote of the resurrection to

come. He explained to the Thessalonians that which would transpire at the moment of the sound of the last trumpet. After explaining details of our resurrection and ascension, he concluded, “... *comfort one another with these words*” (1 Th 4:18). We talk about our hope of the resurrection and ascension to come in order to inspire ourselves to share our piece of the pie with those who have no hope.

We were all once on a suicide mission of sin in our lives when God came along with grace through Jesus (Rm 5:8). The cross was the serum of hope to all of us who were suffering from the deadly plague of lawlessness. We were the “walking dead” until Jesus, through death, poured out His blood on the cross. We were candidates for doom when God cried out from the cross, “I love you!” Hope was grasped as all of us saw in Jesus the possibility of being created anew in Him. As a result of our faith in Jesus, all Christians can now see beyond the grave.

Upon our acceptance of that which we so dearly needed—assurance of life beyond this life—we now have courage to face the future. We were once as someone said, “There are no hopeless situations. There are only people who have grown hopeless about them.” Now in Christ our situation in life is one of be-

ing assured through the hope that beams from the cross. And it is this hope that we seek to share with others. It is because of our character of hope that we seek to motivate others to ask “*a reason for the hope*” that is in us (1 Pt 3:15). Discipleship is living in a manner that generates questions concerning hope.

Hope forces us to think on those things that are above, not on things of this hopeless world (See Cl 3:1,2). It is as Samuel Johnson wrote, “The natural flights of the human mind are not from pleasure to pleasure, but from hope to hope.” The effect of our hope is that we are heavenly minded. And because we are heavenly minded, we are encouraged to press on in times of dire circumstances (See Ph 3:13-15). Hope gives the weary the confidence to rejoice in sufferings, knowing that a crown of life is reserved for all those who endure this present environment (See Js 1:2). James promised, “*Blessed is the man who endures temptation, for when he is tried, he will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love Him*” (Js 1:12).

One may consider the Christian’s hope a fantasy that has been imagined in a hopeless environment of evil and suffering. The hopeless atheist may find solace in the good he would do in this life.

When he is gone, however, there is only a legacy of good by which he is remembered. The Christian will leave a legacy, but his legacy is a treasure that he has laid up in a heavenly environment that will be appreciated for eternity (See Mt 6:20). It is for this reason that Paul could write of all Christians the following encouragement:

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Co 15:58).

Christians can be steadfast and unmovable in the Lord because they are assured that their good works are not useless. Their legacy of good works will follow them right on into eternity:

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. “Yes,” says the Spirit, “so that they may rest from their labors, for their works follow them (Rv 14:13).

The good works of the saints will follow them because their good works identify their character. By the fruits of their good works, they will be known that they are the children of God.

Chapter 7

Character Through Faith

In the Princeton University’s *Alumni Weekly*, June 7, 1963, a graduate wrote after his graduation from Princeton,

The trouble with me is that I can’t believe in anything. On some days I can, but most of the time I am smarter than

that. I have been taught to question, not to believe, so I never know where to stop. What I want is a cause; what I cannot have is a cause.

We live in a world of those who believe that this world is all there is. It is a world that says, "Seeing is believing." It is a world, therefore, that needs a spiritual revival that says, "Believing is seeing." The materialist of this world would say, "Trust in this world." But the Christian would respond, "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding*" (Pv 3:5).

This world would find solace for its sin if it would trust in God. Augustine wrote, "Now it is faith to believe that which you do not yet see; and the reward of faith is to see that which you believe." Our soul beckons for that which is beyond this world; it yearns for eternity. And because we so yearn, our souls seek to believe.

The book of Hebrews is a masterpiece on faith. One of its theme statements is Hebrews 11:1: "*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, **the evidence of things not seen.***" We like the way Edward Robinson translated this statement: "Faith is confidence as to things hoped for; conviction as to things not seen."

We hope for that which we have not seen. However, the Hebrew writer wants to lead our minds beyond wishful thinking and superstition. The proposition of his thesis was that our faith becomes "evidence" of those things that are not seen. God would not demand a faith that is built on wishful thinking. If He had, then such

faith would be no faith at all. It would be only superstition. Bible faith is an evidence of those things that are not seen **because it is a faith that is based on evidence.** It is for this reason that we have the recorded testimony of so many who have witnessed the supernatural work of God.

We have the recorded testimony of Abraham, and Elijah, and Paul, and the apostles of our Lord. It is not that we need a miracle in our own lives. If we needed a miracle, then we would be seeking to negate the power of the testimony of those whose personal experiences of the resurrected Jesus were recorded in the Bible. Modern-day miracle workers are working to deny the statement of Romans 10:17: "*So then faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.*" There will be no cry for a miracle from those who seek to walk by faith. They would in no way ask for God to cheat them of the blessedness of their walk by faith.

If we must have a miracle in our own lives in order to believe, then we are accusing the word of Christ of being an impotent testimony of witnesses. We are saying that the testimony of the word of God is insufficient to produce the faith that is necessary to please Him (Hb 11:6). But we have not forgotten that **miracles were recorded** so that we "*might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God ...*" (Jn 20:31). If we would cry out for a miracle from God in our lives, therefore, we are actually confessing our lack of faith in the word of Christ.

We would not, therefore, be as Tho-

mas who said, “*Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails and thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe*” (Jn 20:25). No, we would not dare venture down that road of unbelief by seeking for a sign as the unbelieving religious leaders of Jesus’ day (See Mt 12:38,39). We would believe. We are not of those who say, “Unless we see we will not believe.” We will believe regardless of seeing, for we seek to walk by faith and not by sight. We seek to walk under the umbrella of Jesus’ statement, “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*” (Jn 20:29).

The Hebrew writer came to our rescue. We once preached a sermon on the faith that the writer sought to present as a foundation of our faith. Throughout the Hebrew document, we discover a **foundation** for our faith (Hb 2:1-4). We discover the **Founder** of our faith (3:1,2), in order that we not **falter** from our faith (3:12-14). We see that some have **fallen** from their faith (3:18 – 4:3), and thus, we seek to hold on to the **future** of our faith (6:11,12). We hold on in order to enjoy the **fullness** of our faith (10:22). In this way we will remain **faithful** throughout our lives (10:38,39). Our faith is the assurance of things for which we hope, the evidence of things that we do not see (Hb 11:1).

The Hebrew writer knew that we needed some examples of faith. And so he recorded the examples of heroes of faith who had experienced the greatest tragedies that life could deliver. Regardless of all the struggles that these heroes

went through in their lives, they remained on course in living a faithful life.

A. The faith of Noah:

“By faith Noah, being warned by God of things not yet seen, moved with fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his house” (Hb 11:7).

Noah built a boat by his faith in what God said was coming. He did not build by sight of what was happening in the present. While living in a generation where “*the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually,*” Noah cut planks, pegged beams, and stuffed pitch in order to prepare by faith a floating house (Gn 6:5). And while laboring with his sons through faith, he had probably never experienced the natural phenomenon of rain, for before the flood a mist came up from the ground to water all vegetation (Gn 2:6). The satisfaction of over a century of building was realized only when the first rain drop splashed across his brow. We can only imagine the thrill that passed through every nerve of his body as he stared in wonder as to what God was bringing upon the earth in fulfillment of His promise.

As he built that boat, we are sure that Noah at times faced an innumerable host of obstacles. Nevertheless, his faith allowed him to see the way to the saving of his family. He saw a dark night coming for humanity, but his faith allowed him to see a bright day again after the waters would dry from the land. The dissipated

canopy of cloud that encompassed the earth before the flood was taken away in order to reveal the warmth of a beaming sun.

We are sure that he dreaded taking that first step by faith into the ark. But when the ark began to be uplifted from the face of the earth by the waters of the flood, he was surely thankful that his faith had kept him building throughout one hundred years while he struggled against all opposition. His faith finally paid off. He was lifted by waters that delivered him to a new world.

Doubt often questions, “Who believes?” Faith always answers, “I.” When doubt knocks at the door, faith will open it. But no one will be there. It is faith that will allow us to be as the psalmist wrote,

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth is removed and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea ... (Ps 46:1,2).

When we feel that our world is coming apart, we will build by faith as Noah. He remained faithful when the world that he knew “*was destroyed, being overflowed with water*” (2 Pt 3:6). And when our world is coming apart, we will seek to walk in the footsteps of Noah who built an ark to the saving of his family. God “*did not spare the old world, but saved Noah, a preacher of righteousness,*” because Noah remained faithful in a time when the rest of the world gave up all faith (2 Pt 2:5).

B. The faith of Abraham:

“By faith Abraham, when he was called to go ... obeyed ... went out, not knowing where he was going” (Hb 11:8).

We would, as Abraham, rather walk alone in the dark by faith, than in the light on our own accord. Abraham chose rather to go to an unknown land by faith, than to stay alone by sight in his own homeland. In his case, God’s commission was more important than land and relatives. He was as all those faithful disciples who have throughout history put God before family by going into all the world. Abraham left his extended family and homeland, but was blessed with being the father of millions who have lived by the example of his faith. Jesus promised the same to everyone who would put Him before houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother and homelands:

And everyone who has left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for My name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit everlasting life (Mt 19:29).

We would be as Abraham for Jesus. We would choose to go out for Jesus into a land we do not know. We would remember that today is the tomorrow about which we worried about yesterday because of our lack of faith. We must remember, as someone said, that “God is playing chess with the Christian. He *meets* every move.” So we must always allow faith to be the grave of fear, and

then move on for Jesus in order to take the gospel into all the world. If doing that which God would ask of us calls on us to make any sacrifice of this world, then the world to come is worth any sacrifice that must be paid in this world.

Our obedience to God is made perfect by our works, but our works must be based on our faith. Paul explained that in Christ, it is our *“faith working through love”* (Gl 5:6). Therefore, the testing of our faith through obedience will either cause us to use our faith or lose our faith. James challenges us: *“Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works”* (Js 2:18). In Abraham’s case, his faith allowed him to move the mountains, but the mountains never moved his faith. He demonstrated his faith through his work of obedience to God. When God commanded, he left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, lands and moved on to a land he had never seen before. His faith allowed him to see the invisible, and thus do the impossible for God. He knew that the only faith that was worth having was the faith that would move him on to the next destination.

C. The faith of Moses:

“By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to suffer mistreatment with the people of God than to temporarily enjoy the pleasures of sin” (Hb 11:24,25).

Someone so wisely said, “All strength and force of man comes from

his faith in things unseen. He who believes is strong: he who doubts is weak. Strong convictions precede great actions.” And such was Moses.

There was once the case when a young, inexperienced seaman was sent up the mast of a sailing ship to untangle ropes and sails during a storm. The young sailor yelled down, “I’m becoming very dizzy. I think I’m going to fall.” An old sailor yelled up to him from the deck, “Don’t look down. Look up.”

In order to get the attention of Moses, God had to take him up to the top of a mountain in order that he look up to His guiding hand. When the despondent mother of Jesus and her friends approached the tomb of Jesus in order to dress His body for final rest, they were concerned about who was going to roll away the stone from before the tomb. The text reads, *“... and looking up, they see that the stone is rolled back ...”* (Mk 16:3,4-ASV).

Moses presented the usual excuses for not assuming his leadership of the people of God. But God turned all his excuses into opportunities for victory. His faith moved him to move out of Egypt. When he moved on with God, God strengthened his faith to move a nation out of captivity and into its entrance into the land of promise.

Our faith will not move us to reach out unless it reaches up. We can never ascend to doing great things for God unless our minds ascend to heavenly things. Paul wrote, therefore, *“Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth”* (Cl 3:2). Doubts concerning our

destiny will find their grave in faith when we mentally transcend this present world in order to be other-world minded. We would, therefore, fix the anchor of our faith in those things that are above, knowing that we live in an ever changing and restless world. We must always remember, *“The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever puts his trust in the Lord will be safe”* (Pv 29:25). God *“is a shield to those who put their trust in Him”* (Pv 30:5).

We must conclude that it is faith that builds one’s character. We do not want God to steal away our faith with miracles that entice us to walk by sight. It is faith, not sight, that spiritually prepares us to walk through the trials of this world. It is as someone wrote, *“The Christian sees more on his knees, than the philosopher sees on his tip toes.”* We would be cautioned, therefore, as Paul so warned: *“Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall”* (1 Co 10:12). It was said by a wise person, *“Unless there is within us that which is above us, we will soon yield to that which is around us.”*

We must always be as the desperate father who brought his afflicted son to Jesus. The father revealed that his faith had come to an end. He pleaded with Jesus, *“But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us”* (Mk 9:22). The father’s faith brought him and his son to Jesus, but there it faltered. Jesus then said to the tearful father, *“If you can? All things are possible to him who believes”* (Mk 9:23).

It seems that all of us are as the fa-

ther. We have a faith that keeps Jesus in our minds, but not a faith that keeps us in His trust. We should all, as the father, cry out to Jesus, *“Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!”* (Mk 9:24).

Character building is not simply to believe that God is present, but that He is here to grow us spiritually through our times of trial. We better understand the struggles of this world, therefore, when we understand that struggles build our faith in order that we make it through this world.

If we would lose all our money, we would lose much. If we would lose a friend, we lose much more than money. But if we lose our faith, we have lost everything. The Hebrew writer concluded his review of our heroes of faith in chapter 11 with the statement of Hebrews 12:1. He reminded us that all the heroes of faith that he mentioned in the letter now surround us in order to see how we will perform in reference to our faith.

... seeing we are also surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

The Bible is a road map for our faith. The way to master it as our road map is to let it master us. We must come to the Bible in order to develop our faith to see that which is beyond the Bible. It is the work of our faith to take us through our troubles, and thus, we must conclude that there are messages in the word of God upon which our faith is founded that deal

with each struggle we may encounter in this life. We must always remember that it is not the greatness of the troubles we encounter in this life, but the weakness of our faith that causes us so much grief. Our failures in our struggles, therefore, become the opportunity to fine tune our faith through study of the word of God. A faith that will not take us to the other side of any trial in life is a weak faith. It is for this reason that we must see in our trials measures of our faith. Trials of life are opportunities to fix our faith with the word of God.

Throughout the ministry of Jesus, it was His task to bring all men to faith in Him. The apostles would later add the details on how to openly profess before men that which was necessary in order to come into Him. During His ministry, there were many chief rulers who believed on Christ. *“But because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him lest*

they should be put out of the synagogue” (Jn 12:42). Their faith would not move them to confess Him who could empower them to be saved.

If the faith that is within us is powerless in taking us all the way to obedience of Jesus, then it is a faith that cannot power us on to victory in Jesus. Jesus calls on a totally committed faith. We must remember that we cannot cross a chasm with two hops. Without an obedient faith in Jesus, it is all the way, or no way. Spurgeon was right: “A little faith will bring your soul to heaven: a great faith will bring heaven to your soul.”

We simply do not believe in a God who can, but in a God who will. It is this behavior of faith that builds character. When we start believing that the things that really count are the things that we cannot count, then we know that we are on our way to the victory that only a true faith can provide.

Chapter 8

Character Through Truth

Many years ago, a resident of Long Island in America ordered from a manufacturer a new barometer. On the morning the barometer arrived in the post, the resident noticed immediately that one hand on the barometer scale was unusually low on the scale. He immediately gave the barometer back to the postman with a very stern letter to the manufacturer. In the letter he complained to the manufacturer that he had sent him a faulty barometer. That afternoon and the following day, a great storm struck Long Island

and caused considerable damage.

Sometimes truth can be staring one directly in the face, but we are often so bent on our traditions, or sidetracked by our subjective religiosity, that we are simply blinded. Those who would cultivate a character that is pleasing to God must be those who are always in search of that which is true. In their search for truth from God, characters for Christ guard themselves against being led astray by error.

Webster’s dictionary defines truth as

“the state of being the case The body of real things, events and facts.” Paul had this meaning in mind when he wrote in reference to his delivery of the message of the gospel to the Ephesians: “*In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of the truth, the gospel of your salvation*” (Ep 1:13). Paul made this statement in the context of so many lies that were being proclaimed in the region of his readers. The recipients of his letter were not living in a religious environment that was much different than the one in which we live today. Error often prevails over truth.

Christendom is burdened with too many theatrical religionists who are strong on theatrical religiosity, but weak on the word of God. Some groups are zealous about doing a good number of good works, but weak on their knowledge of the Bible. They subsequently justify their existence as “Christian” on the foundation of works, not the word of God.

We live in a religious world that is the residence of too many prophets who have no desire to have the knowledge of God in their thinking and ways. We recently spoke to a Christian counsellor who said of the church, “We are no longer a people who come together to hear or study the word of God.” A new generation has arisen who seek to validate their relationship with God through good works, but apart from the foundation of the word of God.

True teachers of the word of God are those who seek truth from God. Such is their nature because they are disciples of Christ. All those who are seeking the

truth must seek those who are also truth seekers. It is the truth of God’s word that brings Christians together. Truth seekers naturally seek out one another. If we would be God’s people, then we must be people who seek His truth. Our fellowship as disciples of Christ must be based on the word of Christ, not simply on our common works for Christ.

John encouraged Gaius to associate with Demetrius because Demetrius had a good reputation for being one of the truth: “*Demetrius has a good report from all, and of the truth itself*” (3 Jn 12). We seek out those who love the truth in order “*that we might be fellow workers for the truth*” (3 Jn 8). We seek out truth seekers, for we rejoice as John who wrote that he had “*no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in the truth*” (3 Jn 4). Notice that in all of John’s preceding statements that he focused on establishing fellowship that is based on truth, not on the common good works of different individuals.

What would be our reputation before the church? Would it be as Gaius whose reputation was reported throughout the church for his love of the truth? John wrote of Gaius, “*For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in truth*” (3 Jn 3; see 2 Jn 4). As Gaius, we must be identified as characters for Christ who have an intense desire to be known for being Bible students. Those who are Bible students are truth seekers, and thus all Bible students are drawn together in order to discover together the truth of God.

A. Rejection of truth.

It is unfortunate that the love of truth is often not passed on from one generation to another. Josiah was the young king of Judah who was touched by the word of God. In fact, he was so touched that he set out to restore Israel to the law of God (See 2 Kg 22,23). His response to the reading of the book of the law in his presence revealed his character: *“Now it came to pass when the king had heard the words of the book of the law that he tore his clothes”* (2 Kg 22:11).

Though he was previously ignorant of the book of the law of God, Josiah did the best he could with what he knew. But when he read in the book that he and all Israel were wrong in following after a religiosity that they had created after their own desires, he repented. As the king of Israel, he subsequently called all the religious leaders to come together for a time of repentance and restoration. When they all gathered, he made the following call for repentance:

Go. Inquire of the Lord for me and for the people and for all Judah concerning the words of this book that is found, for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us because our fathers have not hearkened to the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us (2 Kg 22:13).

Because he humbled himself before the word of God, Josiah ...

... made a covenant before the Lord, to

follow the Lord and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book (2 Kg 23:3).

What was exciting about this repentance was that not only the king, but *“all the people took a stand for the covenant”* that Josiah made before the Lord (2 Kg 23:3). Josiah was a restorationist king of Israel because he sought to take the people back to the word of God. We would conclude, therefore, that if a leader of God’s people is not taking the people to the word of God, then it is not his desire to restore the people to God. He is seeking a following for himself, not for God.

After Josiah, his son, Jehoiakim, became the king of Judah (Jr 36:1). It was then that things changed for the worse. Josiah’s restoration to the word of God did not go deep enough into the hearts of his own family, nor the society he sought to lead back to God. When the word of God was read in the presence of Josiah, **he turned Israel to God**. But when the word of God was read in the presence of his reigning son, Jehoiakim, the following happened:

So it came to pass when Jehudi had read three or four columns [of the word of God], he [Jehoiakim] cut it with a penknife and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the scroll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth (Jr 36:23).

Because Jehoiakim did not have a heart for the word of God, when it was read in his presence, **he turned Israel away from God.**

Depending on one's character, truth is either received or rejected. It is often the case that when the alarm goes off at the appointed time in the morning when we should get out of bed, we have the desire to crush the clock and continue on in our sleep of ignorance. We must always keep in mind that rebellion against the truth hurts no one except ourselves, though others may live with the consequences. Jehoiakim sought to bury his head in the sands of ignorance, forgetting that the truth and its blessings will continue to live in the hearts of those who know and love the truth. Unfortunately, most people are as the religious leaders of Israel during the earthly ministry of Jesus: "*All too well you reject the commandment of God so that you may keep your own tradition*" (Mk 7:9).

When Stephen preached the truth to a mob of those who rebelled against the word of God, "*they were cut to the heart. And they gnashed at him with their teeth*" (At 7:54). Those who do not want to hear truth often respond as Jehoiakim and the mob of religious leaders who threw Stephen "*out of the city and stoned him*" (At 7:58). Jehoiakim burned the truth of God. The religious leaders of Jesus' day rejected the word of God. An angry mob of religious leaders stoned Stephen to death because they did not want to hear what he said in reference to their rejection of the word of God. Such is the response of those who

have no desire to learn the truth of God's word. When one claims to be religious, but has no love for the Bible, then his only option to maintain a following is to be hostile to those who would preach the truth.

The proverb is told of a hunter and a preacher. Behold, a hunter went forth to hunt. He shot at a duck, and the duck was wounded. And behold, the duck began to squawk. Then behold, a preacher went forth to preach. The preacher took aim with the truth and preached. And behold, the truth wounded an erring member, and behold, the member began to squawk.

It is unfortunate that most people are more willing to believe a lie that is repeated by most of the people, than to believe a truth that is spoken only by a few people. This was the reason why Paul wrote the following statement to the Ephesians in reference to the truth that was being ministered to the disciples:

Then we will no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of teaching, by the trickery of men in cleverness to the deceitfulness of error (Ep 4:14).

"It is always easier to believe a lie that one has heard a thousand times," as Grit said, "than to believe a fact that no one has heard before." Eagerness to believe the lie reveals the character of the one who has no desire to search for truth. Those who are content with their spiritual lives are rarely students of the word of God.

To the Thessalonians, the Holy Spirit

wrote in reference to the deceiving power of Satan, “...with all deception of wickedness among those who perish, **because they did not receive the love of the truth** so that they might be saved” (2 Th 2:10). Most people do not have a love for the truth simply because they seek to believe those who craftily lead them astray with error that tickles their ears (See 2 Tm 4:3). Most people are willing to believe a half truth, while failing to understand that in doing so they are believing a complete falsehood. Benjamin Disraeli once said, “Time is precious, but truth is more precious than time.” Anytime one would find the truth of God’s word standing in his way, can be assured that he is going in the wrong way. We would not, therefore, resist the Holy Spirit who comes to us through the truth of the written word of God (At 7:51).

Because we seek to be taught, re-proved, corrected and instructed in righteousness, we will accept all Scripture that “*is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*” (2 Tm 3:16). We will do so in order that we may be “*complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Tm 3:17). It is for this reason that we seek Jesus who can “**teach the way of God in truth**” (Mk 12:14; see Lk 20:21).

When we venture throughout the land visiting those of the religious world, we know that there is always hope when we walk in on an assembly of people who have their Bibles open and are led by a teacher who seeks to know God and His word. These are people who have made

a covenant with God to know His word. They have committed themselves to the way of the truth in order that they not be tossed to and fro in a world of error.

B. Reception of truth.

We thirst for the truth because Jesus promised, “*And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*” (Jn 8:32). Jesus is the truth by which we can find freedom from error. To His disciples He said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life*” (Jn 14:6). We know the true character of His disciples, therefore, when we see their desire to search the Bible in order to discover truth. God’s people can find their way out of the quagmire of religious confusion only through a study of the Spirit’s road map to truth.

We learn a lesson from the residents of Berea. Luke spoke of their character with words that were selected by the Holy Spirit:

These were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind and searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so (At 17:11).

Simply because Paul and his companions spoke the truth of the gospel to the Bereans was not sufficient proof for the Bereans that what they said was true. The Holy Spirit moved Luke’s hand to use the word “noble-minded” in reference to Berean’s truth-seeking character. They were noble-minded because they were truth seekers. And by being

truth seekers, they knew that there was only one source that could be trusted to keep them from being tossed to and fro and carried about by every prophet who passed through town.

The Bereans' final source for truth was the Scriptures, not those who spoke the truth. Before they were caught up in some grand scheme and assembly before those who speak with flattering lips, the Bereans first consulted that which they knew was true and unchangeable. They searched their Bibles. We know the character of a truth seeker because he has his Bible open, checking every word that the preacher says. Before he is caught up in religion that is promoted by a prominent preacher, he searches his Bible. Because it was Bereans' desire to continually grow in their knowledge of the word of God, they remained noble-minded Bible students.

There is a small stream of water that comes forth from a spring near Lake Itasca in the northern part of America. One can easily jump across this stream. But as the stream ventures down and across the North American continent toward the south, many other streams that have become rivers, spill their waters into this stream until it becomes a mighty river.

As the river grows, it reaches the southern part of the North American continent. It is called the Mississippi River, over which no man could ever possibly jump.

When the reception of truth identifies the character of an individual, he spiritually grows throughout life into being a mighty person for God. When the totality of one's thinking is consumed with the word of God, he is able *"to be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might"* (Ep 6:10). Our desire for truth is identified by how earnestly we search the Scriptures. This is that about which Peter referred when he wrote, *"Grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"* (2 Pt 3:18). No person has a right to claim to be a disciple of Jesus if he is not earnestly searching the Scriptures in order to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus.

Jesus pled on behalf of His disciples the night of His betrayal. He prayed, *"Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth"* (Jn 17:17). It is our desire to be sanctified by the truth of God's word. And in being sanctified by His truth, we are set apart from the thinking and behavior of the world. We are set apart for His glory.

Chapter 9

Character Through Morals

In our efforts to build godly characters, we are constantly challenged with decisions as to whether something is either morally right or morally wrong. The Sinai law was a law of statutes where

many acts of behavior were prescribed by precept upon precept. But as Christians, we live under a law of principles. The guiding principle of all law for all time has been based on two directives of love:

(1) *“You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”* (Mt 22:37). (2) *“You will love your neighbor as yourself”* (Mt 22:39). These are the two most important guiding moral principles of life by which all men from the beginning of time were to conduct their lives. However, these two moral directives upon which we base our behavior do not define specifics. Every decision that comes our way is not always defined in Scripture. Our challenge is how we are to apply these two principles in determining what we are to do in those areas where the word of God is silent.

We often legally seek a “thou shalt” or a “thou shalt not” statement in the Bible that would define our response to all circumstances of life. If there were such statements in reference to every aspect of our behavior, then our obedience might be easier. But this legal approach to behavior does not challenge our incentive to grow in our love of God or with our neighbor. If our obedience were simply a legal compliance to commands, then we would not be challenged to make moral decisions that are based on the principle of “love your neighbor as yourself.” And if we are not challenged to make moral decisions that are based on love, then our spiritual growth is limited.

The legalist seeks to perform a law in reference to his relationship with his neighbor, and then excuse himself from any responsibility when the law is silent. But when we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, we are obligated to always love. There are no loopholes in love.

There are no places of silence that would allow us to escape our responsibility toward our neighbor. Love covers the totality of our life, whereas law covers only details.

As one grows in love, the following are some tests that will help in determining what to do when trying to make a moral decision concerning our behavior as disciples of Jesus:

A. The test of Scripture:

The first and most obvious test to determine whether something is either right or wrong is to consult the word of God. When a certain lawyer asked Jesus what one should do in order to inherit eternal life, Jesus responded, *“What is written in the law? How does it read to you?”* (Lk 10:26). When the word of God speaks, we must walk according to its instructions. Paul explained this to Timothy. *“And if a man competes as an athlete, he is not crowned unless he competes lawfully”* (2 Tm 2:5).

As disciples of Jesus, we seek to walk according to His commandments. Jesus instructed, *“If you continue in My word, then you are truly My disciples”* (Jn 8:31). Therefore, in order to determine what to do as a disciple of Jesus, we must first consult the word of Jesus. However, when the word of God is silent in reference to making a decision in a particular area of behavior, then we must move on to other means by which we would determine what is the correct thing to do.

B. The test of common sense:

That which is not sensible cannot be right because God does not call us to be senseless. Though 2 Thessalonians 3:10 is a direct mandate from the Holy Spirit, it is a principle that is based on common sense. “... *if anyone is not willing to work, neither let him eat.*” To be specific, there is no law in reference to what work we must do. Neither is there a law to work in order to support one’s self and his family. The principle Paul states is that if one does not work when there is work to do, then he cannot live off the church.

There is no law that one should not jump off a high building. But common sense would dictate that one should certainly exercise some wisdom in this matter. There are no laws in reference to the abuse of taking drugs that would damage one’s health. But common sense dictates that one should not consume anything that would harm one’s body. There is no law concerning the eating of food, but common sense would state that we should preserve our bodies, and thus, not eat too much, or eat that which would be poisonous to our bodies. When there is silence in the Scriptures concerning decisions that must be made, God expects us to exercise common sense in reference to our behavior.

During His ministry, one individual came to Jesus complaining that his brother would not give him his rightful share of their father’s inheritance for the children. In response to the brother’s complaint, Jesus presented the parable of a rich man

who “*brought forth plentifully*” from his crops (Lk 12:16). So the rich man reasoned, “*I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods*” (Lk 12:18). After he had stored all his wealth on earth, Jesus said that the man proclaimed that he would retire and be happy the rest of his life. “*But God said to him, ‘You fool! This night your soul will be required of you’*” (Lk 12:20). In Jesus’ conclusion to the parable, He gave a rule of common sense: “*So is he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God*” (Lk 12:21). If the Christian focuses all his energy on the things of this world, then he is not using common sense in reference to that which is beyond this world.

C. The test of the golden rule:

Jesus said, “*Therefore, all things whatever you want men to do to you, even so do also to them, for this is the law and the prophets*” (Mt 7:12). This does not mean that we should do unto others before they do unto us. The “golden rule” is a principle of desiring that others treat us as we would seek to be treated by them. The principle is based on what Paul wrote, “... *for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap*” (Gl 6:7). Others will simply treat us the way we treat them. If we sow goodness, we will reap goodness.

The golden rule is the principle, though there are those in this world who are simply evil. Our goodness is often rewarded with dishonesty and persecu-

tion. In fact, Jesus said that the righteous will sometimes be “*persecuted for righteousness sake ...*” (Mt 5:10). What He meant was that when one lives the righteous life, he will reap the persecution of an unrighteous world that is intimidated by righteousness. Nevertheless, when one is treated unjustly for living the righteous life, this is no excuse for retaliating with unrighteousness. Remember what Peter wrote?

Bondservants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. For this is commendable, if for the sake of conscience toward God, one endures grief, suffering wrongfully (1 Pt 2:18,19).

This is difficult. However, in maintaining our righteous character of doing good to others regardless of what others may do to us, our characters are molded to be as Jesus, who said from the cross, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*” (Lk 23:34).

When men gnashed on Stephen with their teeth, he emulated the spirit of Jesus in his character by saying to those who were throwing stones at him, “*Lord, do not lay this sin to their charge*” (At 7:60). Stephen picked up no stones and threw them back. As he breathed his last, there were no stones found in his hands. And for the benefit of all Christianity, it was good that he did not seek to retaliate, for one of his retaliatory stones may have hit the man standing near who was holding the garments of those who stoned him to death. “*And the witnesses laid*

down their clothes at a young man’s feet whose name was Saul [Paul]” (At 7:58). And Saul “*was consenting to his death*” (At 8:1).

If Stephen would have done that which was done to him, then one of his stones could have mortally wounded the man who many years later repentantly said of himself, “*I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious. But I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief*” (1 Tm 1:13). When we do unto others as we would have others do to us, we never know what the result will be. Long after our death, the fruit of our love for others may be produced in the lives of others we influenced, but did not retaliate against.

D. The test of publicity.

Paul wrote, “*And those who are drunken, are drunken in the night*” (1 Th 5:7). Sin loves dark places. The key word for sinners is “cover up.” Sin does not like to be exposed to the general public. We must always ask ourselves that if what we are doing would be made known to everyone we know, then would we be ashamed?

Disciples of Jesus must live the consistent life. In other words, as they conduct themselves in secret, they should conduct themselves in public. As they are in their homes, so should they behave before the public. There should be no variation in the life of the saint from his private life to his public life. We should seek to be the same at all times.

Matthew wrote in reference to the reputation of Jesus, “*And His fame [reputation] went throughout all Syria*” (Mt 4:24; see 14:1; Lk 4:14,37). When one’s reputation is good, then others will do what the people did in response to the fame of Jesus. “*Great multitudes followed Him from Galilee and Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan*” (Mt 4:25). We like the poem entitled *Would I Be Called A Christian?* that was written over a half century ago by J. F. Moser:

Would I be called a “Christian,”
 If everybody knew,
 My secret thoughts and feelings,
 And everything I do?
 Oh, could they see the likeness,
 Of Christ in me, each day?
 Oh, could they hear Him speaking,
 In every word I say?
 Would I be called a “Christian,”
 If anyone could know,
 That I am found in places,
 Where Jesus would not go?
 Oh, could they hear His echo,
 In every song I sing,
 In eating, drinking, dressing,
 Could they see Christ my King?
 Would I be called a “Christian,”
 If judged by what I read,
 By all my recreations,
 And every thought and deed?
 Could I be counted Christ-like,
 As I now work and pray,
 Unselfish, kind, forgiving,
 To others every day?

E. The test of conscience:

Regardless of how bad we might think someone is, we must always believe that there is some good in everyone. God blessed us with a conscience, and it is

this conscience that makes us feel bad when we do wrong.

Numerous species of birds migrate throughout the world every year. For example, the Arctic Terns are born in the arctic tundra of northern Canada. After birth, the young terns learn how to fly, and then migrate. They make their way across the Atlantic Ocean to western Europe, down the western coast of the African continent, and then on to Antarctica at the bottom of the world. When it is time for these world wanderers to return home, they fly north to the tip of South America, across that continent, across America, and then back to the very home of their birth. It is a trip of over 30,000 kilometers.

No one has ever found a lost Arctic Tern flying around trying to find his way home. God gave us a conscience to seek out our way to our heavenly home. If we fly in the wrong direction, there is something in our brain that tells us that we are flying in the wrong direction. It is called conscience.

When David wrote, “*The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God,’*” he was not fooling around (Ps 14:1). God gave us a sense of His presence in our minds. Paul reflected on this presence by which David made the preceding statement:

For the invisible things of Him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and divinity, so that they are without excuse (Rm 1:20).

This was Paul's commentary on David who spoke in reference to those who would deny the existence of God. The next time you are sitting in a philosophy class of a university, and the professor spouts out, "God is dead," then you will understand that he is foolish. He is not following his sense of spiritual direction. Or, it may possibly be that he has buried his conscience in a false science that searches for every opportunity to dodge personal accountability for sin.

Christian students in universities need to remember Paul's exhortation to young Timothy: "*O Timothy, guard what was committed to your trust, **avoiding profane and vain babblings and opposing arguments of what is falsely called knowledge***" (1 Tm 6:20). It would be good for one to read this statement the next time he is tempted to follow the "vain babblings and opposing arguments" of those who have puffed themselves up by foolishly denying the One who gave us enough sense to follow our conscience. Many are simply "*speaking lies in hypocrisy, **having their conscience seared with a hot iron***" (1 Tm 4:2).

Paul reflected on the conscience that was within him in the context of Romans 7:15-25. He confessed that "*I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin that is in my members*" (Rm 7:23). There is always a struggle within our hearts concerning that which we must do. In the context of Romans 7, the struggle is whether to follow a legal code of obedience by which one might boast in his

own performance of law, or to let go and let God through grace deliver one from the temptation of legal justification.

Sometimes it is difficult to follow one's conscience. We seek to do that which is right, but then there is the temptation to ignore conscience and follow after the flesh. In the context of Romans 14:23, some were intimidated into following after the crowd by eating meat that was sacrificed to idols, which thing violated their conscience as novice Christians. Paul concluded his point on the eating of such meat by saying that if one did not feel right about doing such, then he was violating his conscience. If one violated his conscience, then he has at least condemned himself for eating against his conscience. "*And he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith, for whatever is not from faith is sin.*"

This one statement should alert every believer to be careful about doing that which is against one's conscience. When we must make decisions when there is no statement in the word of God in reference to the decision we must make, then it is best to at least follow one's own conscience. This is not always a correct guide for determining correct behavior, but it is at least a trigger to alert us to do that which we believe is right according to our conscience.

God considers our conscience so important concerning our behavior that He left the Gentiles under the "law of conscience" for centuries before the cross. Paul wrote that the Gentiles were subject to work the "*law written in their*

hearts, their conscience also bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else excusing one another” (Rm 2:15). Our obedience, therefore, must be governed not only by the word of the Lord, but also by our own conscience. “*Therefore, it is necessary to be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience sake*” (Rm 13:5; compare 1 Co 8:7; see 1 Co 10). At the end of all things, “*the purpose of the commandment is love out of a pure heart, and a good conscience and a sincere faith*” (1 Tm 1:5; see 4:2; 2 Tm 1:3; Ti 1:15).

John leaves us with an important thought that gives some direction in reference to the use of our conscience: “*For if our heart [conscience] condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God*” (1 Jn 3:20,21). At the end of our lives we need to be able to say as Paul, “*Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God to this day*” (At 23:1). And before a civil court, he stated, “*I exercise myself to have always a conscience without offense toward God and men*” (At 24:16). Paul conducted his life with a pure conscience. He would conclude for us, “*Pray for us. For we are sure we have a good conscience in all things desiring to live honorably*” (Hb 13:18; see 1 Pt 2:19).

F. The test of one’s hero:

Almost everyone has someone they

admire, look up to, follow, seek counsel from, or are mentored by. When we are in a situation to make a decision concerning right or wrong, it is sometimes good to ask oneself what his hero would do if he were faced with the same decision.

Jesus is our hero. “*You call Me Teacher and Lord. And you are right, for so I am*” (Jn 13:13). On the occasion when Jesus made this statement, He continued, “*If I then, the Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet*” (Jn 13:14). The reason we should follow Jesus as our hero is what He said to conclude the impact of His example of washing the disciples’ feet: “*For I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you*” (Jn 13:15). Jesus gave an example of humble servitude. If we are to be His disciples, then we should be looking for his footprints in order to follow His example. We need to be looking for dirty feet.

Now the challenge is to choose the correct heroes we should be following. If we idolize those who are wicked, then we are working against ourselves. Peter wrote that Jesus left us an example that we should follow in His steps (1 Pt 2:21). But if we choose to follow in the steps of the unrighteous, then we will end up with their final destination. One must be cautious, therefore, to choose those individuals who would lead us in the right direction.

The Holy Spirit gave the apostle Paul the right to be followed as an example: “*The things that you have both learned and received and heard and seen in*

me, do these things and the God of peace will be with you" (Ph 4:9). Therefore, Paul wrote of himself, "*Be imitators of me even as I also am of Christ*" (1 Co 11:1). The condition for which one can be a hero for the Christian is that the one we would seek to follow must be a Christian. We would follow Paul, therefore, in so much as he followed Christ.

G. The test of influence:

Sometimes when seeking to determine if something is either morally right or wrong, we must ask ourselves if the action would either benefit society or cause disruption in society if everyone behaved in the same manner. This principle is reflected in Paul's exhortations to the Corinthians in reference to the eating of meat that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Co 8).

The context of eating meat was in reference to older Christians who had long grown out of any scruples concerning the eating of meats that were sacrificed to idols. The strong disciples knew that there was no religious significance to any meat. But some new converts, who had just been born out of idolatry, still associated with idols the meats that had been sacrificed in respect of the idols (1 Co 8:7). If the strong brother had no consideration for the weak brother in these matters, then he could possibly encourage the weak brother to eat such meats in violation of his conscience. If the strong brother thus ate to encourage the young Christian to eat against his conscience, then he caused the weak brother to eat the meats, and thus sin against his

own conscience (Rm 14:23). So Paul said to the strong brethren, "*And so by sinning against the brethren, and wounding their weak conscience, you sin against Christ*" (1 Co 8:12).

The church is a society of believers. Doing some things may be right in and of themselves, as the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. But if participating in such encourages the new converts to behave contrary to their conscience, then the strong have sinned by encouraging the weak to sin against their conscience. Paul's instructions concerning such situations is to forgo one's rights in order to accommodate the weak until such a time when the weak have grown out of their scruples. "*Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, lest I make my brother stumble*" (1 Co 8:13).

In order to determine whether some things are either right or wrong, one should look around and determine if doing what one intends to do will cause another to stumble. In those things in which we have the freedom to participate—such as the eating of any foods—the one who has the freedom to do certain things must be patient until the weak brother grows out of any scruples he has in doing such. We must keep in mind that it is assumed that the weak brother will grow out of his scruples in reference to those things wherein all Christians have freedom. No brother has a right to bring into bondage another brother with scruples he should have grown out of years ago.

When we move beyond the fellowship of the disciples, we must also be con-

siderate of the society in which we live. For example, if the eating of meats that were sacrificed to idols led the unbelievers to believe that the Christian was also a believer in idols, then it would be common sense that the Christian should refrain from doing that which would encourage the unbeliever to continue in his error. One should be careful about doing those things that would either condone or encourage the unbeliever to continue in the error of his way. Christians should manifest a character of truth and godliness before the world. Because the Christian does not participate in those things that identify worldly living, he becomes a light to the world for righteous living (See Mt 5:16).

H. The test of reaping:

Galatians 6:7,8 states a principle in reference to our present behavior.

Be not deceived. God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption. But he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap eternal life.

Some forgotten poet rightly stated,

You never can tell when you do an act,
 Just what the result will be;
 But with every deed you are sowing a seed,
 Though the harvest you cannot see.

Before one participates in any deed, he must realize that he will have to take

ownership of the consequences of what he would do. If he does not suffer the consequences of his own bad decisions, others may.

We grew up on a farm in the central part of the state of Kansas in America. Our mother always reminded us children that in life we should consider our future before we engage in any questionable activities in the present. She gave the example of a young teenager whom she had known, but never told us his name. For some reason, this young teenager became angry with a neighboring farmer. In his youthful retaliation, he went out by night and planted some Johnson grass in the neighboring farmer's field. In those days before herbicides, it was difficult to kill Johnson grass. It was introduced into the United States in 1840 and is classified as one of the top ten most persistent weeds in the world.

Eventually, the young man grew up, our mother said, and became the victim of reaping what he had sown. When he was in his early twenties, he noticed that the neighboring farmer, in whose field he had planted the Johnson grass, had a very beautiful young daughter. As time went by, he eventually fell in love with the fair maiden. His love affair eventually ended in his marriage to the delight of his eyes.

After fulfilling his years on earth, the father of the maiden he had married passed away. You can guess the rest of this story. The retaliatory young man inherited the farm of his wife's deceased father, with all that Johnson grass included. Before you make a decision to do something, it would be wise to first

run it through the test of possibly reaping what you will sow. You may literally reap what you sow.

I. The test of finances:

Before one involves himself in some financial dealing, it would be good to consider what effect his financial involvement in the dealing will have on others if all goes wrong. For example, there is no statement in Scripture that says, “Thou shalt not gamble.” But one must remember that gambling casinos become rich because there are only a few winners. The vast majority of the gamblers lose, and thus, the losers make the management of the casino rich. The few winners, unfortunately, inspire the masses to keep on betting and losing.

We once had a friend who had involved himself in gambling. He once said to me, “Others say that I have a good poker face.” But it must not have been all that good for he was continually burdened in paying off his gambling debts. His habit of gambling brought suffering to his family. We are reminded of Paul’s statement in 1 Timothy 5:8: “*But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*”

Before one would involve himself in anything that would endanger his financial responsibility toward his family, he should be warned. In the case of the Thessalonians, some had quit their jobs. They were not willing to work when there

was work to be done. So Paul rebuked these lazy brothers by instructing the rest of the Thessalonian disciples to “*withdraw yourselves from every brother who walks disorderly ...*” (2 Th 3:6). This statement was made in the context of financial responsibility. If one deals foolishly with his finances, and subsequently must beg off the church, then he has given up his right to be in fellowship with the church. Paul was very specific and direct in reference to such freeloaders: “*... if anyone is not willing to work, neither let him eat*” (2 Th 3:10).

If one’s financial actions lead to the destitution of his family, or to his begging off his brothers and sisters in Christ, then he has shamed his family and given up his right to be in fellowship with the body of Christ. We must never forget that “*the love of money is the root of all evils, by which some coveting after have strayed from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows*” (1 Tm 6:10).

J. The test of family:

Having a good family name is a precious thing. What a young person must remember is that what one does will reflect on the name of his family. If what one would do in the dark, is discovered by the community, then one’s family can be greatly shamed. Sometimes in determining one’s moral decisions on what he would do depends on how his behavior will reflect on his family name.

K. The test of universality:

Our children often seek to justify their actions by saying, “Everybody is doing it.” But what is being done by everyone may be a detriment to society as a whole. We must ask ourselves that if everyone in society behaved as we do, would society as a whole be improved? The Christian seeks to let his light shine before all in order to encourage all to follow an example of Christian behavior. Christians are the salt of the earth because their behavior preserves society. But if one’s salt has lost its saltiness, and one’s light is dim, then there is little preservative and light for the world to follow.

We must always remember that societies do not become progressively better. Without the moral direction of the word of God, societies over time always digress to the moral state of what God said of the society that existed before the flood of Noah’s day: “*And God saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*” (Gn 6:5). The world’s

population was not born morally depraved as babies. It was the acceptance of wickedness by more and more individuals of society over centuries that brought the society of Noah’s day to the point of having no use for the purpose for which man was created.

The same moral degradation happened to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. “... *the men of Sodom were exceedingly wicked and sinners before the Lord*” (Gn 13:13). We know the rest of this story. As the world population before the flood of Noah’s day, so also the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Moral degradation always begins with one accepted and commonly practiced sin. When the majority accept as culturally correct any sinful behavior, then one accepted sin after another will take the entire society into moral ruin. When different practices of sin become common, then the whole is spoiled. Before the first individual considers doing anything, he must imagine everyone doing the same thing. If one’s behavior does not add to the upliftment of society, then he should change.

Chapter 10

Character Through Prayer

How many times have we said our prayers, but never really prayed? The desires of our heart somehow never find the correct words to satisfy our inner yearnings to lay our petitions before our Father. Our prayers often come forth from our lips as if they were uttered to

gods of stone whom we knew would never answer. We seek to pray to a living God with dead words. We seek to carry our words before the altar with cold formality, void of the vehicle of our hearts. No wonder John the Baptist and Jesus taught their disciples how to pray. There

was something different about their prayers, and thus, one of Jesus' disciples asked that He teach His disciples how to pray.

Now it came to pass that as He was praying in a certain place, when He finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray as John also taught his disciples" (Lk 11:1).

At least this one disciple witnessed in Jesus' prayer something that was different than the cold formalities of prayer that were commonly uttered by himself and the other disciples. It is interesting that this is the only request that the disciples made of Jesus to teach them something specific. They did not ask that He teach them how to preach. They did not ask Him to teach them how to lead singing. They did not ask that He teach them how to conduct a colorful assembly of the saints. "Teach us to pray" was all they asked.

We find this interesting, if not revealing of our own selves. We seek to be taught everything, but how to pray. Since our character should be defined by a dedicated prayer life, then we need to be on our knees with the same request as the disciple who asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. Since we are always unsatisfied with our prayer life, then we are always seeking instructions in how to pray.

A. Jesus teaches on prayer.

It is not surprising that there is a

great deal of instruction in the Sermon on the Mount in reference to prayer. If the Sermon on the Mount would be the constitution for character building, then we would expect no less in reference to the subject of prayer. Notice Matthew's introduction to the occasion of Jesus' teaching:

And seeing the multitudes, He [Jesus] went up on a mountain. And when He sat down, His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them ... (Mt 5:1,2).

Jesus taught them many things on this particular occasion. When He came to the subject of prayer in the "sermon," He taught them many things concerning how to express their inner desires to the Father, as well as what to request. The following are some very important points of Jesus' teaching on prayer in the context of **Matthew 6:5-15**:

1. Do not pray as the religious hypocrites. There were some in the religious environment in which the disciples lived who loved to pray in prominent places "so that they may be seen by men" (Mt 6:5). Prayer is not a performance. Prayer is not to be uttered in order to receive the glory of men. On the contrary, "when you pray, enter into your closet" (Mt 6:6). Prayer is a private matter. "In your closet" assumes that prayer is between the one praying and God.

There are those public occasions when holy men lifted up holy hands in or-

der to lead a group in prayer. In view of the phrase “in your closet,” we could deduct that even when one leads in a public manner, his prayer is addressed orally, but the prayer is still an expression of thoughts of the one who is praying. The Holy Spirit wanted “*men to pray in every place, lifting up holy hands without wrath and doubting*” (1 Tm 2:8). This statement is made in reference to public prayer. The mandate is that the men be the ones who are lifting up their holy hands in prayer in public.

We must keep in mind that the statement of instruction to Timothy does not say that all the men in the assembly should pray at the same time. No one person praying in such an environment should pray his own prayer to the exclusion of others. **Public prayer is simply one person expressing the thoughts of the entire group in prayer.** If one is to lead the thoughts of others in public prayer, then the group must be silent in order that the words of the one who leads the thoughts of the group can be heard by the group. If everyone seeks to make his own prayer at the same time in an assembly, then there is no leading in prayer, only vocal confusion with individuals trying to compete with one another in prayer. Such behavior leads to confusion in the assembly.

Jesus’ instructions on prayer indicate that there should be no public displays of one’s praying in a manner that would give a pretense of righteousness, or draw attention to one’s self. This was the context of Jesus’ instructions and the problem of the Pharisees. Prayer is a private

matter, not a public display of shouting to God for attention, or an effort to compete with others. We see this in Jesus’ instructions on prayer: “*But you, when you pray, enter into your closet. And when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret*” (Mt 6:6). If one prays publicly in order to display himself, as did the Pharisees, then he would be as the religious hypocrites who also prayed publicly in order to be seen to be somewhat religious.

2. Do not use meaningless repetitions. “*But when you pray, do not use meaningless repetitions as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words*” (Mt 6:7). Probably no one commandment of Jesus is violated more in reference to prayer than this one statement. We have attended countless assemblies where the entire assembly carried on in prayer with many “meaningless repetitions.” The choir of repetitions by many in the public prayer were the vain repetitions of those who were often in competition with one another. When the unbeliever steps into such confusion, his conclusion is as what Paul said of the confused assemblies of the Corinthians where many were trying to speak in languages at the same time:

Therefore, if the whole assembly gathers in one place, and all speak with languages [at the same time], and there come in the uninformed, or unbelievers, will they not say that you are mad? (1 Co 14:23).

When Jesus prohibited “meaningless

repetitions,” He was prohibiting the saying of the same thing over and over again in prayer. It could not be more clear. But what has been established as a traditional ceremony of prayer in many assemblies is that “meaningless repetitions” in prayer are uttered by the entire assembly at the same time. It seems that this tradition cannot be broken, regardless of whether Jesus said not to do such, or whether Paul said that the unbelievers would judge such behavior in an assembly to be madness.

To our knowledge **there are no statements in Scripture that refer to the disciples praying at the same time when they are in an assembly.** There are numerous statements that instruct us to pray “for” one another (Ep 6:19; Cl 1:9; 1 Th 5:25; Js 5:16). But there are no statements in Scripture that say the disciples are to pray simultaneously “with” one another. When the disciples come together for prayer, only one person leads the thoughts of the group while the rest of the group listens.

Now we must make a distinction between praising God and praying to God. With much of the “simultaneous prayers” that are meaningless repetitions, and are common among many assemblies today, that which is said to be prayer is actually “simultaneous praise.” The participants are often offering to God praise, not prayer.

There is a difference between praise and prayer. We see no problem with an assembly offering together praise to God. Christians have done this in singing since the first century. A song is simply a group praise of God that is organized according

to a melody. An assembly singing together never gives the impression that the assembly is disorganized or that the singers are mad.

When the whole assembly offers simultaneous and repetitious praise to God at the same time, such may be judged to be in the area of freedom. But in behaving in such a manner in assembly, the “uninformed” of 1 Corinthians 14:23 would on an initial and uninformed visit judge that the attendees of the assembly are mad.

What Paul is instructing in 1 Corinthians 14:23 is that every assembly of the disciples must be conducted in an orderly manner, whereby, and if by chance, the uninformed or unbeliever might visit. And if the uninformed or unbeliever attends an assembly of the disciples, then under no circumstances should the assembly give the impression that the attendees are mad. Simultaneous prayer or praise by everyone in the assembly will give this impression. Therefore, in order to guard against being judged by the unbeliever that we are mad, our assemblies must be orderly. It is in this context that Paul instructed, “*Let all things be done properly and in order*” (1 Co 14:40).

When we speak of prayer, we must not forget the “closet principle.” Prayers must always reflect the thinking of one individual to his Father, whether uttered in private or public. Remember Jesus’ instructions, “... *enter into your closet* ...” (Mt 6:6)? When Peter and John were released from custody, there was a public prayer at one of the homes of the disciples in Jerusalem. But read carefully

what the text actually says about their coming together in an assembly to offer praise to God:

Now when they [all the disciples] heard this, they lifted up their voices to God with one accord. And they said, "Lord, You are God, who have made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them ... (At 4:24).

The statement says that they lifted up their voices "with one accord." In other words, that which they stated was the **same thing** in making a statement of praise to God. They were harmonious in their praise that they gave, not individual and confused. In other words, **they were not all saying different things at the same time**. Luke records the exact words that they uttered with one accord. The conclusion, therefore, is that one person led the thoughts of the entire group, which words we have recorded in the text of Acts 4.

Their praise in the same words would be the same as a song of praise where everyone sings the same words of praise in harmony. There is actually a quotation from the Old Testament in the statement that was made (Ps 2:1,2). The statement that they all made as one group was certainly not the "meaningless repetitions" that Jesus said should not be characteristic of the prayers of His disciples in an assembly.

We once watched a CNN news special of the people in Tibet. During the special, an old man in a village was featured. The CNN crew followed the 85-

year-old man in his life in the village. Whenever the man was pictured wherever he went, he was holding and spinning the Buddhist prayer wheel. The prayer wheel is a cylinder on which prayers are written in Sanskrit on the outside. As one turns the cylinder, all the prayers written on the cylinder are supposedly repeated. This aged man was constantly spinning the prayer wheel that was mounted on the spindle, supposedly offering hundreds, even thousands of prayers. Some today have involved themselves in such meaningless repetitions with words.

In offering our "meaningless repetitions," we must be reminded of Elijah who at one time offered one prayer to God to turn off the rain on Israel (Js 5:17). Just one prayer stopped all the rains. After three years, Elijah prayed to turn the water on, and God gave rains from heaven (Js 5:18). The verb tense in reference to the two prayers of Elijah is aorist, that is, a onetime prayer to turn the water off and onetime prayer to turn it on again. One prayer from a righteous person will do that which is required. There is no power in "meaningless repetitions."

Someone was right who said, "Nothing lies beyond the power of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God." The power of prayer is not in "meaningless repetitions." It is in faith that God will perform for His people. Jesus promised, "*And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive*" (Mt 21:22). Working for God without prayer in our lives is like driving a vehicle without stopping for petrol, or in some

modern-day vehicles, stopping for a charge of electricity. Work for the Lord without prayer inevitably comes to a stop.

3. *Pray to our Father:* Our prayers are directed to the Father (Mt 6:9; At 4:24). Jesus said, *“Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest so that He will send laborers into His harvest”* (Mt 9:38; 2 Co 13:7). Jesus asks that we address our prayers to the Father. At the time of his stoning, Stephen saw Jesus in heaven at the right hand of the Father (At 7:59). Since this was a direct and personal request of Stephen to Jesus, whom he saw at the time he uttered his plea, we would have difficulty in using this historical event as a mandate for prayer directed to Jesus. Stephen was looking at Jesus as he made the request that He forgive those who stoned him.

Paul made the statement in 2 Corinthians 13:7, *“Now I pray to God that you do no evil”* We conclude that the word “God” in this statement refers at least to the Father. But one could say that since Jesus is one with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then certainly Jesus would be in on the answer to Paul’s prayer. At least this thought was in the request that Paul made from prison when he wrote to the Philippians. *“But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy shortly to you so that I may also be of good comfort when I learn of your state”* (Ph 2:19). It was the Lord Jesus whom Paul trusted to send Timothy to the Philippians. Would it not be within the request of our prayers to petition the Lord Jesus to send an evangelist to a particular area? The implication is that what-

ever prayer we utter, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit go to work for us.

This thought may have been in the plea of Simon when he said to Peter and John, *“Pray to the Lord for me ...”* (At 8:24). We would assume that the reference “Lord” in this statement at least included Jesus since all that was done on this occasion was in reference to the Samaritans who submitted to Jesus as Lord. Simon’s request, therefore, would have been that Peter and John asked the Lord Jesus not to bring on him that which Peter said would happen because of his bitterness.

Nevertheless, and based on the instructions of Jesus in Matthew 6:9, we will direct our petitions to God, the Father. However, we also understand that when the instructions of Matthew 6:9 were stated by Jesus, **He was still in His earthly ministry to the Jews.** He was taking believing Jews to the cross and His personal ascension to the right hand of God where He would exercise all authority in heaven and on earth (Mt 28:18).

After the ascension, things changed in heaven. Jesus is now our mediator in heaven with the Father (1 Tm 2:5). We seek to do all things in His name (Cl 3:17), and thus, we will follow the instructions of Jesus to the apostles in John 14:13: *“And whatever you will ask in My name, **that I will** do so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.”* Our prayers are addressed to the Lord. We understand that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit will all go to work for us in answer to our prayers. It is our privilege to offer our supplications. It is the work of the

Father, Son and Holy Spirit to answer our prayers. And since the Father, Son and Holy Spirit work as one team, then we assume that all that God is—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—goes to work in answer to our prayers.

4. Prayer unleashes God's business among men. In His instructions, Jesus taught the disciples to pray, "*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*" (Mt 6:10). Jesus' instructions in Matthew 6:9-13 are statements in reference to God's work among men. If we would unleash the power of God on earth in the hearts and events of men, then our prayers must be in tune with the will of God. God's will is done on earth when men submit to the will of God as it is done in heaven.

Jesus reigns in the hearts of men when believers submit to His kingdom reign from heaven. In this way, therefore, the kingdom reign of Jesus comes to a particular place of the world when people believe on Jesus and submit to His kingdom reign from heaven. We would pray for the kingdom reign of Jesus to come to a particular area of the world by pleading to the Father that His will be done in the hearts of men on earth as it is done in heaven.

If we pray that the kingdom come in a particular region of the world, then we would certainly be praying for those who would take the gospel to the people of the region. This too is what Jesus asked of His disciples: "*Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest so that He will send laborers into His harvest*" (Mt 9:38).

5. Prayer builds character. Jesus

said, "*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*" (Mt 6:12). Forgiveness is not only a condition for the Father to forgive our sins, but also the foundation on which our character is changed into being godly. God is a forgiver because He does not wish that any perish from an eternal relationship with Him (2 Pt 3:9). We forgive in order that our friendships on earth not perish.

We must keep in mind that we must bless those we ask the Father to bless. We must pray the hardest, therefore, when it is the hardest to pray. When we are offended, sinned against, and tormented by our persecutors, it is indeed hard to pray. But when we have a forgiving spirit on our knees, it is hard to fall. The cross of Jesus indeed stands tall when we are on our knees, emulating in our lives the spirit of forgiveness that came forth from the cross. From the cross, Jesus prayed to the Father, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*" (Lk 23:34). We must simply not forget, as someone said, "Kneeling in prayer keeps you in good standing with God." We must simply remember that it is difficult to stumble when we are on our knees in prayer.

We also must not forget that Satan is the greatest believer in our prayers, simply because he is the one who suffers the most from our prayers. A wise poet wrote,

If prayer is made the center of our life,
 God will remove our strife.
 If one petitions God in humility,
 God will bless with tranquility.

We sometimes pray to God for strength in order to achieve great things. What God often gives in answer to our prayers is weakness in order that we realize we must find strength in Him. Some would ask for health in order to do great things for God. But the answer to such a prayer may be infirmity in order that we depend more on His work and less in our own. We would not ask for riches in order to be happy, but for contentment with those riches we already have. We ask not for power to be praised of men, but for weakness in order to feel our need for Him. We do not need all things in order to enjoy life, but as the humble African villager, have few things in order to

enjoy all things. At the end of the day, we are usually not given all the things for which we ask, but certainly we are given everything we need. We would be known for that which God desires that we be known: *“My house will be called a house of prayer for all people”* (Is 56:7). Our desire to serve the Lord is certainly the engine of our destiny, but it will never start up without the fuel of our prayers.

*And all things you ask in prayer,
believing,
you will receive.
(Mt 21:22)*

Epilogue

The Christian must continually re-examine his character. No one can be true to himself if he is self-deceived or narcissistic. Some seek to lead a secret life deep within themselves, but their inner self will always be revealed to others through their behavior. If there is an inconsistency between one's deep inner feelings, and what one seeks to portray to the world, then he is leading a life of self-deception in what he portrays. The spiritual struggle of the Christian is to bring harmony between one's inner feelings and beliefs and his character that he manifests to others. This is being true to oneself, and in one word, being sincere.

When on our knees to the Father, we must never deceive ourselves into believing that the Father does not know our inner most desires and character. If one prays to the Father contrary to his

inner most desires and character, then he is seeking to be a hypocrite before the Father.

We should not expect insincere prayers to be answered. It is for this reason that we must continually struggle to bring our prayers into harmony with our inner most beliefs and feelings. If we find an inconsistency between the hidden inner self, and the character we seek to portray to others, then only repentance will bring us peace of mind.

Over a century and a half ago in 1867 Alfred Bernard Nobel moved the world beyond black powder by inventing a more powerful explosive mixture that he called dynamite. He was thirty-four years old when he was granted the patent for the mixture in 1867. He became fabulously wealthy because his invention of dynamite was sold to governments

throughout the world to make war.

Nobel's last will and testament was dated November 27, 1895. At the end of his life he realized all the damage to humanity that his invention had caused. As a result of this realization, in his last will and testament he wanted his wealth given in special grants to encourage the building of societies. He requested that his wealth be given in grants to build and not destroy. The grants were eventually called the Nobel Prizes. The financial grants were to be given to those who excelled in social development in the fields of physics, chemistry, psychology, medicine, literature, and above all, peace. The profits of his invention that caused so much grief in war, eventually led to encouraging humanity to prosper.

It may be that we too need repentance in our lives to live the character of

Christ, instead of living a life of destruction. This is what the Ephesians did, for Paul wrote the following of their past:

Among whom also we all once behaved in times past in the lust of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature the children of wrath, even as the rest (Ep 2:3).

The end of the story for the Ephesians can be the glorious end of all those who change their characters from being "children of wrath" to being people who bring glory to God.

"But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Ep 2:4,5).