The Commands of Christ
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CONTENTS

1.	Repent	3
2.	Come, Follow Me	12
3.	Rejoice and Be Glad	20
4.	Let Your Light Shine	31
5.	Honor God's Law	41
6.	Be Reconciled	51
7.	Do Not Lust	60
8.	Keep Your Word	72
9.	Go The Second Mile	82
10.	Love Your Enemies	93
11.	Be Perfect	101
12.	Practice Secret Disciplines	110
13.	Store Up Treasures	118
14.	Seek God's Kingdom	127
15.	Do Not Judge	139
16.	Do Not Throw Pearls	148
17.	Ask, Seek, and Knock	156
18.	Do To Others	165
19.	Choose the Narrow Road	174
20.	Beware of False Prophets	183
21.	Pray for Workers	193
22.	Be Shrewd as Snakes	203
23.	Fear God, Not Man	211
24.	Hear God's Voice	220
25.	Take My Yoke	230
26.	Honor Your Parents	239
27.	Beware of Yeast	248
28.	Deny Yourself	258
29.	Honor Children	267
30.	Go To Offenders	275
31.	Beware of Greed	286
32.	Forgive Others	296
33.	Honor Marriage	306
34.	Be a Servant	316
35.	Be a House of Prayer	327
36.	Ask in Faith	338
37.	Bring in The Poor	348
38.	Give to Caesar	358
39.	Love the Lord	368
40.	Love Your Neighbor	379
41.	Await My Return	388
42.	Take, Eat, and Drink	397
43.	Be Born Again	410
44.	Keep My Commandments	421
45.	Watch and Pray	432
46.	Feed My Sheep	442
47.	Make Disciples	451
48.	Baptize My Disciples	460
49.	Receive God's Power	471

INTRODUCTION

Walking With the Lord

When Jesus said, "Follow me," He was expressing the goal of God in all creation – God walking with man in perfect fellowship.

The purpose of all of Christ's teachings is to instruct us in how to achieve this marvelous privilege. We must delight in His Word and understand His way of thinking. We must learn His ways and do His work in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Each of the forty-nine* commands of Christ express an important aspect of our walk with the Lord and our love for others. Loving God and loving others must be the central focus of this study, because that is the sum total of all Christ's teaching and of all the rest of the Scriptures.

(*Jesus gave many commands; however, this group of commands was chosen to represent the basic "curriculum" that Christ gave His disciples – commands that we are to keep and teach others in order to be His disciples.)

Keeping Christ's Commands

Jesus said that if we love Him, we will keep His commandments (see John 14:15.) The Greek word tereo, translated "keep," means to guard, protect, watch over, observe closely, and hold fast.

During the days of celestial navigation, mariners would maintain a course in the vast waters by keeping the stars at a certain position, using them to guide the ship toward its destination.

Jesus used this concept when He told His disciples to keep His commands. The commands are fixed "lights" that can be trusted to guide us through the storms of life. If we follow them, we will arrive at our destination safely, bearing much fruit.

As we keep Christ's commands before us, we will be more ready to live them out. "But thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein" (Joshua 1:8; see also Leviticus 20:8).

Rewards for Keeping Christ's Commands

- **God will reveal Himself to us.**

  "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him." (John 14:21)

- **God will dwell in us.**

  "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him." (John 14:23)

- **We will receive God's love.**

  "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." (John 15:10)

- **We will know we love God.**

  "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him." (1 John 2:3-5)

  "If you love Me, keep My commandments." (John 14:15)

- **We will love others.**

  "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments." (1 John 5:2)

- **Christ will be our Friend.**

  "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you." (John 15:14)

- **Our prayers will be answered.**

  "And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight." (1 John 3:22)

- **We will be disciples.**

  "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

- **We will have true joy.**

  "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full." (John 15:11)

- **We will be purified.**

  "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." (John 15:3)

  "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth." (John 17:17)

- **We will have peace.**

  "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

49 Commands of Christ & Corresponding Character Qualities

		Command	Character Quality	Scripture
☐	1.	Repent	Humility	Matthew 4:17
☐	2	Follow Me	Meekness	Matthew 4:19
☐	3.	Rejoice	Joyfulness	Matthew 5:11-12
☐	4.	Let Your Light Shine	Generosity	Matthew 5:14-16
☐	5.	Honor God's Law	Love	Matthew 5:17
☐	6.	Be Reconciled	Responsibility	Matthew 5:23-24
☐	7.	Do Not Commit Adultery	Self-Control	Matthew 5:29
☐	8.	Keep Your Word	Truthfulness	Matthew 5:37
☐	9.	Go the Second Mile	Deference	Matthew 5:38-42
☐	10.	Love Your Enemies	Creativity	Matthew 5:44-46
☐	11.	Be Perfect	Sincerity	Matthew 5:46-48
☐	12.	Practice Secret Disciplines	Faith	Matthew 6:3-18
☐	13.	Lay Up Treasures	Thriftiness	Matthew 6:19-21
☐	14.	Seek God's Kingdom	Initiative	Matthew 6:33
☐	15.	Judge Not	Discernment	Matthew 7:1-3
☐	16.	Do Not Cast Pearls	Discretion	Matthew 7:6
☐	17.	Ask, Seek, Knock	Resourcefulness	Matthew 7:7-8
☐	18.	Do Unto Others	Sensitivity	Matthew 7:12
☐	19.	Choose the Narrow Way	Decisiveness	Matthew 7:13-14
☐	20.	Beware of False Prophets	Alertness	Matthew 7:15-16
☐	21.	Pray for Laborers	Compassion	Matthew 9:37-38
☐	22.	Be Wise as Serpents	Wisdom	Matthew 10:16
☐	23.	Fear Not	Boldness	Matthew 10:28
☐	24.	Hear God's Voice	Attentiveness	Matthew 11:15
☐	25.	Take My Yoke	Obedience	Matthew 11:28-30
☐	26.	Honor Your Parents	Honor/Reverence	Matthew 15:4
☐	27.	Beware of Leaven	Virtue	Matthew 16:6
☐	28.	Deny Yourself	Determination	Luke 9:23-25
☐	29.	Despise Not Little Ones	Tolerance	Matthew 18:10
☐	30.	Go to Offenders	Justice	Matthew 18:15
☐	31.	Beware of Covetousness	Contentment	Luke 12:15
☐	32.	Forgive Offenders	Forgiveness	Matthew 18:21-22
☐	33.	Honor Marriage	Loyalty	Matthew 19:4-6
☐	34.	Be a Servant	Availability	Matthew 20:26-28
☐	35.	Be a House of Prayer	Persuasiveness	Matthew 21:13
☐	36.	Ask in Faith	Patience	Matthew 21:21-22
☐	37.	Bring in the Poor	Hospitality	Luke 14:12-14
☐	38.	Render to Caesar	Gratefulness	Matthew 22:19-21
☐	39.	Love the Lord	Enthusiasm	Matthew 22:37-38
☐	40.	Love Your Neighbor	Gentleness	Matthew 22:39-40
☐	41.	Await My Return	Punctuality	Matthew 24:42-44
☐	42.	Take, Eat, and Drink	Thoroughness	Matthew 26:26-27
☐	43.	Be Born Again	Security	John 3:7
☐	44.	Keep My Commandments	Diligence	John 14:15
☐	45.	Watch and Pray	Endurance	Matthew 26:41
☐	46.	Feed My Sheep	Dependability	John 21:15-16
☐	47.	Baptize My Disciples	Cautiousness	Matthew 28:19

☐	48.	Receive God's Power	Orderliness	Luke 24:49
☐	49.	Make Disciples	Flexibility	Matthew 28:20

Welcome to Your First Day of the Daily Success Plan!

We are thrilled that this plan has the best guarantee in the world—it is guaranteed by God Himself. However, we must never forget that the guarantee is based on one requirement—to meditate on God's Law day and night. The purpose of this entire plan is to encourage and motivate us to be faithful in doing this.

The Law of Moses is a shadow of the brilliant light of Christ's commands. Thus, for our first week of meditation, we will concentrate on the following verse:

Command One

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." (Matthew 4:17).

Our plan is to memorize this verse and quote it back to God at least ten times throughout the day. For each command, we have a Study Question. If you can answer this question, you will understand the essence of the command. Why not read the Study Question to your whole family in the morning and see what their answers are by the evening?

Study Question One

"Why did Esau find no place of repentance for simply selling his birthright while David found repentance for adultery and murder?" (See Hebrews 12:16–17 and Psalms 51.)

We want to explain how each command is directly related to success, so how does repentance relate? Repentance puts us into fellowship with the Lord and allows Him to bless everything we do. Our greatest asset is the blessing of the Lord, because "The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it." (Proverbs 10:22). Without God's blessing, Satan is given opportunity to devour our strength, family, health, and resources, so that there is no possible way to be successful.

Repent - Character Qualities

Humility vs. Pride

Humility is recognizing that in myself I am nothing and have nothing, and therefore, everything in life is a gift from God's hand.

Several Hebrew words are translated humble. One is anah, which means "to stoop, be downcast, bow down; to be afflicted; to weaken oneself; to mishandle." King David expressed humility of soul by wearing sackcloth and by fasting. (See Psalm 35:13.)

Another Hebrew word for humble is kana, which means "to bend the knee, to be brought into subjection, subdue." God used this word in 2 Chronicles 7:14: "if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

The Rewards of Humility

The greatest reward of humility is that of becoming like the Lord Jesus Christ. He identifies His character as being "meek and lowly in heart." The word lowly means "not rising far from the ground" and expresses being brought low with grief and being lowly in spirit.

Other rewards of humility are what every person longs for—true riches, high honor, and abundant life. "Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life." (Proverbs 22:4).

Our Choice: Humble Ourselves or Be Humbled

God appeals to all of us to take the initiative to humble ourselves. If we fail to do this, He will humble us through circumstances, opposition, infirmities, or weaknesses. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time." (1 Peter 5:6).

Notice that we are first and foremost to humble ourselves in the eyes of the Lord, not necessarily in the eyes of others. He can see the true condition of our hearts, whether we are flattering ourselves with compliments or sincerely abasing ourselves and exalting Him.

King Nebuchadnezzar learned what happens when a man fails to humble himself. However, after being humbled by God, he gave proper glory to the Lord: "At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation." (Daniel 4:34).

Personal Evaluation: How Humble Am I?

- When people disagree with me, do I argue to defend my position?
- Am I hurt when people I dislike are honored?
- Do I find it difficult to admit I am wrong?
- Do I inwardly react to criticism?
- Do I give my opinions before being asked for them?
- Do I enjoy sharing about my accomplishments?
- Do I talk more than I listen?
- Am I more concerned about my reputation or God's?
- Do I seek ways to humble myself?
- Do I do things for praise and compliments?
- Do I accept praise rather than deflecting it?
- Am I quick to correct others when they make mistakes?
- Do I react when I do not receive the credit I am due?
- Do I compare myself with others rather than God?

Start Your Day in the Evening!

First let's answer the question of why Esau failed to find repentance for simply selling his birthright even though he sought it desperately with tears. Esau's repentance was faulty because he did not understand true repentance. He was a profane fornicator (see Hebrews 12:16–17), and he simply wanted to regain the blessings that he had lost (see Genesis 25:33–34).

However, when David was confronted with his sin, he repented for the right reason. He wanted to restore fellowship with God. If we repent for any other reason than this we are not experiencing true repentance. (See Psalm 51.)

Jesus did not come to restore the blessings that were lost by the sin of Adam and Eve. He came to restore the relationship that was broken by their transgression. If we repent for any other reason than wanting to restore and maintain an intimate fellowship with God, we are missing the true meaning of repentance.

Now let's discuss the question of why God designed the day to begin in the evening rather than in the morning. "And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day." (Genesis 1:5).

- The evening is the most important part of our day because it affects the quality of our sleep and sets our mental attitude for the rest of the day. Therefore, people do not "get up on the wrong side of the bed"; they go to bed on the "wrong side."
- The evening is the best time to evaluate the achievements of the previous day and to set new goals for the next day.
- As we go to sleep meditating on Scripture and setting our goals before the Lord, our minds will be cleansed (this may produce unusual dreams). Then we will experience an exciting phenomenon: "I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs

me." (see Psalm 16:7). This means that God will give us practical insights from His Word and clear direction, which will have a profound impact on the success of our lives.

This has been one of the most exciting experiences of my life. It is how the questions for this study came into being, including the question on true repentance. If we meditate on the wisdom of God's Word, we can claim this promise: "I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion." (Proverbs 8:12).

Remember! Our responsibility is to meditate day and night. God's responsibility is to give us creative insights and direction. "The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple." (Psalm 119:130).

Daily Scriptures

In addition to meditation on Matthew 4:17, meditating on the verses below will provide you with further insight and understanding of Christ's command: Repent.

Revelation 3:19
"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent."

Psalm 51:1–4
"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge."

Acts 3:19
"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord"

Acts 8:22
"Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart."

Proverbs 1:23
"If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you."

2 Corinthians 5:10
"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

Be Cleansed by the Word

How would you evaluate your success in meditating day and night? Whatever your answer is, don't be discouraged!

You cannot imagine the delight and admiration of family that you are producing because of your commitment to daily success!

They have reason to be grateful and joyful, because as you cleanse your heart and mind with the Word of God, a supernatural work also takes place in them.

Paul speaks of this when he tells husbands to cleanse their wives with the washing of the Word (see Ephesians 5:25–33). This does not mean to get your wife to read the Bible or even to read it to her. It means to cleanse your own heart and soul by engrafting the pure Word of God into it. Jesus affirmed this meaning when He prayed in John 17:19: "For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified." If Jesus sanctified Himself through the truth for our sakes, how much more should we do it for those who are under our spiritual care?

The fact is that children reap the benefits of their father's successes, but they also experience the consequences of their defeats.

Family Question

Abraham lied to Pharaoh by saying that his beautiful wife was his sister and Pharaoh heaped riches on Abraham. There is no record of Abraham's repentance. Instead he justified his deception by saying Sarah was indeed his half-sister. Did any consequences result from Abraham's lie?

The surprising answer will come tomorrow. As you meditate on the command to repent, are there things that God is wanting to cleanse out of your life?

When Confronted With Sin, Repent!

by Ken Pierpont

I once knew an elderly lady from the mountains who had a habit of secretly smoking a pipe. She thought no one knew. When she went to the store, she would always buy a large tin of tobacco and would say as she set it on the counter, "It's for my hands," hoping people would believe that she was buying it for her hired hands. Everyone knew that it was really for her own hands.

One day I happened upon her suddenly and she had not had time to put her pipe away, so she hid it in the pocket of her apron. It was comical to watch the smoke circle up out of her pocket while she talked, thinking I didn't notice. I resisted the urge to draw her into lengthy conversation just to see how long it would take for her apron to begin to smolder.

Like a smoking habit, sin is something that is difficult and eventually impossible to hide. If you attempt to hide your sin, you usually only deceive yourself. Your wife knows. Your children know. Those close to you know. God knows.

Sin is not only impossible to hide, it is too heavy to bear. One summer while doing odd jobs for a lady, I overloaded her truck with gravel. The tires were nearly flat with the weight. The bumper was inches from the ground. The engine labored so hard on the way home that huge black clouds of smoke billowed out along the highway, nearly causing an accident. I was pulled over by the police and eventually released to limp home, with the poor old green truck, but I learned my lesson. Don't try to haul more than you are designed to carry.

You were not designed to live with the weight of unconfessed sin. If you try to hide your sin and refuse to confess it and repent, you will eventually come to ruin and to shame. "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." (See Proverbs 28:13.) As soon as you are aware of your sin, repent. The load of sin will disappear and you can prosper again. As the old story goes, when the demons argue about the most effective way to destroy a man's soul, some will say, "Tell him there's no heaven." Others will say, "Tell him there's no hell." Others say, "Just tell him there's no hurry."

When your conscience tells you that you have sinned, don't try to hide it. Don't delay, don't deny your sin, don't minimize it, and don't confuse remorse or regret with repentance. Take advantage of the privilege of the Kingdom of Heaven being at hand, and repent. Repent right away! You weren't designed to operate well under the weight of sin. When you are confronted with your sin, repent!

- Don't try to hide it.
- Don't deny it.
- Don't minimize it.
- Don't blame someone else.
- Don't confuse remorse and regret with repentance.
- Don't delay!

Repent With Sincerity!

As we meditate on the command to repent and call upon God for understanding, He will reveal to us the true essence of repentance and also give us the grace to do it. One of the best ways to

understand repentance is by reading the prayers of those who did repent in Scripture. One such prayer is Psalm 51.

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." (Psalm 51:1–2).

James describes sincere repentance by calling for our laughter to be turned to mourning and our joy to be turned to heaviness. He exhorts us to cleanse our hands of past sins and purify our hearts of double-mindedness. (See James 4.)

The rewards of true repentance are not only a clear conscience and restored fellowship with God, but also a Godly heritage for our children and grandchildren. The failures of parents can affect children for generations to come, as in the case of Abraham.

After Abraham returned from Egypt, where he got riches by deception, God blessed him; however, the blessing began with the horror of darkness. (See Genesis 15:5–17.) This was a strange setting for a blessing until we realize what God was doing. He informed Abraham that his descendants would be in Egypt as slaves for 400 years, but that God would judge Egypt and in the end Abraham's family would be freed from bondage and taken to the land God promised to Abraham. (See Genesis 15:12–13.)

Could it be that God was sending Abraham's descendants down to Egypt for 400 years to pay back the riches that Abraham got by deception? If so, it was a high price to pay for failure to repent and make restitution!

"He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." (Proverbs 28:13).

David broke through to genuine repentance when he realized that even though his sins hurt other people, they were primarily against God. Therefore, he prayed, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4). Let's begin our repentance now by praying the words of Psalm 51 back to God.

Model Repentance to Your Family

by Ken Pierpont

When I was a young man, my dad was going through a difficult time and he noticed some things in my life that were wrong. Instead of gently correcting me and appealing to my conscience until I saw the sinfulness of what I did, he became angry and impatient with me. He picked me up from work, and on the way home he wounded me with harsh words and rough language.

I was shocked, guilty, confused, and hurt. When I got home I went up to my bed. I lay in bed, my heart pounding, trying to make sense of what had just happened. My dad was a Christian. He was even a pastor. I knew that what I did was wrong, but I also knew that he was wrong for dealing with it the way he did.

Before I went to sleep, the door to my room opened and light spilled into the room from the hallway. My dad came in and knelt down by my bed. He began to weep.

"Son," he said, "I am so sorry for what I said tonight. You are a fine son, and I am proud of you. I should not have said what I did. I have had a difficult day and I have been discouraged. I took it out on you. That was wrong. Will you forgive me?"

"Yes, Dad. I forgive you."

We hugged for a long time. I could smell his aftershave and feel the tears on his face.

"I love you, Buddy," he said.

"I love you too, Dad."

My dad said goodnight and left the room, turning out the hall light. My burden and my confusion were lifted. I was free to consider what I had done wrong without being distracted by what my dad had done wrong.

There may be some things you need to clear up with your wife or with your sons and daughters. Before your children go to sleep, maybe you should go and kneel by their beds and be sure that their hearts are light and happy and that all is clear between you.

One of the most powerful, valuable things you can ever do for your family is to model the spirit and practice of repentance. I know. My dad did it for me.

"In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." (Ephesians 4:26–27).

Conquer the Greatest Sin!

One day the president of a successful real estate company stood before his sales staff of about one hundred. After presenting several new properties, he stated, "My success story has been written up in a national business magazine. If you would like a copy, just see my secretary."

A lightning bolt of dismay and tension struck the staff. Angry looks were exchanged, and murmuring began: "Who does he think he is?! We are the ones that made this company successful! It is our success story, not his."

That very afternoon, several of his top salesmen quit and formed their own company. Soon there was not enough money to close contracts, so the president used money from other escrow accounts, which is a federal offense. Within six months, the once-successful company was dissolved, and the president began serving a prison sentence, all because of the lack of one character quality—humility.

"Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life." (Proverbs 22:4).

Pride is the sin that God hates the most and punishes the swiftest. Pride caused Satan and a third of the angels to be cast out of heaven. Pride was the cause of Adam and Eve's dismissal from the Garden of Eden. It is also the cause of our unrepentance over sin, which keeps God from blessing us with riches, honor, and life. "To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech." (Proverbs 8:13). God resists the proud and so do people. That is why conflicts are stirred up, because "Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice." (Proverbs 13:10).

Pride is putting ourselves on an equal level with God. It is reserving for ourselves the right to decide what is right or wrong. Our pride is what put Jesus on the cross. We are just like those who said, "We will not have this man reign over us."

Pride is projecting on the outside what is not true on the inside. Today, let's conquer this primary hindrance to daily success by humbling ourselves before a holy God and making things right with all those whom we have offended.

Sin Will Surface

by Ken Pierpont

Our firstborn is an especially diligent young man. Even when he was just a lad you could count on him to attack a job and bring it to completion.

One summer afternoon I asked him to vacuum out the van. He eagerly ran, got the vacuum and an extension cord, and went to work. He did a great job, but that was not the end of the story. About six or eight days later, we noticed a very unpleasant odor. It was a mystery. We could not find it. At first, we thought it might have been a dead mouse or maybe road-kill out on the highway, but the stench just grew stronger every day.

I was forced to investigate. (If I recall correctly, my wife was considering going to visit her mother until I solved the mystery of the wretched odor.) I traced the odor to the west side of the house. We had an enclosed front porch. On the side farthest from the front door we had a huge chest-freezer full of meat. It was a little distance from the outlet, so to get power to the freezer we used an extension cord. We had only one extension cord. It was the one we used to vacuum the van.

When our boy finished his job he must have been distracted by the call of the creek or the flight of a butterfly. Maybe it was his dog or his brothers or sisters, or maybe the mail came and he was eager to get it in for Mom and Dad. Maybe I came along and asked him to mow the lawn. Maybe it was time for baseball practice. Maybe he could smell dinner cooking and was eager to eat. Whatever it was that distracted him, he forgot to plug the freezer back in.

At first no one knew. At first there was little harm and little damage. Our lives went on as usual. Eventually, though, the meat spoiled and ruined and rotted. The evidence of ruined meat was impossible to ignore.

At first the presence of unconfessed sin goes unnoticed. Life goes on in its normal way. But unconfessed sin can be compared to a freezer full of rotten meat "cooking" on the porch. You can ignore it, but it will not go away. Eventually, it will become the biggest thing in your life. Eventually, it will demand your attention. Eventually, it will dominate your life.

John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus came preaching repentance. I think Peter said it beautifully, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord..."

Repentance is like a fresh spring breeze that blows away the foul odor of sin. What a gift repentance is! Paul wrote, "… in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:25–26).

This evening, think on the rich privilege we have to repent. Think on what a gift repentance is. The Kingdom of Heaven is near at hand to you in your home tonight. It is as near as your eagerness to repent.

Put Spirit Over Mind

The secret of effective meditation is quoting Scripture back to God with the spirit rather than the mind. This means that rather than trying to intellectually understand God's truth, we discern it by His Spirit speaking to our spirit because "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Corinthians 2:14).

If we evaluate Scripture with the mind we tend to become proud, because "knowledge puffs up," but if Scripture "evaluates" the heart, we become humble because it exposes our secret sins.

By coming to Scripture with our spirit, we cry out, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139:23–24).

Your spirit has direct access to God's Spirit, because "God is a Spirit: and those that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). The Spirit of God has direct access to the conscience and is able to activate it with the spiritual understanding of what is right and what is wrong as we meditate upon His truth. It is this intimate fellowship of Spirit-to-spirit communication that constitutes true meditation and results in daily success.

Scripture is "the wisdom of God" and is given to us "in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world." God determined that this wisdom would be "for our glory." However, it is revealed to us only "...but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God." (1 Corinthians 2:7–10).

"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks." (John 4:23).

Our natural inclination is to simply quote Scripture back to God as a mental or intellectual exercise. This will rob us of the riches of God's wisdom and the joy of His fellowship. Therefore, we must bring the mind under the control of God's Spirit with a definite act of the will.

Thus, it would be wise to pray, "Heavenly Father, right now I do place my mind under the control of Your Holy Spirit and the authority of Your Word." With this prayer, you have just taken a giant step toward daily success.

Command 1: Repent | Day 7

Write It Down!

How often have we heard these words "Write it down or you'll forget it"? If that is true for our daily efficiency, how much truer is it for the treasures of our experiences with God's Word?

One of the greatest heritages that you could pass on to your descendants is a written account of your walk with God. The struggles and trials that you experienced and the steps that you took to overcome them will be a tremendous resource to those who follow you.

You do not know what you are thinking until you write it down.

When you begin keeping a written record of your experiences, you will become much more alert to the people and events that affect your life. You will learn how to be precise with words and ideas. The result will be a greater ability to communicate truth with others, and this is an important foundation for daily success.

So, what should you include in your "daily success journal"? Here are some ideas:

- How consistent were you able to be during this first week of meditation?
- What hindered you from keeping Scripture before your mind?
- What was your experience in meditating before going to sleep?
- Did you have any unusual dreams?
- How were you able to personalize the Scripture?
- What practical applications have you applied from this command?
- How has God blessed you or your family this week?

You might be encouraged to know that God is also writing a journal about **you**:

"Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name." (Malachi 3:16).

Congratulations for completing your first week!

Command 2: Follow Me | Day 8

Have a Tent Mind-Set!

Welcome to our second week of meditation! In order to live out Christ's second command, we must comprehend the rich insights of a "tent mind-set."

Command Two

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men."

(Matthew 4:19).

Those who heard the call to follow Jesus understood that it meant forsaking their way of life and being trained by Him as a disciple.

This is consistent with God's call to Abraham. Abraham was told to leave his land, kindred, and father's house and follow the Lord to a land of promise. In the process, he learned the mind-set of a tent-dweller. When Abraham's descendants went down to Egypt (symbolic of the world),

they lost their tent perspective. Soon the pressure of their bondage caused them to cry out to God for deliverance.

God brought them "out of the house of bondage" (see Deuteronomy 13:5) and restored their perspective of tent dwelling in the wilderness. God also lived with them in a tent (the Tabernacle) and had them look to heaven for their daily bread and daily direction. In the land of promise they lived in goodly houses, but God warned them never to lose their tent mind-set. So, He established an annual feast in which they would live in a tent for one week and be reminded of their total dependence upon God. (See Leviticus 23:34.)

A tent mind-set is realizing that this world is not our home and that we are on a holy pursuit of God's kingdom with total dependence on Him as "strangers and pilgrims."

Peter speaks of this mind-set as a powerful basis for conquering lust: "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul." (1 Peter 2:11).

A tent mind-set helps us lay aside temporal things and see the value in eternal things, such as discipling others. Therefore, when a would-be follower of Jesus volunteered his services, Jesus immediately focused on his need for a tent mind-set by saying, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." (Matthew 8:20). There is nothing wrong with living in a house as long as we don't lose a tent mind-set and view our home as a temporary base from which to fulfill the Great Commission.

Command 2: Follow Me

Study Question

Q: Why did Jesus require His disciples to be with Him to the end of His ministry while Moses and Paul taught their followers by writings that they received through the Holy Spirit?

A: Jesus had power that He wanted to transfer to His disciples, but He knew that they would not obtain it unless they stayed with Him to the end. After His resurrection, He called His disciples and breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20:22). He later said, "... stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:49). This they did.

As Moses and Paul spent time with God, they reflected His light to others by their writings. Their goal was not to create their own followers, but rather for people to be drawn to Christ and to follow Him.

How Can We Follow Jesus Now That He Is in Heaven?

When the disciples followed Jesus, they were with Him 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for 3 years. They learned how He thought, how He answered questions, how He lived, and how He gave Himself for people.

Jesus is now in heaven; however, He made provisions for us to continue to be with Him 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for the rest of our lives. First of all, He is within every believer, as the Scripture states: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

He also sent His Holy Spirit to live within us and to guide us in His ways. (See John 14:16–18.) Just as the disciples walked with the Lord and did only those things that the Lord directed, so we are to walk in the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

The result of this fellowship is that the Lord can accomplish more through our lives than He accomplished in His earthly ministry. "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12).

The more time we spend with Christ by meditating on His Word, the more we will be able to reflect the light of His truth to others.

Get a Double Portion!

The invitation to follow Jesus is no small matter. The more we follow Him, the more we will become like Him. Imagine what this will mean for daily success! We will multiply our wisdom, because Jesus is ultimate wisdom, and "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm." (Proverbs 13:20).

We will also gain the rare quality of creativity that is so essential to success, because Jesus is the Creator. (See John 1:3.) Most of all, we will grow in the character of Christ, because He is the perfect expression of all the character qualities of God.

In addition to all of these benefits, there is something even more exciting.

Those who follow Jesus can receive a "double portion" of His power if they fulfill one important requirement. Do you know what it is?

Many heroes of faith accomplished greater things than the one they followed because they fulfilled this one prerequisite.

- Samuel served Eli and then accomplished greater things than Eli.
- Joshua served Moses and then accomplished what Moses failed to do.
- David served Saul and achieved greater victories than Saul.
- Elisha served Elijah and got a double portion of his power.

Each one of these men remained faithful until the end. Elijah explained this prerequisite when Elisha asked him for a double portion of his power. "…yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours…." (2 Kings 2:10).

Jesus made the same stipulation when He said to His disciples, "All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." (Matthew 10:22). The word *saved* is the Greek word *sozo*, which can refer to physical, emotional, or spiritual vibrancy. During the ministry of Jesus, many disciples became offended and stopped following Him, but Jesus said of those who remained faithful:

"...I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12).

The faithful disciples had a double portion of Jesus' power because the Holy Spirit was sent to them. And, through the mighty power of the Holy Spirit, they accomplished great things for God. Let's purpose now to follow their example by faithfully following Jesus until the end.

Command 2: Follow Me

Related Character Quality

Meekness vs. Anger

Meekness is yielding our rights to God so He can demonstrate His peace and power through our lives.

One Hebrew word translated meekness is anavah. It is derived from the root anah, which means "to humble oneself, to bow down, to be afflicted, to become low." One Greek word for meek is praus. It simply means "mild, humble." The word meekness is often used in combination with other words such as lowliness (see Ephesians 4:2), righteousness (see Psalm 45:4), and gentleness (see 2 Corinthians 10:1).

Significance of Meekness

Meekness is vital because it is the one quality that Jesus used to describe Himself: "… learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart" (Matthew 11:29). Thus, the more we understand and develop meekness, the more we take on the nature of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is therefore understandable that Jesus would begin His discourse on discipleship by praising the quality of meekness: "Blessed are the poor in spirit… . Blessed are they that mourn… . Blessed are the meek… ." (Matthew 5:3–5).

Rewards of Meekness

1. **Knowing Jesus Christ**
   The goal of the Apostle Paul was "to know him [Jesus Christ], and the power of his

resurrection …" (Philippians 3:10). He declared that he counted "everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8).

2. **Comprehending the Gospel**
   The good news of salvation is available to everyone. However, only the meek will understand it and respond to it. Jesus explained this when He opened the scroll of Isaiah and read, "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Isaiah 61:1).
3. **Transforming Our Souls**
   It is by the quality of meekness that one is able to make God's Word a vital part of his mind, will, and emotions and thereby conquer the sinful and destructive habits of life. (See James 1:21.)
4. **Receiving God's Guidance**
   One of the most important challenges in life is making wise decisions. We often make decisions that we are sure are right, but they turn out to be wrong. When we demonstrate the quality of meekness, the Lord will direct us in our decisions. (See Psalm 25:9.)
5. **Developing True Character**
   Scripture explains that the "inner self" is more important to adorn than the outward appearance of a person. This inward adornment is to be meekness. (See 1 Peter 3:3–4.)
6. **Enjoying Life to the Fullest**
   Many people do not actually enjoy their own possessions. They eat food, but it does not satisfy their appetites. However, God promises that "the meek shall eat and be satisfied" (Psalm 22:26).
7. **Receiving a Lasting Inheritance**
   The meek will receive an eternal reward. Jesus promises, "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

Personal Evaluation: How Meek Are You?

- Have you dedicated yourself to God and yielded all your rights to Him?
- Do you have full confidence that God controls all that happens to you?
- Is it your goal to become more like the Lord Jesus Christ?
- Have you received and responded to the good tidings of the Gospel?
- Do others praise you for a meek and quiet spirit, or do they react to an angry spirit?
- Do people resist your advice or counsel when you try to help them?
- Do you speak evil of those in positions of leadership?
- Do people ask you why you are so peaceful when serious adversities come into your life?
- Have you exchanged your burdens for the yoke of Christ?
- When you do good works and are praised for them, do you deflect the honor to others who helped you?

How Do We Learn Meekness?

We learn meekness by coming to Christ with the recognition of our own weaknesses and being united with Him by belief in His finished work on the cross. Then we must grow in the experiential knowledge of Christ, Who humbled Himself for us, that we might be conformed to His image.

Follow Very Closely!

The crowds followed Jesus, but only those closest to Him heard the rich teaching He gave along the way. There were others who followed Him from afar. (See John 19:38.) John followed Jesus as closely as he could. As a result, John heard rich truths, which he shares in his writings.

Closeness is determined by how well we can hear Jesus speak to us, and this ability is determined by how much we meditate on His Word day and night.

John was one of the three who were in Jesus' "inner circle." He was with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and on the mount of Calvary. He sat right next to Jesus at the Last Supper and wanted to sit next to Him in His kingdom. Because of this very close relationship, John shared truths from Jesus that are found in no other gospel or epistle.

For example, John recorded the secret of intimate fellowship and effective discipleship through meditation on the commands of Christ. "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14:21). John further emphasized the importance of meditation when he wrote, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7).

Secrets bind the spirits of people together. Jesus wants to share His secrets with us, but we must follow closely to hear them.

Does your walk with Jesus allow Him to whisper secrets to you, or does He have to shout to get your attention? The more you meditate on Christ's words, the closer your walk with Him will be!

Daily Scriptures

In addition to meditation on Matthew 4:19, meditating on the verses below will provide you with further insight and understanding of Christ's command: Follow Me.

Psalm 63:8

"My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me."

Matthew 19:28–29

"Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life."

2 Corinthians 4:1–4

"Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

Proverbs 11:30

"The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise."

Use Transformed "Rods"!

Meditation is imagining the action involved in carrying out the command. For example, imagine what would happen if you were Peter or Andrew and heard Jesus' call to follow Him and be made a fisher of men. There is a principle here.

Jesus will take our talents and skills and transform them for eternal achievement. This is what He did with Matthew's experience as a tax collector. Matthew teaches more about money in his Gospel than any other writer. The same principle is true with David; his shepherding skills were transformed by God into tools with which to shepherd, or care for, the whole nation of Israel. The skills he used for the sheep were applied to taking care of people. "So he [David] fed them according to the integrity of his heart; and guided them by the skillfulness of his hands" (Psalm 78:72). However, before God can use our skills, something must happen.

God will use whatever we bring to Him, but it must first be transformed by an action on our part. That action is demonstrated by the rod of Moses.

When God called Moses to follow Him back to Egypt and deliver the nation of Israel from bondage, He asked Moses to cast down his rod. That rod represented his skill and livelihood as a shepherd. The rod became a snake and was so terrifying that Moses fled from it. What a precise picture of personal skills and abilities that are not dedicated to God.

Once the rod was given to God and seen in a totally new light by Moses, God told him to pick it up. When he did, it was transformed into a new rod. No longer was it referred to as the rod of Moses, but rather the rod of God, and with it God was able to accomplish great and mighty deeds, which brought much glory to Him.

God will not use our skills or abilities, but He will transform them into His skills and abilities when we place them at His feet.

As a young boy I had an interest in drawing, but I had no unusual skill. However, when I dedicated my body to God at about the age of twelve, God took my interest in drawing and directed it to chalk art. As a result, millions of people have received spiritual encouragement and direction from the drawings. What "rods" do you presently have in your hand that are going to "bite you" if you don't give them to God today?

Fish With Light!

As we continue meditating on Christ's second command, we see that the ultimate purpose for following Jesus is to become fishers of men. God loves people, and He wants us to draw as many as we can to Him; it is not His will that any should perish. But how will He make us effective fishermen? The answer is found in an understanding of fishing methods of Christ's day.

Peter and Andrew were fishing with nets during the day. That is when Jesus called them. However, James and John were mending their nets, indicating that they fished at night, which can be far more effective.

God's way to fish is to attract people with Christ's light in us and then draw them in with nets of love.

It is for the purpose of drawing people to Christ that Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:14) and Paul wrote, "...you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8). The intensity of the brightness of our light is directly proportional to our meditation day and night, because Scripture itself is light. When it becomes a living part of our lives, we increase our brightness.

Scripture states, "The unfolding of your words gives light" (Psalm 119:130) and "…it gives light to everyone in the house" (Matthew 5:15). It is especially significant that God relates His commandments to the function of light: "The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes" (Psalm 19:8).

At night, the fishermen in Jesus' day suspended lamps out from the boat and attracted fish to the light. Scripture states that the word of God is a "lamp" and a "light" (Psalm 119:105).

Is our light bright enough to attract others to Christ, and do we have enough love to draw them in?

The reason that Christ's commands are so effective in drawing people to Christ is that they are all practical expressions of loving God and loving one another. In fact, Jesus explained that the entire Law and prophets hung on two commands: loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Let's turn up our light by intensifying our meditation day and night!

Reject Deceptive Lures!

When we think of fishing, we tend to picture a fisherman with rod and reel. He is casting out his line with bait and hook. The bait is designed to look as close to the real thing as possible.

When the fish bite the bait, they are hooked and reeled in. Would this be a method that Jesus would use to draw people to the Gospel? Imagine the conflict and turmoil of such a "catch"! These "fish" were not drawn to the light but drawn to deceptive bait. They expected one thing and got another.

Attracting people with lures rather than light will draw "light haters" into the church, and their mission will be to extinguish the light.

Haters of light are committed to a way of life that is contrary to the holy standards of God's Word. Jesus describes them by saying, "Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God." (John 3:20–21).

Paul understood the damage that results from using deceptive lures. He wrote, "Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." (2 Corinthians 4:2). The word *deceptive* is translated from the Greek word *doloo*, which means "to adulterate for the sake of personal gain." Mixing the Gospel with human traditions is an example of this adulteration.

Mixing the light of Christ with the lusts of the world is a contradiction to the Gospel of Christ.

John makes it very clear that the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life are not of the Father, but are of the world. Therefore, if we use things that are not of God to lure people to God, we are contradicting the very message we preach.

May God give us discernment to attract people by the brilliant light of Christ rather than the clever manipulation of deceptive lures!

Record Your Progress!

Congratulations on finishing the second week of daily meditation. By now the living power of God's Word should be having a significant effect upon your life and the lives of those around you. Today is an excellent day to record what is happening. Such a record is important for the following reasons:

1. Your written report proves to your family that you are committed to daily success.
2. It forces you to honestly evaluate how consistent and effective you have been.
3. It encourages your family to trust you because you are in daily contact with God.
4. It creates a longing in your family to seek after the God you love.
5. It preserves a valuable record for your children and their children.

Ten years from now, your Daily Success journal will be a powerful encouragement to you. Fifty years from now, it will be an inspiring challenge to your descendants.

It is important that you record victories and defeats in daily meditation. It is also important to note the responses of others in your family. Here are some examples:

This week I started strong, but things at work piled up and crowded out my meditation. I now see that the less I meditated, the more pressure I experienced.

I have been quoting Scripture back to God while going to sleep, and it has definitely improved my quality of rest. I did, however, have some unusual dreams.

One night I went to bed with a question, and during the night God gave me the answer. This was a thrilling experience!

I was encouraged when my young son asked me what it meant to meditate day and night. I was able to explain it to him, and now he wants to join me.

Meditation should not be something we have to stop to do, but should become a natural expression of our thoughts throughout the day.

Millions of people today find tremendous strength and encouragement because one man was faithful in writing out his daily experiences of meditation. His name is David—a man after God's own heart!

Understand "The Program"!

A positive outlook on our daily circumstances is essential for success. However, if our perception makes no allowance for the ongoing conflict between good and evil and the ultimate triumph of good, we will be disillusioned. Thus, we are given the third command to rejoice.

Command Three

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11–12).

The more we meditate on this command, the more we will tap into the rich treasures of God's way of life. These treasures are based on the premise that we will experience unexpected rewards and also bring spiritual life to "light haters" if we respond properly to their attacks.

When one becomes a follower of Jesus and ceases to do the things that worldly friends are doing, these friends will often feel guilty about their own evil ways. At that point they have a choice: either respond to the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin and repent or react to God's standards demonstrated in the believer's life.

Peter describes this conflict by stating that worldly friends will "think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you" (1 Peter 4:4). Isaiah also spoke of this reaction when he said, "Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice." (Isaiah 59:15).

In spite of this vicious reaction, we are told to "rejoice, and be glad." Therefore, God knows something that we don't know about the great benefit and rewards of being criticized for doing good, and this is what we want to discuss this week.

The way you respond when someone speaks badly about the good things you do, reveals your level of maturity in the ways of God.

As a young boy I saw Matthew 5:11–12 in action. My father was the executive director of a civil engineering publishing company. The papers were in order for him to become the president and to enjoy a very high salary. He was the favorite of the outgoing boss, who would become the chairman of the board, until my father became a believer and was not able to participate in the promotion of things related to the liquor industry.

His good favor with the boss diminished, and soon he faced an ultimatum: either violate his conscience or leave his job. When he made the decision to leave the company, with a wife and six children to support and no prospect of a new job, he received further criticizing from unexpected sources.

Command 3: Rejoice!

Study Question

Q: Why did Job attribute the destructive deeds of Satan to the Lord by stating: "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21)?

A: Jesus declared in the Sermon on the Mount to "rejoice and be glad" when persecution arises. Yet, in order to be thankful for our trials, we must understand that all things come from the hand of God and are designed for our good and growth of character.

Since God is the ruler over all, and nothing happens without His permission, Job was able to state, "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21).

It was actually Satan who destroyed Job's flocks and herds, killed his servants, and then killed his ten children. Yet, before Satan was able to do this, he had to get permission from God to do so.

Job even asked his wife, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:10) God was pleased with this response and, after a time of trial, gave Job twice as much as was taken from him. This included ten more children and a long life to enjoy them.

The Apostle Paul also understood that even though Satan may be involved in an evil work, God has ultimate control and will use it for His purposes. Paul was given a thorn in the flesh, which he identified as the messenger of Satan. Yet, when he prayed three times for God to remove it, God explained that He had allowed it for Paul's benefit. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

God uses persecution and reproach in our lives to add to the splendor of His work in and through us and to conform us to the image and character of Christ.

Expect Surprises!

We must never forget that we are in constant combat. The lives of those under our care and concern depend upon our success. In warfare, one of the most effective tactics of the enemy is a surprise attack. This tactic is used by Satan in the poison darts of criticizing.

"Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me" (Psalm 41:9).

This prophetic Psalm experienced by David is repeated in Psalm 55:12–14: "If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God."

Truth embraced and lived out, divides. Jesus made this clear when He stated: "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division" (Luke 12:51). Jesus Himself demonstrated this division when He presented truth that required a life change. Many of His followers were offended and walked away from Him. (See John 6:66.) His betrayal was carried out by the least suspected disciple, since Judas had the only appointed position—the position of treasurer. (See John 13:29.)

Surprise attacks also produce surprise results in those who are watching.

When I watched my father take a stand for righteous living and walk away from being the president of his company, I said to myself, "If he can do it in the business world, I can do it in my high school." I then began a series of projects that would explain the Gospel to every classmate.

Surprise attacks came, not from my classmates, but from the superintendent. One day he called me into his office and demanded, "Are you trying to convert our student body?" I respectfully but enthusiastically stated that this was my intended goal. He then threatened that if I didn't stop a pre-school prayer meeting in the cafeteria, he would send a letter to every single family in our town telling them what he thought about "my faith."

But God has the last word! During those years I was meditating on the Scripture day and night and saw God's blessings in every area of my life. So one day the superintendent had to

congratulate me before the entire student body for winning a Future Scientist of America contest. Then at graduation he had to present to me a special scholarship fund collected by grateful fellow students!

Let's purpose now to rejoice whenever we are criticized. It will cause people to take a deeper look at what they are reacting to!

Command 3: Rejoice!

Related Character Quality

Joyfulness vs. Self-Pity

Joyfulness is the bright spirit and radiant countenance that come by being in full fellowship with the Lord.

A primary Hebrew word for joy is simchah. It means "to brighten up, to rejoice, to be or make glad." Related Biblical words are rejoice (Philippians 4:4), glad (Matthew 5:12), delight (Psalm 37:4), and blessed (Psalm 1:1).

The Rewards of Joy

There are physical, psychological, and spiritual rewards of joy, both in the life of the one who is joyful and in the lives of those who are around a joyful person, as joy tends to be contagious. Joy stimulates the release of a variety of hormones that strengthen and benefit the body. Thus…

1. Joy is our strength—(Nehemiah 8:10).
2. Joy is our health—(Proverbs 17:22).
3. Joy is our brightness—(Proverbs 15:13).

What Produces Joy?

1. **Our Eternal Salvation**
   Our greatest source of joy is eternal salvation. Jesus emphasized this point to His disciples when He said, "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20).
2. **A Good Conscience**
   Because joy comes from fellowship with the Lord, anything hindering that fellowship will diminish our joy. Unconfessed sin and iniquity will damage that fellowship, but "if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).
3. **The Precepts of God's Word**
   A precept is a practical application of the Law of God. It has the ring of truth and thus causes our hearts to rejoice: "The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart" (Psalm 19:8).
4. **The Commands of the Lord**
   The whole Law is fulfilled in the commandment to love God and love one another. Jesus said that it is by keeping this commandment that we experience His joy in our lives. (See John 15:11–12.)
5. **The Rhemas of Scripture**
   All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for personal application. The Holy Spirit will guide each believer to passages that have specific direction for a particular situation. As these rhemas are engrafted into our souls and made a living part of our lives, they produce special joy. (See Jeremiah 15:16.)
6. **The Giving of a Wise Answer**
   When we give wise and helpful answers, we have joy. "A man finds joy in giving an apt reply— and how good is a timely word!" (Proverbs 15:23).
7. **The Tests of Persecution**
   The very trials that most people fear and react to are designed by God to be sources of joy. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:2–3).

8. **The Spiritual Growth of Our Disciples**
   Our goal in life should be to bring as many people as we can to the Lord Jesus Christ and to help them grow spiritually. While this requires much effort, the reward is great joy. John stated, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 1:4).
9. **The Power of the Holy Spirit**
   When we respond to trials and persecutions by thanking God and rejoicing, He will reward us with the power of the Holy Spirit. "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Peter 4:14).
10. **The Confidence of a Job Well Done**
    The ultimate joy for every believer is to meet the Lord at the end of his life and to hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matthew 25:21).

Personal Evaluation: How Joyful Are You?

- Do people see a bright countenance when they look at you?
- Do you cry out to God whenever you are faced with a difficult situation?
- Do you experience God's working in response to your cries to Him?
- Do you look for opportunities to share these experiences with everyone you can?
- Do you use the names of God in your prayers?
- Do you enjoy times of rich, wholehearted fellowship with the Lord?
- Do you memorize the rhemas God gives you from Scripture?
- Do you thank God for every trial you experience?
- Are you discipling others in their spiritual growth?
- Do you put your whole heart and mind into the jobs you are given?

* A rhema is a verse or portion of Scripture that the Holy Spirit brings to our attention with application to a current situation or need for direction.

The words of Jesus are significant on this point. "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Jesus also stated, "The words [rhema] I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63).

Experience a Shining Face!

Something unexpected happens when we suffer for doing right. We are usually not aware of it, but those around us are aware of it. A spirit of glory and of God comes upon us.

"If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you." (1 Peter 4:14).

The word *glory* in the Greek is *doxa*. It means "honor" and "renown," the opposite of shame and dishonor. It is God's character and image that attracts attention and commands recognition. It is equivalent to splendor, brilliance, and radiance. It comprises all that God will be in His final revelation to us.

It embraces the excellence and precision of the Divine nature. God's glory begins within a believer and is reflected in the outward appearance, which attracts attention with splendor and brightness. (See *Hebrew/Greek Key Study Bible*, Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D., editor, pages 1708–1709.)

The source of our light is the face of Jesus shining in us and upon us, which happens during persecution.

Notice the relationship between God's face shining on us and the attacks from others: "My times are in your hands; deliver me from my enemies and from those who pursue me. Let your face

shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love" (Psalm 31:15–16). "…our enemies mock us. Restore us, O God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:6–7; see also Psalm 119:135).

Three disciples saw the brightness of Jesus' face on the Mount of Transfiguration when "His face shone like the sun" (Matthew 17:2), and Stephen saw the brightness of Jesus' face when the council flew upon him in a rage. (See Acts 7:54–60.)

Perhaps no man in the eighteenth century was more vilified, ridiculed, mocked, and reviled than John Wesley. He was made the laughingstock of newspaper articles, plays, sermons, and cartoons. His meetings were disrupted by mob action and false accusations. Yet, through it all, people were amazed to see the radiant countenance of this mighty man of God, and now he is one of the few people remembered from that century.

When we ask God to cause His face to shine upon a person, we are focusing on the reward that will come when that person responds in the right way to accusation. Tomorrow we will learn what that way involves. Meanwhile, let's continue to meditate on the rich treasures of the command to rejoice!

Daily Scriptures

In addition to meditation on Matthew 5:11–12, meditating on the verses below will provide you with further insight and understanding of Christ's command: Rejoice.

1 Peter 4:12–14

"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you."

1 Thessalonians 5:16–19

"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire."

2 Corinthians 12:9

"But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

Philippians 4:4, 6

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!. … Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

Trade in Your Reputation

Few experiences in life are more painful than having one's name and reputation damaged. Our name represents all that we are, and when it is slandered or vilified with false or distorted information, we are jolted into action—or reaction. We instinctively know that…

"A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold" (Proverbs 22:1).

We often try to increase respect for our name through personal riches, prestigious possessions, and praiseworthy achievements. The driving force behind this self-effort is usually a fear of man's rejection. God warns that "Fear of man will prove to be a snare…." (Proverbs 29:25). A snare is a death trap that holds its victims in its grip until destruction comes.

Our name is important and should not be tarnished by words, actions, or attitudes that harm other people. However, there is a far better name than ours which is rather to be chosen! It is the name of Jesus, which is above every name in heaven and on earth (see Philippians 2:9–11). The command to rejoice involves trading in our name and reputation for God's.

No longer should we wonder what people think of us, but rather we should ask, Do they see Jesus Christ in us?

When I was 29 years old, I was the director of a youth organization. For several years I had been developing a plan that I believed would be effective for youth. When I presented it to the board of directors, I was stunned by their reaction! They not only rejected and reviled the plan, but they brought ten accusations against me, which I believed were false or trivial. They also demoted me from being director to being a staff member under a much younger director.

During that grievous time, God assured me that if I would be thankful and faithful to Him, He would cause a good report to overtake their bad report. This is what actually happened, because the plan they rejected became the Basic Seminar. It has benefited millions of youth and families around the world.

God will also act on your behalf if you now declare from your heart, "O Lord, I hereby trade in my name and reputation for the holy and mighty name of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Pastor Chen

by Ken Pierpont

Pastor Chen spent 18 years in a prison work camp in China. Because he came from a background of moderate wealth and opportunity, the guards at the camp worked hard to break his spirit and indoctrinate him. He was so hungry at times that he was tempted to eat toothpaste. He was separated from his wife and his young church. While he was in prison, his wife died.

One of his greatest hardships was that he had no privacy to worship, pray, read, or memorize the Scriptures. He was under constant surveillance. Frequently, he prayed that God would allow him a place of privacy so he could enjoy fellowship with Him.

Soon the prison officials gave him a new assignment. In order to break his spirit and indoctrinate him further, they gave him the most difficult work assignment in the camp. They assigned him to the camp cesspool.

The sewer pit where he worked served 60,000 prisoners. His assignment was to scoop out human waste to be used for fertilizer. No one else wanted the job because it was lonely and repulsive and they feared deadly diseases.

His heart was broken when he went to work on his new assignment. Day after day working in the foul pit he wondered if his prayers were heard. To withstand the hardship, he would sing, pray, and quote Scripture aloud. One day it occurred to him that his assignment was a specific answer to prayer.

Because he worked in such a foul hole, none of the guards would get anywhere near him. He worked completely alone. He could pray, sing, and quote Scripture as loud as he wanted! He began to thank God and rejoice. There was no one there to hear him but his faithful God. His cesspool assignment lasted six years, and miraculously he never contracted a disease from it.

When he was released, the church for which he had labored and prayed had exploded in growth and vitality. He traveled to poor villages where he saw the hand of God at work. He represented the cause of the suffering church in China around the world.

Speaking before a huge missionary conference years later, he told the story of God's faithfulness to him in prison. With bright eyes he spoke of the fellowship that he enjoyed with the Lord in the prison cesspool. Standing before the huge crowd, the small Chinese pastor began to sing the song that he used to sing in the prison sewer.

> I come to the garden alone
> While the dew is still on the roses …
> And He walks with me and he talks with me
> And He tells me I am His own
> And the joy we share as we tarry there
> None other has ever known.

Pastor Chen had learned that the secret to rejoicing is not perfect circumstances, but a consciousness of the presence of the Lord Jesus. "… you will fill me with joy in your presence …" (Psalm 16:11).

When you are discouraged by difficult circumstances, misunderstanding, pressures, responsibilities, or outright persecution, rejoice! The presence of Jesus can turn a cesspool into a garden.

See Enemies as Agents!

Wisdom is basing responses on the bigger picture. This means recognizing that whatever happens to us is not the whim of fate, or the will of man, but the work of God. If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without God's approval, neither can anyone attack us without God's permission.

If we view revilers as our enemies, we will get angry and discouraged, but if we see them as agents for our good and God's glory, we will rejoice!

Paul was tormented and attacked so painfully that he pleaded with God three times to deliver him. When God explained that this messenger (agent) from Satan was allowed for the purpose of keeping Paul humble so that the power of God would rest upon him, Paul gloried in the assault and took pleasure in it. (See 2 Corinthians 12:6–10.)

Job had the same insight. Satan was clearly responsible for the destruction of Job's children, possessions, and health; yet, Job did not say, "God has given, and Satan has taken away." Instead, he said, "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away…" (Job 1:21).

God causes the wrath of men to praise Him by using revilers to bring about the very achievements that they ridiculed.

The brothers of Joseph reviled him for his preposterous dreams that one day they would bow down before him. In an act of hate and envy, they sold him as a slave, which actually brought his dreams to pass. Later, he told them, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20).

Jesus was reviled by the Pharisees for stating that if they destroyed the temple (of His body), He would raise it up in three days. Their cruel act of nailing Him to the cross allowed this historic achievement to come to pass for our salvation.

Actually, the pages of Scripture and history are filled with examples of great achievements that were facilitated through the reviling of opponents. Dr. Raymond Damadian was ridiculed by colleagues for thinking that he could design an imaging unit that would produce an image of internal organs. Their reactions spurred him on to invent the MRI scanner, which revolutionized diagnostic medicine.

Since this is the way of God, it is no wonder that we are to rejoice when all men speak evil of us falsely. God is getting such a person ready for great achievement here and for great rewards in heaven!

Ragna's Question

by Ken Pierpont

"Ken, can I ask you a question?" Ragna said. "Why are you so happy all of the time?"

The question took me by surprise. I had just survived a challenging commute into Columbus and was getting ready for the day's work. I wasn't sure if she was really serious or if her comment was just an off-hand reference to my habit of whistling wherever I go.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

I opened up the notebook I kept on my desk and, pointing to a picture of my family, said, "One reason I am so happy is because I have a house full of kids. That's what it says in the Bible.

Children are a heritage from the Lord. Happy is the man that has a quiver full of them. (See Psalm 127:3–5.)

"But I don't have any kids. How can I be happy?"

When she asked that, she stopped and watched my eyes. I knew she really wanted an answer.

"Ragna, you were created by God, and you were made to worship Him and enjoy Him. In this life there are many things that will give you temporary and incomplete happiness. You can enjoy food, relationships, romance, experiences, adventures, honors, possessions, and pleasures. All of them will bring some happiness, but inside you there is a deep spiritual hunger that no person, experience, or possession can ever fully satisfy. Only Jesus can do that."

I went on to explain the Gospel to my friend, and she listened thoughtfully. My happiness had given me an opportunity to share Christ.

There are many profound theological and philosophical arguments about the truth of the claims of Christianity. There are approaches to Christian apologetics complex enough to fill huge volumes. But maybe the most profound proof of the reality of Jesus is joy in the lives of His followers.

Dads should remember that. We do so desperately want our sons and daughters to know the reality of a living God and to walk in fellowship with Him all the days of their lives. They need to know God is real, even in the dark, even when they are tempted. They need a deep assurance that what they have been taught is true. They need to know that they can build their lives on it.

One of the most powerful arguments for the reality of the Christian faith is a "satisfied customer," and when that satisfied customer is your very own dad, that is powerful indeed. When you come to the end of your days, will your children say, "Dad was really a happy man, wasn't he?"

If you want to stimulate faith in your children, be happy. Rejoice. If you do, people might even ask you for the secret of your happiness.

Have a "GREAT" Response!

Great rewards are waiting for those who endure testing, including the power of God and a crown of life. "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12). If we could learn how to have the right response to every situation involving reviling, we would take a giant leap toward daily success.

Accusations that produce anger confirm to bystanders that we are at least partially at fault, but a joyful response is a strong witness of innocence.

G—Give thanks: "give thanks in all circumstances [including reviling] for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). If our first response is to thank God, we will have the right heart attitude to understand the deeper reasons for God allowing it to happen.

R—Rejoice: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). Giving thanks is an act of the will; rejoicing is a response of the spirit when we list the benefits that God intends to give us through the trial.

E—Engraft God's Word: "…humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you" (James 1:21). During His wilderness trial, Jesus defeated Satan three times using Scripture: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). We are to follow His example.

A—Appeal to God: "and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me" (Psalm 50:15). Crying out to God is powerful! David testified, "Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me" (Psalm 56:9).

T—Triumph With Good Works: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Peter 3:16).

Every relationship in your life will be successful if these five responses become an immediate response to attacks.

May God give us the wisdom and grace to have a GREAT response, beginning now!

Be a Happy Dad

by Ken Pierpont

When life's responsibilities are pressing, it is easy to forget how to rejoice. Our natural response to trouble is to murmur and complain, to become solemn and go through life with a wrinkled forehead. Then we complain that there are children's bikes in the driveway instead of rejoicing that there are children. We murmur about the menu instead of rejoicing that God has provided food.

One evening when I was a boy, our family was trying to adjust to an unfamiliar town, a troubled church, mild culture shock, and inadequate pay. We sat down to a meal and everyone could tell that Mom and Dad were under pressure. One of my little brothers reached for something without asking first and knocked over his drink.

Instantly, Dad sprang back from the table, knocking the chair over and striding from the room. The atmosphere was charged with tension, and we all sat and looked around in uncomfortable silence. No one spoke. We wondered if Dad would come back to eat.

In a minute we heard noise, and then Dad showed up in the doorway. He was dressed in a full-length rain coat. We all burst into laughter. Dad sat down and we enjoyed a meal together, laughing and talking at the same time.

Are you a solemn, sober, sullen dad, or do you lead your family in rejoicing when things are dark and difficult? Do you lift people's sights to God and to good when things are hard? You can if you simply obey the command to rejoice.

Command 3: Rejoice | Day 21

Document Your Responses!

Welcome to your 21st day of meditation! I once heard that if an activity is performed for 21 days, it becomes a habit. What a marvelous habit meditation would be! However, God's guarantee of complete success involves meditation on God's Word with the determination to carry it out.

Spiritual light received and acted upon brings more light, but light neglected or rejected brings darkness.

Our greatest hindrance in applying the command to rejoice when being reviled is the anger that erupts when little things go wrong in the family. Our responses to little irritations will establish our reactions to big assaults.

For this reason, the five steps of a "GREAT" response, which were shared yesterday, are vital. For your journal entry today I urge you to gather your family together and go over those five points. Select a situation in which you responded the wrong way, and write out what could have happened if you would have followed these five steps.

Then, think of a situation that will probably happen in your family, and apply the same five steps to it. You cannot imagine how this will encourage and instruct your family in the ways of God as they see you humble yourself and apply God's truth to your life!

The highest honor is given to a leader who teaches by example with a humble spirit.

Your focus on your family follows the example of David, who made his home a priority: "I will be careful to lead a blameless life…. I will walk in my house with blameless heart" (Psalm 101:2).

When you carry out this project and record the results, you will have "best-seller" information for other fathers who will be eager to find out what you did to conquer anger and what the good results were in your family!

Comprehend Light!

There are two vital qualities about light which, if understood, will have a major impact on daily success. They are introduced in Christ's fourth command.

Command Four

"... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

In order to comprehend these two qualities, we must understand the sequence by which light came into the world. The first mention of light is found in Genesis. Darkness covered the earth, but then God spoke, "Let there be light." However, the darkness did not receive the light. Thus, God separated the light from darkness. The light He called day, and the darkness He called night. (See Genesis 1:3–5.)

The second, parallel account is found in the Gospel of John, which appropriately begins with the same words of Genesis 1:1: "in the beginning." John also speaks of darkness upon the earth and how all things were made by Christ, Who is the Creator and the Light. He then reveals that this is "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world." (See John 1:1–9.) There is a correlation between the first quality of light and love that needs to be emphasized.

Light does not choose whom it will benefit and neither does love. Every person is loved by God and should be loved by us. Therefore, everyone we meet should see God's light and love in us.

"Selective love" leads to failure. Jesus reminds us that God causes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust. If we "brighten up" only when we meet our friends, we are no better than sinners, because they do the same. (See Matthew 5:46–47.)

One day I was at a wedding reception and noticed a couple sitting alone across the room. I experienced a sudden prompting to go over and greet them; however, I reasoned with myself that I did not know them. The thought persisted until I finally walked over and got acquainted.

When I asked what type of work the man did, he stated, "I am the city attorney." When I inquired about his current projects, he said, "Tomorrow we are taking final steps to demolish a county facility." Then his eyes brightened up, and he exclaimed, "Say, why don't we give this property to your organization?!" I quickly responded, "We will accept it!" That is how we received a beautiful 375,000 sq. ft. children's home on 25 acres of country property from the city of Indianapolis at a cost of one dollar!

How much have we failed to receive because we "shine" only to the people we know? Let's purpose that starting today we will brighten up to everyone we meet.

Command 4: Let Your Light Shine

Study Question

Q: Since "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5), how does God use darkness to accomplish His purposes?

A: Darkness was one of the first elements identified in Creation, and it was not until God created light that He separated darkness. "God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness" (Genesis 1:4).

Throughout Scripture, God creates and uses both darkness and light for His purposes. He is a powerful, awesome God, and therefore He can use anyone and anything to display His might. Here are a few examples of His use of darkness to gain greater glory:

Darkness inspires awe.
"The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was" (Exodus 20:21).

Darkness reveals God's power to create it.
"Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt—darkness that can be felt." So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and total darkness covered all Egypt for three days" (Exodus 10:21–22).

Darkness is a form of God's protection.
"Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long" (Exodus 14:19–20).

Darkness is a motivation to seek the hidden things of God.
"He reveals the deep things of darkness and brings deep shadows into the light" (Job 12:22).
"I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name" (Isaiah 45:3).

Darkness confounds the wicked.
"But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble" (Proverbs 4:19).

Darkness is used for punishment of wrongdoing.
"If a man curses his father or mother, his lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness" (Proverbs 20:20).

Check Your Brightness!

The second quality about light that is vital for daily success is its incompatibility with darkness. Just as God separated the light from the darkness on the first day of Creation, so He wants to separate the children of light from the children of darkness.

To the degree that we try to partake of the world, we diminish our brightness.

God identifies all people as members of one of two categories: "children of light" or "children of darkness." He states to believers, "You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness" (1 Thessalonians 5:5). We became children of light at salvation when God "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Colossians 1:13).

As children of light, we are to live on a higher level than the children of darkness. We are to "live a life of love…. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light…. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them" (Ephesians 5:2, 8, 11).

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul explains that we will have interaction with unbelievers through the course of daily responsibilities. However, in these contacts, we are to be light to them. Beyond this, he makes the following appeal: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? …Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord…" (2 Corinthians 6:14, 17).

A "dim" believer has too much light to be welcomed by the children of darkness and not enough brightness to be comfortable with the children of light. What a dilemma!

This instruction has a profound application to business associations, because one of the characteristics of a person in darkness is greed. Jesus warned that if the light of one's eye became evil [greedy], his whole body would be full of darkness. (See Matthew 6:22–23.)

Is the brightness of your witness being dimmed by the influences of the world? If so, ask God for wisdom today to "come out and be separate."

Command 4: Let Your Light Shine

Related Character Quality

Generosity vs. Stinginess

Generosity is demonstrating the nature of God by wisely reinvesting the resources that He has entrusted to us.

Several Biblical words describe the concepts that make up generosity. First and most important is that of love. The Biblical word for love is charity, which embodies giving to the poor and needy. The Apostle John said that love without giving is hypocrisy. (See 1 John 3:17.)

The second Biblical word is sowing, because generosity follows the laws of the harvest. The more generous we are in sowing, the greater will be our harvest in true riches. (See 2 Corinthians 9:6.)

Another word describing generosity is distributing. One Greek word for distribute is koinoneo, which has the rich meaning of fellowship among believers. We are to give (koinoneo) to the needs of the saints. (See Romans 12:13.)

The word grace is also related to generosity. Paul used this word in praising the Gentile believers for their liberal distribution of gifts to the saints in Jerusalem and to all men. He went on to explain that it was through God's grace that they had the means to give. (See 2 Corinthians 9:8.)

The Rewards of Generosity

Many people refuse to be generous because they falsely believe that what they give, they lose. Yet the opposite is true. Those who are generous receive far more than they give.

A Bright Countenance

Generosity is at the very heart of the nature of God, and because God is light, those who are generous share in His brightness. When Jesus spoke of giving, He related it to the eyes. A good eye is a generous eye, and a stingy eye is an evil eye. (See Matthew 6:22–23.)

The Love of the Lord

"God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). The love that God has for a generous giver is an agapao love, which is a giving love. Thus, when we give to others cheerfully, God gives back to us.

The Fear of the Lord

The great reward of the fear of the Lord is described in Proverbs 22:4: "Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life." This fear is learned by generosity. "Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year …. so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always" (Deuteronomy 14:22–23).

Treasures in Heaven

The promise of treasures in heaven was given to the rich young ruler if he would exercise generosity. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21).

Victory Over the "Root of Evil"

Generosity breaks the bondage of greed and overcomes the love of money. The love of money gives us the illusion that our lives are made up of the things that we possess. It also makes us idolaters when we expect from money what only God can provide.

Escape From Lusts and Sorrows

Those who desire to be rich "fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires…. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:9–10).

Personal Evaluation: How Generous Are You?

- Do you see God as the Provider of all wealth?
- Do you view yourself as a steward of God's resources?
- Have you dedicated all your resources to God?

- Do you honor God with a generous portion of all your (His) increase?
- Are you living as frugally as you can so you have more to reinvest?
- Do you distribute to the needs of fellow believers when you know about them?
- When you give, do you base it on what you can afford or on what God can provide through you?
- Have you rejected the goal of being rich in money, but made it your goal to be rich in good works?
- How often have you sacrificed things you wanted in order to give to the needs of others?

Begin to Demonstrate Generosity

Dedicate Resources to God

The first step toward generosity is to dedicate all our resources to God, including our money, time, possessions, and strength.

Practice Personal Frugality

Based on the requirements of stewardship, we must spend as little as possible on ourselves so that we can have as much as possible to reinvest in ways that will bring multiplied returns.

Give as God Directs

The goal of generosity is to demonstrate the love of God so that others will be drawn to Him. When a person in need receives an anonymous gift that meets the need, God is glorified and the giver is in line for eternal rewards.

If we give with the motivation of public praise, we receive the praise of people, but lose out on the greater rewards that come from God. "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:3–4).

Shine With Good Works!

As we continue meditating on Matthew 5:16, we see the direct connection between letting our light shine and doing good works. In fact, it is through our good works that the world is able to see the light and love of Christ in us. It is for this important reason that Jesus made us unique through salvation.

Jesus redeemed "us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:14).

It is certainly important to share our faith with others. However, the command does not say, "Let your light so shine that men will hear your good words." Actually, many people will not want to hear what we have to say until they see our works of love. This is why God makes good works such a priority for believers.

- "This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone" (Titus 3:8).
- "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:24).
- "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:12).

A good work is meeting a need in the life of another that will cause him or her to give glory to God.

This wise counsel, "Wherever you are, witness for Christ, and when necessary use words," is based on the words found in 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have"

The Communist leaders of a certain nation were so impressed with the brightness of young people on our staff that they asked if 30 of them could come talk to the students in their public schools about character. However, we were told that we could not witness about our faith. We enthusiastically accepted this "good work," based on the powerful witness of the brightness of these staff members.

The government assigned a Communist official to be with our group throughout the week. At the end of the week he stated, "You have passed the test. Now we want you to come back on a more permanent basis." As I write this, many young people and families we have sent to this nation are having a profound impact on leaders, parents, and students. They are permitted to answer questions about their faith, and as a result, many individuals have put their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

What good works could we invite others to join us in doing so that the world will see our love for Christ and for them and then ask us for a reason of the hope that we have?

Daily Scriptures

In addition to meditation on Matthew 5:16, meditating on the verses below will provide you with further insight and understanding of Christ's command: Let Your Light Shine.

John 8:12

"When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Ephesians 5:8

"… but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light."

Ephesians 2:10

"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Philippians 2:14–15

"Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe."

1 Peter 2:12

"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

Titus 3:8

"This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone."

Do Good to All!

We are given an important instruction in Galatians 6:10: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" How could we possibly do good to all people? There is an answer.

The leaders of cities, states, and nations are responsible to God for doing good. As we assist them with their responsibilities, we benefit those under their care.

In Scripture, government officials are described as "ministers of God for doing good" three times. They are ordained by God to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good. (See Romans 13:1–10 and 1 Peter 2:13–14.)

Paul writes, "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:1–4).

Notice the relationship between prayer support for leaders and widespread salvation. It is the leaders of nations who can make possible the fulfillment of the Great Commission to teach "all nations… everything I have commanded you."

Our good works should be carried out so that leaders get the credit, God gets the glory, and we have the joy of eternal rewards.

Several years ago, Dr. Kyle Guimon went to an African nation as an ambassador for Christ. He hired some men from the police department to assist him. One day their officer, who was a Christian, said to him, "My men tell me that you actually serve them, rather than having them serve you. Why do you do this?" Dr. Guimon responded, "Because that is my purpose in being here." Then he added, "How could I serve you?"

The officer thought a moment and then explained that some relatives had died and that he must adopt their child; however, he was not financially able to do this. Dr. Guimon asked if he could financially support that child. The police officer was amazed and gratefully accepted his offer. The officer then told higher officials about this unique Christian.

Soon, Dr. Guimon was working directly with the top leaders of this nation, one of whom attended a leadership conference we sponsored. Today, those leaders, who have a totally different religion, are giving Dr. Guimon land, facilities, and preferential treatment so that he can do good to a large number of people.

What good works can you do for the government leaders in your area? One way to start is by sending a personal letter thanking them for their sacrifices and the benefits they bring to your life.

Generous Souls

by Ken Pierpont

One of the best ways to let your light shine before men is to cultivate generosity in your soul. One autumn day, I saw this firsthand.

Since it was a perfect autumn day, I was glad to have an excuse to get out of the study for a pastoral visit. In the late afternoon, I drove to Mr. Smith's house. It was a nice drive, past neat Amish farms, through a section of a National Forest, over the White River, with leaves floating downstream on the water. The salmon were running and fishermen eagerly worked the water. The sun was shining and it was sweatshirt-cool.

When I drove up, Mr. Smith was standing in the door of his shop. There was a box of apples sitting on the machine nearest the door. I saw them and coveted one. He must have seen me. "Try one of those," he offered. I happily obliged.

It was picked fresh from an orchard down the road, the perfect apple, Gala Royal—my favorite variety. I have been known to pay outrageous prices for a Gala. It was sweet, crisp, fresh, thin-skinned, and perfect.

An apple is a miracle, a marvel, and a wonder of God's creative power. In the three or four minutes it takes to eat an apple on an autumn afternoon, you have enjoyed the hope of springtime blossoms, the product of long summer days, and a piece of autumn in the palm of your hand.

I tossed the core away and made small talk with the Smiths while the farmer across the road harvested corn. A breeze swept leaves across the lawn in a melancholy steady flow.

While we chatted, Mr. Smith got a small box and put a few apples in it. I smiled. This is one of the fringe benefits of my job. Sometimes parishioners give you zucchini, sometimes garden-ripe

tomatoes, sometimes even banana nut bread, and almost always a cup of coffee. (You know you live in a small town when you have to lock your car … to keep people from putting zucchini in it.)

When I left, he surprised me. He put the big box of apples in the back of my van and kept the small one for his family. I offered a weak and completely insincere objection.

I drove home the back way, down a gravel road, so I could see a pretty little white country church on the way home and eat apples. Driving home that mellow fall evening, I thought about being the kind of man who would keep the small box for myself and give away the big box to my friend.

The book of Proverbs says, "A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed" (Proverbs 11:25).

Command 4: Let Your Light Shine | Day 26

Make Good Works Great Works!

We were sitting around a large conference table at our Oak Brook Headquarters, when the director of the Department of Education of Moscow, Russia, asked this direct question: "How can your organization assist our teachers and students?"

I said to the director, "We are committed to doing all we can to help; however, the resources are not within us, but rather with the Lord. I know that He will release them to us if we agree ahead of time to give Him the glory for doing it." Here was our opportunity to apply the Scripture, "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know" (Jeremiah 33:3).

First, there was silence, and then all of the officials verbally agreed that if God provided for their needs, they would publicly acknowledge His provision. Later that afternoon, we received several unexpected phone calls from companies. One company offered to give thousands of pairs of shoes, and another offered to give 1,500 fur coats!

Months later, I was at a meeting in Moscow when that director announced to thousands of pensioner teachers the gifts that were being given. She concluded by stating, "We are thankful to God for these provisions."

A good work becomes a great work when it is achieved by the supernatural power of God.

In every age and civilization, people will worship the god whom they perceive as being the most powerful. This was true in the days of Elijah. He declared to the nation: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). The people answered not a word until they agreed to a "power contest." The prophets of Baal cried out to their god, and nothing happened. Then Elijah cried out to the Lord God.

Only when the nation saw a supernatural work of God did the people fall down and worship Him, saying, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!" (1 Kings 18:39).

That same God is waiting for people to cry out to Him today. Often God will arrange impossible circumstances that can be resolved only by crying out to Him. His purpose in doing this is to affirm our need for Him and to demonstrate to the world His power.

What needs do people around us have, which if God met, would demonstrate His power? Let's in faith apply the promise of Jeremiah 33:3 to these needs.

Command 4: Let Your Light Shine | Day 27

Do Even Greater Works!

We have an awesome promise that when the commands of Christ reside in us, we will be able to do greater works than Jesus did—not in quality, but in quantity (see John 14:12, 15:7–8). When Jesus opened up the synagogue scroll to Isaiah 61, He read a list of the works that He came to do.

Jesus healed the sick, but eventually they all died. His greater works involve healing of the soul and spirit of a person.

Notice how the anointing of Jesus deals primarily with the soul and spirit: "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God…" (Isaiah 61:1–2).

The greater our works are for God, the greater will be the brightness of our light and the glory that is given to God.

Teresa Apple's story illustrates the bondage and captivity of the soul and the urgent need for the good news of Christ's commands. For two and a half years, she had been in so much pain that she would cry every day. She was able to get only one or two hours of sleep per day, and she was taking fifteen medications at each meal.

As I talked with her, we soon discovered that the root cause of her problem was a broken heart and deep resentment for the ones who were responsible for her father-in-law's death. Three specific commands of Christ were explained to Teresa and her husband. Right then, Teresa tearfully and hopefully applied these life-giving commands.

Within an hour the pain had subsided. That evening she no longer needed her pills, and that night, for the first time in two and a half years, she was without pain! Six months have passed since the Lord healed her, and her total health continues to be strong!

As we continue to meditate on all the commands of Christ and apply them to our lives, we also will have the joy and rewards of sharing them with others. Look for opportunities today to share Christ's commands with those in bondage and see how the Lord will work to set them free!

Win by Writing!

Several years ago I asked a group of young people, "What is your greatest irritation?" Someone called out, "Younger brothers and sisters!" Many others groaned in affirmation. Then I explained that the answer to this problem was to write a book on how to make brothers and sisters best friends. The challenge of writing the book would open up insights and answers that would never be understood otherwise.

One day Sarah Mally and her younger brother and sister started such a project. Their book, titled Making Brothers and Sisters Best Friends, has now gone through three printings and is ready for a fourth one in Spanish. Sarah and her family are being invited by a growing number of groups throughout the country to share their message. Sarah also initiated Bright Lights, a discipleship ministry with young ladies, and currently there are 90 Bright Lights groups in the United States. Part of this ministry involves teaching the girls positive character qualities, which promote family harmony.

Sarah traces the success the Lord has given her to a time when she was eight years old and her father challenged her to memorize chapters and books of the Bible. She recently finished memorizing the entire New Testament.

The pen is mightier than the sword, because ideas change behavior, and behavior changes the world.

Along with memorizing Scripture, you would be wise to challenge your sons and daughters to turn their greatest frustrations into a book.

Meanwhile, there are many possible entries for your journal this week:

- What have I learned about light and love being non-directional? How have I improved my friendly greetings to strangers? What results have I seen?

- In order to brighten my light for Christ, what separations from activities, possessions, or groups associated with darkness have I made?
- What good works have I done or plan to do so that leaders get the credit, God gets the glory, and I get the joy of eternal rewards?
- What has been the result of writing a personal letter of thanks to local government leaders?
- What experiences have caused me to cry out to God, and what were the results?

The light that shines the farthest must shine the brightest at home!

Enter Into Fulfillment!

The Apostle Paul declared, "So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good." He also stated, "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin" (Romans 7:12, 14).

Many people have a general awareness of God's Law as it is expressed in the Ten Commandments, and since they have not murdered anyone or committed adultery, they feel that they have kept the Law as much as is humanly possible. However, we must all admit to telling at least one lie, and James made this statement: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10).

So often we acknowledge that we have broken God's Law, and take refuge in the teaching that Christ came to do away with the Law. However, Jesus said:

Command Five

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5:17).

There are three primary ways in which Jesus fulfilled God's Law. First, He fulfilled all the prophecies and analogies in the Law that related to Him. He is the spotless Lamb of God (see John 1:29), and He was "a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (Isaiah 53:3).

Second, He perfectly fulfilled all the regulations and requirements of the Law. When the Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath by healing a man, He pointed out a statute in the Law that allowed them to pull an ox out of the ditch on the Sabbath.

Third, He fully satisfied God's requirement for the penalty of sin. Because man sinned, blood had to be shed: "…Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). The perfect and complete fulfillment of God's Law has great significance for us.

When a person believes, repents, and is baptized, he enters into Christ and becomes one with all that Christ did—including the perfect fulfillment of God's Law. (See Romans 6 and 7.)

Being "in Christ" through salvation means that when He died, we died with Him. When He was buried, we were buried with Him, and when He rose up from the grave, we rose with Him! (See Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12.)

Therefore, God's requirement of holy perfection in order to enter heaven was met by every believer at salvation. We are now perfect in Him. (See Colossians 2:10.) Let us recognize our willful violation of God's holy Law and affirm or reaffirm our belief in the Lord Jesus Christ and our acceptance of His perfect life, death, and resurrection. Salvation came to the publican when he cried out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Have you cried out with such a prayer?

Command 5: Honor God's Law

Study Question

Q: Since the Law cannot save anyone, why did Abraham, the "father of faith," tell the rich man his brothers would not be saved from hell unless they heeded Moses and the prophets?

A: Jesus gave the significant account of Lazarus and the rich man when He explained the important place of the Law of Moses and the prophets. In the parable, Abraham told the rich man that if his brothers did not heed Moses and the prophets, "they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16:31.)

How could it be that a person who rejects Moses and the prophets would not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead? The answer is that Christ's redemption is what the Old Testament is all about. Jesus emphasized this when He said to the Pharisees, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39).

Scripture makes it abundantly clear that no one can be saved by the works of the Law, because we cannot keep the Law to the level of perfection that a holy God demands. (See Galatians 2:16.) Therefore, we are to see those words in the light of New Testament truth in order to understand how the kingdom of God functions and how we must relate to it.

To focus on the works of the Law will bring discouragement or false pride, but to focus on the words of the Law and the prophets will reveal a beautiful picture of the Lord Jesus Christ, Who said, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me" (John 5:46–47).

Be Great in God's Kingdom!

After commanding us not to think that He had come to destroy the Law, Jesus gave the following instruction: "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:18–19).

Why would Jesus issue such strong penalties or rewards for breaking or obeying the least of the commandments? To understand this command, we must remember Jesus' response to the lawyer who asked, "Which is the greatest commandment?" Jesus declared:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30–31).

If this is the greatest commandment, then why is so much importance placed on the least commandments? Jesus explained the relationship between the two when He stated, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:40).

Therefore, every law, great or small, is a practical expression of how to love God and how to love others. Failing in any area and teaching others to fail in that same area is a major concern to God.

Jesus gave further warning about this matter in the next verse: "… unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

The scribes and the Pharisees focused on the letter of the Law and missed the spirit of the Law. Because they missed the point of loving others, they actually negated the laws of God. For example, the Law tells us to honor our parents. However, the Pharisees worked out a clever plan whereby they could dedicate their money to the Temple, while still using it, but tell their parents they had no money to give them. Jesus condemned this by saying:

"… you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition" (Matthew 15:6).

So, to be great in God's kingdom, let's begin to look at the Law through the eyes of Jesus. Let's meditate on each command until we understand how it teaches us to love God and love others.

Command 5: Honor God's Law

Related Character Quality

Love vs. Selfishness

Love is giving to the basic needs of others without being motivated by personal reward.

Genuine love is the most important character quality. Every other quality must be motivated by it, or the quality will be empty and of no benefit (see 1 Corinthians 13:3). Agape love is the greatest commandment given by God (see Matthew 22:36–40). It is expected of a local church and is the badge of a true disciple (see John 13:35). It is one of the primary requests of Jesus in His final prayer for His disciples. (See John 17:23–26.)

God's Description of Love

Because love is so important and there are many distorted ideas of what it is, God defines exactly what it involves in 1 Corinthians 13.

Love is patient.
It does not lose heart. It perseveres with patience and bravely endures misfortunes and troubles. It bears offenses and injuries with joy and confidence that a good reward will come from God's hand.

Love is kind.
It looks for ways to be useful and giving. It focuses on people's needs rather than on their faults.

Love does not envy.
It does not boil with desires to have that which belongs to others. It is not possessive of what has been entrusted to it. It is content with basic necessities and rich fellowship with the Lord.

Love does not boast.
It does not boast of its abilities or its accomplishments. It does not look for ways to promote itself or extol its virtues with rhetorical embellishments.

Love is not proud.
It does not cherish exaggerated ideas of its own importance. It does not look down on others with contempt or disdain.

Love is not rude.
It does not flaunt itself to attract attention or to stir up sensual desires in others. It does not act indecently or shamefully. It has good manners.

Love is not self-seeking.
It does not crave things for its own pleasure or profit. It does not focus on itself, but on the needs of others. It is willing to lay down its life for the benefit of others.

Love is not easily angered.
It does not get irritated or exasperated. It conquers anger and wrath. It is not quickly excited to rivalry but rather to helping others succeed.

Love holds no record of wrongs.
It guards its heart and mind and brings every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. It distinguishes between good and evil and rejects the evil. It does not retain wrong desires or plans and does not harbor hurtful feelings toward others.

Love does not delight in evil.
It grieves when evil people are promoted and unjust laws are made. It does not secretly desire to carry out the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes, or the prideful goals of life.

Love rejoices in the truth.
It delights in God's Law and meditates on it day and night. It dwells upon thoughts that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of a good report. It is eager to share truth with others and rejoices when truth prevails.

Personal Evaluation: How Loving Are You?

- Do you tend to get discouraged and want to give up when everything seems to go wrong?
- Do you look for ways to be useful and help out wherever you go?
- Do you tend to envy the possessions or opportunities of other people?
- Do you enjoy telling about your achievements more than listening to the accomplishments of others?
- Do you tend to look down on those who do not live by your standards?
- Do you choose your clothing with a motive of drawing attention to yourself?
- Do you know and practice good manners wherever you are?
- Do you tend to want your own way and argue when you do not get it?
- Do you easily get irritated or exasperated with others?
- Do you harbor grudges against those who have hurt you?
- Do you dwell on secret desires to fulfill the lust of the flesh?
- Do you meditate on God's Word day and night and delight to do His will?

Have Your Soul Converted!

David begins his praise of God's Law with a profound statement in Psalm 19:7: "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul." One of the functions of God's Law is to convert the mind, will, and emotions so that they are in harmony with God's ways and thoughts. This is necessary because of God's assessment recorded in Isaiah 55:8:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD."

In Psalm 19:7, the Hebrew word translated reviving is shub. It means to "return … come back to; to turn around (figuratively); to turn to Jehovah … to cease from … to restore (Lexical Aids to the Old Testament, The Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible). This same goal for the soul is given to us in James 1:21, "Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."

So, how does the Law of God convert the soul? Note the sequence in Psalm 19:

- "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul." The Law reveals the holy nature of God, which is in direct contrast to the sinful nature.
- "The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple." Testimonies are the stories of God's dealings with individuals and His nation. They reveal His ways, which often involve the birth, death, and fulfillment of a vision.
- "The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart." Precepts are Biblical principles applied to specific situations. The heart affirms their wisdom.
- "The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes." As we read God's Word, the Holy Spirit reveals to us truths that we would not otherwise understand and brings us to conclusions that we would not reach using our own reasoning.
- "The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever." When we are aware that God is watching and evaluating every one of our words, thoughts, and actions, we begin to understand wisdom, which is an essential tool for every converted soul.
- "The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous." The formal decrees of God are just and right because they are expressions of His holy nature.

Until the soul is converted, we will not understand the ways of God and will often be frustrated by things that happen.

God's Law can convert our souls, but only as we read it. When was the last time you read the five books of Moses?

Discover Hidden Treasures!

We live in a day when the Law of God has been ruled out of legal systems, rejected by many churches, and reacted to by many Christians. The result is that every man does what is right in his own eyes, and the great riches and rewards that God wants to show the world are lost.

Now is the time for us to realize that there are rich treasures of wisdom and power in God's Law. When we realize this, God will glorify Himself through our lives, and the world will know that the Lord of hosts rules and reigns through His Law.

"It is time for you to act, O LORD; your law is being broken. Because I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold, and because I consider all your precepts right, I hate every wrong path" (Psalm 119:126–128).

Any person, family, city, or nation that discovers and uses the treasures of God's wisdom will become a marvel to the world. This is the promise that God gave to the nation of Israel regarding His commandments: "Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today" (Deuteronomy 4:6–8).

So how do we discover the hidden treasure of God's wisdom? James gives us the starting point:

"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, gives this instruction: "My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you … and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:1–5).

The key to wisdom is having a proper fear of God, because "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). Let's take the first step by crying out to God for wisdom and lifting up our voices for understanding!

Choosing to Honor God's Law

by Ken Pierpont

The second year he played baseball, my son Kyle was offered a spot on the all-star team. He was sitting beside me when I got the call from the coach. He said, "Ken, I would like to have Kyle on the all-star team. I know you are religious and I just wanted you to know that if I pick Kyle for the all-star team he will have to be willing to play on Sunday. No pressure, but I need to know if Kyle can do it. If not, I will need to call someone else."

"Guy, let me talk with Kyle, and I will call you back."

I got off the phone, and I could see the excitement in Kyle's eyes. "Dad, do you think I could play? The games wouldn't start until church is over, would they?"

"Let's think about that, son," I said. "I want you to read a passage in the Bible, and I want you to tell me what you think we should do. Go get your Bible and open it up to Isaiah 58:13–14. Read those verses."

A few minutes later he came back with his Bible and sat down on the floor at the foot of my chair and began to read: "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle

words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob. The mouth of the LORD has spoken" (Isaiah 58:13–14).

When he finished reading, I said, "What do you think you should do, Kyle?" He looked disappointed and said, "I shouldn't play, should I."

I said, "Kyle, let me tell you a story. There once was a great runner in Scotland. His name was Eric Liddell. His parents were missionaries in China. He was very fast, so fast he was chosen to represent his homeland, the country of Scotland, in the Olympic Games. This was a great, great honor.

When it came time for the time trials, they were scheduled on the Lord's Day. Eric Liddell believed that running on Sunday would violate the fourth commandment. He could not do it. Not for fame, or money, not even for his country. He told them he could not. They put pressure on him. They said it was his patriotic duty. Many thought he was a fool, but he was a man of conviction.

His strength was in running short distances, but because he refused to run on the Lord's Day he was asked to run a longer distance. He hadn't trained for the distance, which was four times as long, but he ran and qualified to compete in the Olympic Games.

Just before the race, he was handed a slip of paper with a quotation from 1 Samuel that simply said; "Those who honor me I will honor." He ran. He had honored God's Law and God honored him before all the watching world. He won the gold medal for beloved Scotland. He won the admiration of the nation.

He went on to speak of Christ all over Scotland to groups of young people. Later he served as a missionary in China.

"Kyle, we can play baseball six days a week, but let's agree that we will always keep the Lord's Day special. I believe that if you will honor God like Eric Liddell did, God will honor you."

We called the coach and thanked him for the offer, but turned him down. The next year Kyle had the best year ever. He was the key hitter and the key pitcher for his team. At the end of the year, the coach of the all-star team called and said, "If I promise not to ask Kyle to play on Sunday, will you let him pitch for the all-star team this year?"

"I'm sure he would love to do that," I said.

When I got off the phone I told Kyle, and after he spent some time jumping around the room we remembered the story of Eric Liddell and we stopped to thank God.

Those summer nights the whole family enjoyed watching Kyle play under the lights in the crisp uniform of the all-stars. It is a fond memory to all of us to this day and a reminder of the importance of honoring God's Law.

Experience a Burning Heart!

I have often wondered if I would ever experience the intensity of longing to which David referred when he wrote, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God" (Psalm 42:1). About three years ago, I discovered a key to making this happen, which is based on the following passage:

"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

Like so many others, I was taught to "divide" the Scriptures at the cross. Anything before the cross was assigned to the Law, and anything after the cross was grace. The tragedy of this interpretation is that it puts most of Christ's teachings under the Law.

In fact, those who taught this division did not know what to do with Christ's teachings, so they assigned them to some future kingdom age. This takes the heart out of the Gospel of Christ and removes its power for kingdom living.

When I finally understood that the central message of Scripture was the commands of Christ, the Law and the prophets are their foundations, and the epistles reflect applications of these commands, I experienced a whole new excitement in the Word of God and in my walk with Him.

For example, Jesus commanded, "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1). So we go to the Law and the prophets to find the foundation of this command. There we read about the Feast of Unleavened Bread: for seven days they were to have no yeast in the house and anyone who ate yeast was "cut off from Israel." (See Exodus 12:15.) Then we go to the epistles to find an application of this command. Paul tells the Corinthian church to cut off fellowship with the immoral man, because "a little yeast works through the whole batch … . Therefore let us keep the Festival … with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:1–8).

When I saw this connection, I had the same kind of joy that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus must have had when Jesus began with Moses and all the prophets and explained how they related to Himself. They later said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32) These disciples knew the Law, and they had heard Jesus teach for three years, but they had never put the two together.

Finding these treasures requires searching, just like we would search for a vein of silver or buried treasure. When we find this threefold confirmation of truth, our hearts "burn" with joy. Let's do a diligent search for each command, so that we can correctly handle the word of truth.

Discern True Intent!

There is a common perception that in the Old Testament God reveals Himself as a harsh and unloving God and that in the New Testament He reveals Himself as a loving and compassionate God Who forgives our sins and overlooks our transgressions.

"I the LORD do not change" (Malachi 3:6).

In reality, the commands that God gave to the nation of Israel in the Law of Moses do not seem as strict as the commands that God gave to New Testament disciples through the teachings of Christ. Christ clarified the true intent of the Law of Moses.

Law of Moses	Teachings of Christ
1. Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment	1. anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment
2. Do not commit adultery	2. anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart
3. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth	3. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also
4. Love your neighbor and hate your enemy	4. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you
5. Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce	5. anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress

"But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do" (1 Peter 1:15).

Those who try to take comfort in a supposed New Testament "attitude of leniency" toward sin need to hear again the words of Paul: "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient" (Ephesians 5:6). However, there is hope, because "where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Romans 5:20).

Let us embrace the holy Law of God, recognize our sinful condition before it, and come boldly before the throne of grace to obtain the grace we need to live it out. (See Hebrews 4:15.)

Delight in God's Law!

The promise of complete success and prosperity is not only for reading the Law of God or studying it, but includes the aspect of delighting in it.

"But his delight is in the law of the LORD ... Whatever he does prospers" (Psalm 1:2–3).

When I experience a need to increase my delight in God's Law, I read through Psalm 119. It lifts up the Law of God as a diamond in the brilliant light of God's wisdom, and turns it in various directions so that we can enjoy the splendor of each facet, as seen through the eyes of David:

- Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD. (1)
- I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word. (16)
- Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. (18)
- My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times. (20)
- Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors. (24)
- Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. (35)
- for I delight in your commands because I love them. (47)
- The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold. (72)
- Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. (97)
- Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them. (129)
- Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them. (140)
- I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil. (162)
- Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble. (165)
- I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight. (174)

Enthusiasm is contagious. That in which we delight will be of interest to those around us.

If you want a challenging exercise on this day of journaling, take a piece of paper and put on the left-hand side the things from Psalm 119 that God expects us to do and on the right-hand side the things He will do. You may discover that you are trying to do what God promises He will do, and are expecting God to do things that are your responsibility. One of the things we are to do is to delight ourselves in Him and in His Law. Then, He promises to give us the desires of our heart. (See Psalm 37:4.)

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 5:17

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

Psalm 119:11

"I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."

Joshua 1:8

"Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."

Psalm 1:2–3

"But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers."

Psalm 119:97–98

"Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me."

Galatians 3:24

"So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith."

2 Timothy 3:16–17

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Put Out Fires!

When we offend others, or when they perceive that we have wronged them, a destructive fire is kindled in them. The heat of their anger feeds the fire. The longer we allow it to burn, the more damage it will do in their lives and in the lives of others to whom the fire spreads.

Because of this, God commands:

Command Six

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23–24).

This is an amazing command! God is so concerned about reconciliation that He wants us to interrupt our worship of Him in order to restore fellowship with an offended brother. Actually, reconciliation is true worship, because whatever we do to others, we do to Christ. (See Matthew 25:40.)

There is another reason why this command is so vital. Jesus introduces it with the warning that if we attack a person's character by calling him a fool, we will be in danger of hell fire. This is certainly not referring to eternal hell, because we do not go to hell for calling a person a fool but for rejecting the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word hell in this passage is the Greek word geenna. Hell is the place of future punishment called "Gehenna" or "Gehenna of fire." This originally referred to the valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, where the filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned. Spiritually, it is a symbol of the state of torment that will be suffered by those who are condemned to hell. James used the same word when he explained that the "tongue is a fire … set on fire of hell" (James 3:6). Fires spread quickly and can turn into disastrous infernos. Therefore, as soon as a fire is detected, every effort should be made to put it out.

The altar was a place for burning sacrifices as a sweet savor to God. Reconciliation is putting out the stench of bitter fires so God can enjoy the aroma of our worship.

By not seeking to make things right, how many fires have we left burning in the hearts of those whom we have offended? Family feuds often begin with one offense, last for generations, and affect hundreds of people. As we meditate on the command to be reconciled, we can expect God to bring to our remembrance those who are holding things against us. As He does, let's purpose to go and make things right as an expression of our worship to the Lord.

Correct the Attitudes!

The sources of the most painful offenses are not usually actions, but attitudes. People who offend others unintentionally are judged with less severity than those who intend to hurt. Even in law, the intent behind a crime is a factor in assessing the guilt of the one who stands before the judge.

Jacob's offense toward Esau did not involve only actions; the attitudes that prompted his actions were offensive also.

What was Jacob's primary offense toward his brother Esau? Esau accused Jacob of taking his birthright and stealing his blessing. However, Esau's tears of anguish came when his father Isaac informed Esau that he was to be a servant to his brother, Jacob. Isaac said, "I have made him [Jacob] lord over you" (Genesis 27:37). For this, Esau purposed to kill Jacob.

We know that this domineering spirit was odious to Esau, because Isaac assured Esau that in the future things would change: "… But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck" (Genesis 27:40).

The fire burned in Esau's heart for 20 years. During that time, God changed Jacob's heart from wanting to be lord over his brother, to seeing himself as Esau's servant. When Jacob prepared to seek reconciliation with his brother, he sent flocks and herds as restitution and gave his herdsmen strict instructions about what to say when Esau asked whose flocks and herds they were. The servants were to say, "They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau" (Genesis 32:18).

Jacob also addressed the issue of any wrong attitudes toward Esau that were held by Jacob's family members. We know this was the case, because when Esau asked about all the people who accompanied Jacob, Jacob said, "… They are the children God has graciously given your servant" (Genesis 33:5). Then all of Jacob's household bowed in reverence before Esau. This act of humility was very important, because those who are closest to us often pick up our wrong attitudes toward other people.

People are hurt by our wrong actions, but they are deeply wounded by our offensive attitudes.

The problem with attitudes is that we cannot hide them. They just keep coming out. Others see them in our facial expressions, our body language, our tonal patterns, our lack of a loving smile, in the words we use, and in our failure to show respect.

If we are serious about applying this command to our lives, we need to honestly evaluate our attitudes, especially toward those whom we have offended, before we seek reconciliation with them. Get the benefit of an outside perspective by asking a close friend or family member today whether or not you demonstrate a loving attitude toward others.

Command 6: Be Reconciled

Related Character Quality

Responsibility vs. Unreliability

Responsibility is knowing and doing what both God and others are expecting of me.

The Biblical word duty describes the concept of responsibility. It is translated from the Greek word opheilo and means "to owe" or "the goodwill due" to another. In the New Testament, the word opheilo is also translated as ought, due, need, owe, and bound.

Duties That Are Our Responsibility

- Paying on a debt of love—"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another" (Romans 13:8).
- Protecting weaker believers—"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves" (Romans 15:1).
- Giving love in marriage—"In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself" (Ephesians 5:28).

- Being thankful for believers—"We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing" (2 Thessalonians 1:3).
- Suffering for believers—"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 John 3:16).
- Being in submission—"For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head" (1 Corinthians 11:10).
- Caring for children—"children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children" (2 Corinthians 12:14).
- Walking in Christ's love—"Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6). "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11).
- Providing hospitality—"you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you … . We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth" (3 John 5, 8).

Personal Accountability for Responsibility

An important aspect of responsibility is being personally accountable for our thoughts, words, actions, attitudes, and motives. These are to be consistent with the commands of Christ, because in the final judgment they will be exposed and evaluated.

Our Thoughts
"We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Our Words
"But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:36–37).

Our Actions
"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Our Speech
"keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies" (Psalm 34:13).

Our Motives
"I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve" (Jeremiah 17:10).

Personal Evaluation—How Responsible Are You?

- Do you accept responsibility for the debt of love that you owe every other believer?
- Do you determine to set aside any personal pleasure that could cause a weaker brother to stumble or be offended?
- Do you fulfill all your responsibilities in marriage?
- Do you look for practical ways to lay down your life for fellow believers?
- Do you accept personal responsibility for all your thoughts, words, actions, and attitudes?
- Do you purpose to fulfill your responsibilities to train up sons and daughters to be mighty in God's Spirit?
- Do you show responsibility for the practical needs of believers?
- Do you give support to those who minister to you in the Word?
- Do you take responsibility for your own health and well-being in order to better serve the Lord?

Make Restitution!

Restoring a relationship with those whom we have offended is not easy. It requires that we set aside all the reasons we have been using to justify our offensive words, attitudes, or actions and seriously consider the offense from their perspectives. When tangible loss has been suffered, it is vital that we make full restitution in order to gain a clear conscience.

The cost of restitution is incidental compared to the cost of shipwrecking our faith with the lack of a clear conscience.

Paul sent Timothy into spiritual warfare with only two weapons: his faith and a clear conscience. He warned Timothy that those who fail to maintain a clear conscience will make shipwreck of their faith. (See 1 Timothy 1:19.) Paul himself affirmed the importance of a clear conscience when he stated, "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man" (Acts 24:16). Purposing to make restitution demonstrates an acknowledgment of wrongdoing and a willingness to do whatever is possible to restore the relationship.

When a businessman returned to a former employer to ask forgiveness for taking some funds out of the cash register, he brought with him the amount of money he had taken, plus interest. This was an especially difficult sacrifice to make, because the businessman was out of a job. The former employer was amazed by his action and accepted the check. Can you imagine the businessman's surprise when this former employer then said, "I don't know what you are doing now, but we are looking for an honest man to fill an important position in our company, and you have just qualified yourself as one by what you have done"!

We should not always expect such a good response when we make restitution, however. After a certain woman heard about the importance of making restitution, she went to authorities and confessed that she had killed a person. To make restitution, she had to serve a prison term. While she was in prison, she experienced God's grace and had a rich ministry to fellow prisoners.

Most offenses involve wrongdoing by both parties, but the one who is more spiritual will initiate reconciliation.

Sometimes making restitution will not be possible because we don't have the resources or because the damage is beyond what money can make right. A number of years ago, the courts assigned a young man to our juvenile rehabilitation program. He was to stay with us until restitution for his crime had been carried out. Since he had no money, we helped him learn a carpentry trade and paid him for his work. Today he is married, has two children, a good job, and is very thankful for the year and a half that he spent making restitution.

Let's ask the Lord to bring to our remembrance people whom we have damaged and discern what restitution would be appropriate.

Command 6: Be Reconciled

Study Question

Q: What did Jacob actually do to turn his brother from hatred and plans of murder to forgiveness and brotherly affection?

A: Jacob and Esau went from bitter hatred to embracing one another and weeping on each other's necks in full forgiveness. The steps that brought about this great reconciliation can be used as general guidelines for reconciliation within all our relationships.

Reconciliation is usually motivated by God's reproofs for unresolved offenses, and this was proved when Jacob had deceived his father and was in continual conflict with Laban, his father-in-law. When he finally fled from Laban, he was faced with the threat of his bitter brother Esau.

Jacob knew that for reconciliation to take place, God had to do it. It was on this basis that he prayed, "Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me" (Genesis 32:11). As Jacob cried out to God, his words were fervent and effectual. Such prayer follows the instruction of James 5:16: "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective"

As part of our reconciliation we must make restitution for what we have taken or damaged. Jacob realized his need not only to give an unexpected gift, but to make restitution to his brother Esau. He prepared "a gift for his brother Esau: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys" (Genesis 32:13–15).

Reconciliation also requires turning all pride into a spirit of serving. Jacob told his herdsmen to identify him as Esau's servant rather than his brother. He reiterated this statement when he personally met Esau. This servant's spirit is vital, since it was the lack of this attitude that caused the initial conflict.

When Jacob finally met Esau after crying out to God, making restitution, and wrestling with the angel for God's blessing, he demonstrated humility not only by bowing before Esau, but by having his wives and children also bow. God blessed this attitude of humility by causing Esau to fully forgive and release Jacob from the wrong that was initially committed against him.

Wrestle for God's Blessing!

A key factor in achieving reconciliation is realizing that all our enemies are under God's control. It is on this basis that Scripture states, "When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7).

Before Jacob met Esau, he wrestled with the Lord and was blessed because he "struggled with God and with men and have overcome" (Genesis 32:28).

To wrestle with God means that we become desperate about reconciliation and realize that unless God works in the situation, things will only get worse. It also means that we search our own hearts and lives for the things that prompted God to stir up our adversaries. For example, God blessed Solomon with a wise and understanding heart. However, when Solomon violated God's commands and allowed his heart to be turned away by strange women, God stirred up significant adversaries against Solomon, which eventually divided the kingdom of Israel (see 1 Kings 11).

One day, a husband was shocked when his wife announced that she was going to divorce him. He thought they had a good marriage and could see no reason why she should take such an action. She was shocked to learn that he thought they had a good marriage, which only confirmed to her how insensitive and selfish he was.

In the months that followed, he tried to win back her affection by giving her gifts. This only made her more determined to put him out of her life. It was not until he spent an extended time in fasting and prayer that God revealed his self-centeredness and inappropriate control over his wife and family. When his wife saw a sincere change in his life, she was open to reconsider the marriage.

When Jacob wrestled with the Lord, something very important took place. The angel touched his thigh and the sinew shrank. This must have been painful, and thereafter he walked with a limp. However, that very posture could have contributed to Esau's change of heart. As Jacob approached Esau he limped, and he bowed to the ground seven times before he reached him. (See Genesis 33:3.)

When we wrestle with God, He puts His finger on precise areas that will humble us so that we can be reconciled.

Clearing the conscience of offenses and attempting to be reconciled seems like a never-ending process in the Christian life. On a fairly regular basis I am told about somebody who is offended because of something I said, did, or failed to do. In most cases, a personal visit or phone call will bring reconciliation; however, there are other situations that seem to be humanly impossible. These require spiritual wrestling so that God's power can be shown in my weakness. Are you facing a wrestling match, and can you say as Jacob did, "I will not let you go until you bless me"?

Discern the Right Timing!

God uses a significant analogy to describe a person who has been offended: "An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city, and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel" (Proverbs 18:19).

In the days of walled cities, there were only three ways to conquer the city. The first way was to storm the walls. This was a bloody ordeal and often ended in failure. The second method was to try to knock down the walls. This was a major operation and required huge engines of war. The third and most effective way was to watch for someone to leave a door open in the walls and to go through that door to conquer the city.

Finding the right time means asking: "When will this person be most open and responsive to my appeal for reconciliation?"

Generally speaking, when seeking reconciliation, it is best to make an appointment with the individual and meet face to face. When a personal meeting may create problems, make a phone call. Calling too early in the morning or too late at night would be inappropriate. It is also inadvisable to call during meal times or during times when you know the person would be very busy. Asking a close friend of the offended person for a suggestion of a good time to call could be the best approach.

The important thing is to make sure we do it. David certainly offended the entire family of Bathsheba when he committed adultery with her and arranged for the death of her husband. He probably had many opportunities to be reconciled to her family members; however, it appears that David did not seek reconciliation with Bathsheba's grandfather, Ahithophel. (See 2 Samuel 11:3, 23:34.)

Ahithophel was David's wisest and most trusted counselor, but David's offense possibly caused him to grow bitter and wish for David's death. When Absalom rebelled against David, Ahithophel gave Absalom precise counsel about how to destroy David. If Absalom would have followed that advice, he probably would have been successful in defeating David.

After preparing for restitution and wrestling with God for His blessing, we can anticipate God's leading in the timing.

Since the command tells us to leave our gift at the altar and go our way to seek reconciliation, the best timing is the day in which God reminds us of the offense. In Psalms we read, "Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days? … Seek peace, and pursue it" (Psalm 34:12, 14).

Has God reminded you of individuals whom you have offended? Let's make today the day of reconciliation so that we can release the offended individuals from bitterness and experience the wonderful freedom of a clear conscience.

Check Your Spirit!

True reconciliation requires that we be genuinely repentant, humble, transparent, and sincere before God and before the one whom we have offended. These qualities must be expressed in the attitudes, actions, and words that we use to ask for his forgiveness.

Reconciliation involves a spirit-to-spirit communication in which our sincerity is instantly discerned.

Since few offenses are 100% our fault, and since we instinctively look for ways to justify our actions, our biggest challenge in reconciliation will be to focus on our part of the offense and be sincerely grieved over it. Any lack of true repentance will come out in statements such as these: "If I was wrong, will you forgive me?" or "I know that I was partly to blame; please forgive me," or "I understand you were offended by what I did, and I apologize."

Jacob knew that his life and the lives of his family members depended on his making reconciliation the right way. Esau was approaching with 400 men! Jacob wisely sent gifts to Esau before he even saw Esau face to face. Scripture states, "A gift given in secret soothes anger, and a

bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great wrath" (Proverbs 21:14). Jacob referred to himself as Esau's servant, and Jacob referred to Esau as his lord. He wrestled with the Lord for a blessing and bowed down seven times as he approached his offended brother.

When Esau saw evidences of sincere repentance, he ran to meet Jacob, embraced him, fell on his neck, kissed him, and they wept. Jacob further demonstrated his sincerity by saying, "… For to see your face is like seeing the face of God" (Genesis 33:10).

The prodigal son carefully chose his words of reconciliation: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men" (Luke 15:18–19).

A request for forgiveness should be as brief as possible since it is one's spirit that will be doing the real communicating. You should explain that God has convicted you of how wrong you were in offending him and that you have come to ask for his forgiveness. Explain how your offense must have deeply hurt him. The more you understand and "feel" his hurt, the easier it will be for him to forgive you. Be ready to make financial restitution if the damages were tangible.

Before you go, ask a friend to pray for you. This will strengthen and motivate you to follow through in the act of "dying to self" so that you can have a deeper experience of true life!

The Embrace of Brothers

by Ken Pierpont

I ran into an old acquaintance in the exhibition hall of a conference one autumn day. Years before, we had allowed a disagreement to come between us and we had not tried to communicate since. It had been nearly ten years since we had talked. Ironically, his name was also Ken. I greeted him without warmth and avoided him. His presence and the memory of our conflict marred my enjoyment of the conference.

The second day of the meeting he caught up with me and asked to speak. I agreed. We found a private place and sat down. He looked directly at me and said, "Ken, there's something between us and I would like to get it cleared up."

While I don't recall our exact words, I'll never forget his eagerness to reconcile.

"Ken, will you forgive me?" he said. "I don't want anything to be between us. We are brothers in Christ." He looked at me sincerely, waiting for my answer.

My heart softened and I had a strong urge within to clear up any offense. "Yes, Ken, I do forgive you. I'm sorry I let anything come between us. Will you forgive me?"

"Yes, gladly."

We prayed and shook hands warmly, then embraced. The memory of it is sweet to me even today.

Something happened recently that brought this back to my mind. My wife, Lois, and I were on our way to Chicago for a weekend meeting. We arranged to meet our oldest son in west Michigan, where he works. We brought our other three sons along with us to visit with him for the weekend since his fiancé was occupied with a mother-daughter retreat.

We met where we could fuel up on coffee. I saw him standing in front of the place dressed for work. He is strikingly handsome with a strong set of his mother's physical features. His hair and eyes are dark. I admired the man he has become.

We were all glad to see him. I hugged him to me and he hugged me back. The little boys had been chattering all week about being together. They embraced their brother. Chuk, our second-born son, a man himself now four years younger than Kyle, also embraced him holding him for an extra moment.

Watching my sons together was a sweetness in my soul. I have within me the deepest longing for those boys to love each other. Anything between them would be like a knife in my heart. Maybe the day Ken and I embraced after nearly a decade of coolness made my heavenly Father smile as well.

"How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity" (Psalm 133).

Expect God to Work!

When a flight attendant remembered how she had offended an acquaintance months earlier, she purposed to attempt reconciliation. However, she had no idea how to make contact, because that acquaintance lived in another country. The very next afternoon she received a phone call from that person!

The same thing happened to a young man who remembered how he had wronged a former teacher. He decided to contact the teacher, but did not know where to start. Five minutes later he stooped over to take a drink from a water fountain. When he straightened up and turned around, who should he see but that former teacher! Not all reconciliation encounters are this dramatic. However:

When we are prepared to make reconciliation, God will do whatever is necessary to make it happen.

Early in the morning, when I began writing this, I purposed to apply this command to my own life. Immediately, God brought to my mind a man with whom I needed to be reconciled. However, I had been trying to make reconciliation with him for several years, and every attempt resulted only in deeper conflict. So, I concluded that this reconciliation would be impossible and asked the Lord for another idea.

A second person came to mind, and I decided I would try to contact him. So, I drove over to visit him at his home. I thought I knew where he lived. However, when I got to the neighborhood, I couldn't locate his house, so I began driving up and down the streets looking for a familiar landmark. I finally came to a business intersection and my car just stopped. Try as I may, I could not restart the engine.

This was a new experience for me (and the car!). I sat there as cars began to line up behind me. Then, I saw two young men running from across the street. As they got closer, I recognized them as IBLP staff members. They had been eating in the restaurant across the street when they saw me in distress. They helped me push the car into the corner parking lot, and when I got out of the car, a man came up to me and asked, "Can I help you?" I looked at him in astonishment! He was the first individual that God had brought to my mind that morning when I had purposed to apply this command in my life! Here we were, neither of us in our own neighborhood, and God had brought us together.

I accepted his offer of help and asked if he could drive me back to my office. On the way, we both looked at each other and agreed that God had truly arranged unexpected circumstances to bring us together and that He had done it for the purpose of encouraging us toward reconciliation. We made plans to meet together for that purpose.

When people see the hand of God in reconciliation, they are also motivated to bring their gifts of praise to God's altar.

Some of the most exciting and meaningful chapters you could possibly write in your journal are the steps that you took to make reconciliation with those whom you have offended and the work of God in making it happen.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 5:23-24

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

Ephesians 4:26

"In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry."

1 Corinthians 12:25–27

"so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

Acts 24:16

"So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man."

Romans 12:17–18

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

Proverbs 21:14

"A gift given in secret soothes anger, and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great wrath."

Proverbs 17:14

"Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out."

Declare War on Lust!

The story is told of an ancient wrestling match that was particularly gruesome. Adrenaline flowed, because each man knew that if he lost the contest, his opponent would put his foot on his neck and call for a sword. He would then poke that sharpened sword into the eyes of his conquered foe.

Thereafter, the weaker wrestler would grope in blindness throughout the city as a public display of his defeat. This is a sobering introduction to the tremendous importance of Christ's next command.

Command Seven

"Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away ..." (Matthew 5:28–29).

It is unthinkable that a man would rip out his own eye. The intent of this command is that we make it equally unthinkable to lust after a woman. Satan would have us believe that what we secretly lust after in our hearts will have no real consequence to us or to anyone else. Yet, God Who created us is telling us that secret lust is so desperately serious that we must declare war on every lustful thought and take it captive.

Peter speaks of this war when he writes, "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11). James explains the seriousness of this war as he asks, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" (James 4:1). Paul describes the war within our members in very understandable terms:

"I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members" (Romans 7:23).

After explaining the war, Paul exclaims, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24). Then he praises God because there is a way to victory through Jesus Christ. "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:25).

Peter also relates lust to eyesight when he gives a list of qualities that, if developed, will conquer lust, but if missing, will cause us to be spiritually blind. (See 2 Peter 1:1–9.) The tragedy of Samson's lust after women is also a sobering testimony. He lost the war on lust, his freedom, his leadership, and then he had his eyes gouged out! (See Judges 16:20–21.)

The wrestler in our story may have been on his back, but as long as he had at least one shoulder above the mat the fight was not over. If we are prone to surrender to lustful thoughts, now is the time to declare war against the giant of lust. He is one of our greatest adversaries against daily success!

Command 7: Do Not Lust

Related Character Quality

Self-Control vs. Self-Indulgence

Self-control is instant obedience to the initial promptings of God's Spirit.

The Biblical term for self-control is temperance. The Greek word for temperance is egkrateia, which means "restraining and controlling one's self." It is the virtue of one who masters his desires and passions.

Self-control is the inward strength to bring all physical appetites under the control of the Holy Spirit. A word related to egkrateia is egkrateuomai, which describes the rigid self-discipline practiced by athletes who are intent on winning the prize.

The Vital Importance of Self-Control

Self-control is essential for any believer who wants to excel in the Christian life and receive honor from the Lord. Paul used the analogy of a runner in a race. "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training" (1 Corinthians 9:24–25).

Paul then emphasized the eternal value of self-control and the personal sacrifice he was making to achieve it. "They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:25–27).

The Opposite of Self-Control

The Biblical antonym of egkrateuomai (temperate) is akrates. It means "powerless, incontinent," unable to withstand or resist the desires and passions of human appetite. Paul describes this condition: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. … For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. … What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:15, 19, 24).

The Power That Produces Self-Control

Scripture gives a clear sequence of spiritual steps that, when followed, produce self-control. "escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. … make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control…" (2 Peter 1:4–6).

These steps are consistent with the functions of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life. When a person exercises faith belief, repentance, and baptism, he receives the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Then, as a believer, he can ask his heavenly Father to fill him with the Spirit. "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Luke 11:13).

Once we are filled with the Spirit, we will be taken through trials and testing that will require us to die to ourselves and our natural inclinations. Passing each test requires that we thank God for His purposes in allowing the tests, rejoice in them by looking for benefits, and then cry out to God if there is need for deliverance.

The resurrection power of the Spirit produces self-control. Paul refers to this in Romans 8:11: "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you."

Experiencing this power was Paul's great goal; he was willing to go through whatever suffering was necessary. (See Philippians 3:8–10.)

Personal Evaluation—How Much Self-Control Do You Have?

- Do you give more time to spiritual pursuits than to the pleasures of the world?
- Do you bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ?
- Do you control your eating or allow yourself to indulge in food?
- Do you acknowledge your weakness so you can experience the power of Christ?
- Do you literally cry out to God for deliverance from addictions?
- Have you asked your heavenly Father to fill you with His Spirit?
- Do you respond to each test of the Spirit by thanking God for His purposes and then looking for benefits if you respond correctly?
- Do you remove provisions for indulgences so you will not fulfill them?

Surrender for Victory!

Conquering lust is one of the most serious matters a man will undertake. The wisest man who ever lived was defeated by lust. The world's strongest man was also defeated by lust, as well as David, who was a "man after God's own heart." (See 1 Kings 11:1–4, Judges 16:1–4, and 2 Samuel 11:1–5.)

Paul's description of the battle with sin, including lust, is painfully true to life. "For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (See Romans 7:15.) Yet, standing out in Scripture like a victorious banner is this promise:

"For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14).

God uses the Law to expose the sinfulness of our lust, yet the Law does not give us the power to overcome it. (See Romans 7:7.) The power to overcome lust comes by exercising the gift of God's grace through righteousness by yielding the members of our body. Thus, we are not to yield our members to unrighteousness, but "offer [surrender] yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life, and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments [weapons] of righteousness. For [then] sin shall not be your master …" (Romans 6:13–14).

This is explained in Romans 5:20–21, "The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign **through righteousness** to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Righteousness is the Greek word dikaiosune, which in the broader sense means "the condition acceptable to God; integrity, virtue, purity of life, rightness, correctness of thinking, feeling, and acting." "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Titus 2:11-12).

"because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2).

Scripture promises that if we walk in the Spirit we will not fulfill the lust of the flesh (see Galatians 5:16). This means asking the Holy Spirit to forgive us for grieving Him by our lust and quenching His power in us. Then, it means surrendering ourselves to God and the members of our body as instruments of righteousness to overcome lust.

Now would be an excellent time to accomplish these spiritual objectives in a sincere and earnest prayer to the Lord. God's grace will then be able to accomplish His purposes in us.

Command 7: Do Not Lust

Study Question

Q: Since losing one eye or one hand will not conquer lust, why did Jesus give such a command?

A: This command is not to be taken literally, but rather figuratively, because if Jesus had wanted to stop men from lusting, He would have instructed that both eyes be removed. Yet, even without eyes, men lust with their hearts.

It is through our eye "gate" that we receive the images and signals that direct our hands and feet. The right eye influences the entire body and is usually the dominant eye. Jesus emphasized the power and importance of the eye when He said, "The eye is the lamp of the body" (Matthew 6:22).

The greatest damage that comes as a result of lusting with our eyes is that we train them to focus on the delusions of immorality and become spiritually blind to the realities of life. This blindness allows us to rush headlong into sin, ignoring the consequences of our actions. (See James 1:14–15.) The term right hand is rich with symbolic meaning. It represents one's honor, authority, power, protection, and security (see Acts 5:31; Romans 8:34; Luke 22:69; Psalm 20:6, 16:8). These important qualities are lost or damaged when we lust.

Jesus used this analogy to communicate the important truth that the damage we do to others and ourselves when we lust is far greater than any limitations that would come with the loss of a right eye or right hand.

But how can we teach our eyes not to lust? If we fully dedicate our eyes, hands, and heart to the Lord (Romans 12:1–2), we will be able to die daily to the lusts of the flesh. We can also make a covenant with both eyes (Job 31:1), training them to see women as Jesus saw them (Hebrews 4:15–16).

Regaining Surrendered Ground

We are told in Ephesians 4:27 not to "give the devil a foothold." The word foothold refers to an area of jurisdiction. In warfare, opposing sides gain jurisdictional area whenever ground is surrendered.

The context of Ephesians 4 refers to three ways "ground" in the soul can be given to the devil: immorality (they "… given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more" verse 19), greed ("He who has been stealing must steal no longer …" verse 28), and bitterness ("Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" verse 31).

It is critical that we understand the spiritual battle in which we are involved and that we resist temptations to sin. When we do sin, it is important to repent as soon as the Holy Spirit convicts us and then reclaim the ground that we have given Satan the "legal right" to occupy. The steps involved in taking back ground are as follows:

1. Repent of your sin.

Repentance is acknowledging your sin, submitting to God's truth, and making commitments to be obedient to His holy standards. Only after we have submitted to God's justice can we plead for His mercy. "the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love" (Psalm 147:11).

2. Make a full confession to God.

The greatest offense is the offense against God when we violate His Law. Violating the Law brought about the need for atonement through the death of His Son, Who took the punishment for our sins on the cross. When making confession, we must name our sins with the terms God uses, such as fornication or lust, not physical involvement or attraction. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

3. Claim the blood of Christ.

Because Christ died on the cross in our place, we can accept His shedding of blood, which provided the remission of our sins. "… without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22).

4. Ask God to take back surrendered ground.

God has written His Law in our hearts. Therefore, when we violate a portion of His Law, we give away a portion of our souls through that violation. Satan uses his new authority over the

surrendered ground of our souls to bring his philosophy into our thinking. With Satan's deceptions, we distort God's Law in our hearts to justify our sin. Scripture speaks of those that "since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them" (Romans 2:15). Once we accept the blood of Christ, Satan loses his claim to the ground of our souls. We then need to ask God to take the authority over that ground.

5. Make confession to appropriate authorities.

Once we have made our hearts right with God, we need to go to our human authorities and those who have been directly affected by our sin to request their forgiveness. The first commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength… . The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30–31). (See also Matthew 5:23–24.)

6. Tear down "strongholds" of false ideas.

Although God has retaken authority over the ground of our souls, we still have the "strongholds" of false ideas and the distorted understanding of God's Law which we accepted to justify our sin. We must identify these strongholds in our thinking and tear them down. "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4–5).

In order to identify these strongholds in our thinking, it is important to memorize and meditate upon the portions of God's Word that deal with the sin committed. As we receive God's Word into our souls, we are able to reestablish His truth in our hearts. "Accept instruction from his mouth and lay up his words in your heart" (Job 22:22).

7. Build up "fortresses" of truth.

Once we have made wrong decisions and violated God's Law, it is easier to fall back into the same sin again. In order to guard against this, we must go beyond the basic commitments of right and wrong and establish higher standards through disciplines that will guard the previously lost ground in our souls from further defeat.

"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil" (Proverbs 4:23–27).

8. Be ready for opportunities to share with others.

Conviction takes place when God measures our wills and the direction of our lives with His desire and purpose for us. "The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being" (Proverbs 20:27). Once the soul is submitted to God and the heart is purified with His truth, God gives us grace, which includes the desire and the power to do His will. (See 1 Corinthians 15:10.)

We can use this grace and a testimony to motivate others to make Biblical commitments and avoid the same sins. A further benefit of accepting the humbling opportunity of telling others about our failures is that it brings more grace to strengthen us against temptation, for "… God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). It is important when sharing, however, not to describe details of sin that would create wrong imaginations in the minds of others and cause them to stumble.

Conquer Lust With Light!

Satan is the prince of the kingdom of darkness. (See Revelation 16:10.) He wins his battles in the dark. It was when the simple young man was lured by his lust to the harlot's house "as the dark of night set in" that she accosted him and led him as an ox to his slaughter (see Proverbs 7:6–10).

Paul warns us to "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them" (Ephesians 5:11). On the other hand, God promises that:

"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin [including lust]" (1 John 1:7).

The most powerful way to conquer lust with light is to expose our deeds to the light as explained in the following testimony given by a man named Paul.

At the age of 8 I was introduced to pornography. By age 18, I was controlled by lust. Two weeks before marriage I shared all my past failures with my fiancée, except for a recent defeat. This set me up for years of failure.

I knew it was wrong to hide my periodic defeat, but guilt, fear, and shame kept me bound. The more I hid the more I failed. No longer was it once a year, but many, many times. I was also having huge financial problems. I could not lead my family in any way. I was disconnecting from my wife, and our home life was in shambles. Yet, I wouldn't believe it had anything to do with my secret lust.

After several years, I purposed to confess my hidden sins. My wife was shocked and devastated. We set out to bring everything to light with no minimizing. For the next week, we slept very little and allowed the Lord to reveal every sin. We would confess it as sin to the Lord and each other and ask for forgiveness. Then we would renounce it and ask God to take back the ground we had given to the enemy.

During these seven days, I also went to my children and confessed my sin and asked for their forgiveness. At that time I broke emotionally and wept like a baby. It was then that I learned that each of my children was also struggling with sexual temptations. We went through the same steps with them and there is now incredible freedom.

The reason a man must tell his wife about his sins is that at marriage she is given authority over his body. (See 1 Corinthians 7:4.)

Paul's testimony is one of many similar reports of how God is releasing men from deep-seated lust when they openly confess it. Scripture promises, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Proverbs 28:13). Let's purpose now to conquer lust with light and ask God for grace, wisdom, and courage to do it.

Win With a New Focus!

When Jesus saw a woman, He did not lust after her. We know this because He "has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). What then did Jesus "see" when He looked at a woman? He looked past her outward appearance and into her heart. This is consistent with the nature of God:

"Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Based on the responses that Jesus had in His contacts with women, we can draw the following applications to the needs we should focus on when we see a woman, especially a woman with immodest dress or appearance:

- Think of her father, who has a God-given responsibility to train and protect her. How can we help him fulfill this responsibility? (Matthew 9:18)
- Imagine the concerned mother who will grieve over a daughter who is not protecting her purity and will feel a special sense of guilt and rejection. (Matthew 15:22)
- Realize the deep and destructive sense of guilt and shame that comes from past immorality, often accompanied by a corresponding bitterness toward all men for their part in causing it. (Luke 7:37–38)

- Be sensitive to a multitude of personal pressures and anxieties that women often bring upon themselves because of self-imposed goals or lists of things to do. (Luke 10:38–40)
- Understand the deep need in every woman to be trained in God's truths that will satisfy her inward longing for a personal relationship with her Creator. (Luke 10:39)
- Discern the underlying needs for love and acceptance, and look for ways to give rather than to get. (John 4:7)

Job had a powerful answer for lust: "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl" (Job 31:1)

God boasted to Satan about Job, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil?" (Job 1:8). The covenant Job made with his eyes not to lust after women was a key factor in his moral integrity.

Let's make a similar covenant with our eyes right now. Then when we see a woman and are tempted to lust, we can immediately pray for God to protect her and carry out His will in her life, so that she can become the Godly woman He designed her to be.

Do Not Commit Adultery

by Ken Pierpont

I once heard a man say in a prayer, "Thank you God for marriage. That was one of your best ideas." That made me smile. After 25 years of marriage, I am just beginning to understand what he meant. Marriage the way God designed it is such a good idea, but when we violate God's design, things always take an ugly turn.

The old traditional wedding ceremony says it this way:

As the union now formed is to be sundered only by death, it becomes you to consider the duties you solemnly assume. If these be remembered and faithfully discharged they will add to the happiness of this life, lightening by dividing its inevitable sorrows, and heightening by multiplying all its blessedness. But if these obligations are neglected or violated, you cannot escape the keenest misery, as well as the darkest guilt.

Marriage as God designed it has a way of adding to the happiness of life. It divides the inevitable sorrows of life. It multiplies the joys of life. But when we violate the heart of marriage through lust or adultery, we cannot escape the sharpest sorrow and the darkest guilt.

Maybe that's why we have so many vivid pictures in the Scriptures of the joy of married love and the damage of sexual expressions outside of marriage.

Within marriage, sexual expressions are like a life-giving fountain. Outside of marriage, they are like a sewer running in the streets. When you are tempted to believe there are satisfying sexual delights outside of marriage, consider the pictures given in Proverbs 5: "Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer— may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love. Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress? Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife? For a man's ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all his paths. The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast" (Proverbs 5:15–22).

Within marriage, sexual expressions are like a warming, life-giving fire. Outside of marriage, they are like a devastating explosion or disfiguring burns. "Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?" (Proverbs 6:27–28).

Within marriage, sexual expressions are a peak of human expression. Outside of marriage, they are degrading, like an animal caught in a trap. "All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose till an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life" (Proverbs 7:22–23).

Within marriage, sexual expressions are like a gift. Outside of marriage they are robbery. They are a scandalous kind of theft. (2 Samuel 12:1–6, 1 Thessalonians 4:3–6.)

May God give each one of us the moral resolve and good sense to see that there are no pleasures greater than those that God has designed. May we never yield to the temptation to forfeit our fellowship with God, our fidelity to our wives, or the respect of our sons and daughters by any sexual expression outside of marriage.

God's Design for Sexual Expression

When Followed:		**When Violated:**
It is like a **fountain**	Proverbs 5:15-22	Is like a **sewer**
Is like a **warming** fire	Proverbs 6:27-28	Is like a **raging** fire
It is the **peak of human expression**	Proverbs 7:22-23	It is degrading **like a trapped animal**
It is like a **gift**	2 Samuel 12:1-6 1 Thessalonians 4	It is **robbery**

Target the Twin Giants!

Lust is a giant that has a twin—anger. Both lust and anger are manifestations of uncontrolled passion. They feed each other and cause great damage to any relationship. Thus, God instructs us to:

"But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips" (Colossians 3:8).

Anger is often caused by deep hurts from the past that were never forgiven. When similar hurts occur, the emotion from the past surges up into an explosion of anger. David's angry outburst and harsh judgment for the man who stole his neighbor's sheep was possibly motivated by the shame and rejection that he and his men received at the hand of Nabal years earlier. (See 1 Samuel 25:10.)

Moses's angry outbursts could be traced to the rejection from his own people that he experienced years after he sacrificed so much to try to deliver them. The following testimony illustrates the freedom that comes by forgiving past offenders.

"Thirty years ago I attended a Basic Seminar in Seattle as a very angry, bitter man. I was raised in a home of angry beating and sexual abuse. I lived with the goal of killing my stepfather. In the seminar, you spoke about my need to go to my stepfather and ask for his forgiveness. I did not want to do this, but the moment I did I was set free.

The next year I re-attended the seminar and now heard the truth that God becomes the Father to the fatherless. The joy of the Lord so filled me that I learned to laugh for the first time in my life at the age of 33. I became a pastor and have shared these truths all over the world. I am now 60 years old and love the Lord more than I can say."

Failure to forgive past offenders means that God will turn us over to jailers, which can include lust. (See Matthew 18:34.)

When we refuse to forgive our offenders and hold them prisoner by our anger and bitterness, we resist God's grace and give Satan the "legal right" to hold us hostage by sins that we cannot conquer. (See Ephesians 4:26–27.) Just as the unforgiving servant was turned over to the jailers until his full debt was paid, Jesus said, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35).

The battle to conquer lust is tremendously important. We cannot afford to lose it by refusing to forgive an offender! Now is the time to ask the Lord to reveal to us anyone whom we have not fully forgiven and sincerely forgive him from the heart.

Command 7: Do Not Lust | Day 48

Use Your Chief Weapon!

When it comes to conquering lust, there is no weapon more powerful than meditation on God's Word. It must be used at all times, even when we don't think it is effective.

"How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word" (Psalm 119:9).

The following testimony is from a pastor. It affirms a vital principle.

"I grew up in an alcoholic and abusive background and lacked self-esteem and love. I began discovering all that the devil had in the world, beginning with pornography. I was preaching at the time and my conscience rebuked me with great pain after each incident.

"In tears of sincerity I confessed my sins and asked for God's forgiveness, but the temptation always returned even stronger. A powerful wicked force was driving me into the mud of moral impurity. I hated what was happening and tried many things to change, but nothing worked.

"Finally, I was able to attend my first Basic Seminar and heard the principle of meditation and engrafting Romans 6 into my heart. I began by making a list of every past sin I could think of and tracing these sins to their root causes, confessing each one.

"I wrote out each verse of Romans 6 on a card and recited it many times until I had a pretty good grasp of it. Then before bed I recited it again, pondering the meaning and personalizing the application. When I got up the next day, I meditated on my new verse. Throughout the day, whenever possible, I continued to meditate and tied the new verse to the preceding verses. I began to see things I never saw before.

"Sometimes I fell into sin and became discouraged again, but I decided that this time I would continue to meditate—even if I failed. Instead of giving up because of my sins I pressed harder to come under the authority of God's Word.

"By the second week of meditating day and night, my peace and joy began to grow. By the third week I sensed a newness of spirit, a freshness about life, and a positive perspective. I couldn't believe how good I felt inside.

"Then it happened on the fourth week! I remember driving one afternoon on a freeway, meditating on the verses I had memorized up to that point. As I came to the verse, 'When you were slaves to sin…' (Romans 6:20), I felt a bolt of fiery power come into my chest and explode. I knew then that the old man had experienced death by the cross. With tears streaming down my cheeks, I cried out, 'Praise the Lord, I'm free!' "

Let's purpose to have the same determination that drove this pastor to freedom. For those in strong bondage to lust, memorizing and meditating on Romans 6–8 is a powerful way to renew the mind and achieve moral purity. (See Romans 12:1–2.)

Command 7: Do Not Lust | Day 49

Remove Ensnaring Provisions!

A man tried to conquer years of lustful passions; however, he never gained any long-lasting victory. For a short time he would have freedom, but when his lust overcame him, he would go to his secret store of pornography and indulge in lustful desires. One of the obvious causes of his defeat was a violation of the following instruction:

"Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Romans 13:14).

Many fathers are totally unaware of the damage that sensual provisions bring to them as well as the moral defeat that it brings to their sons and daughters. One day a teenager shared with me that he was at home alone when he had a sudden desire to take out his father's bottom dresser drawer and see what was underneath it. This was a strange prompting, but he followed it and discovered a stash of pornographic magazines, which became an addiction to him.

In another situation a father justified having television in the home because he only looked at sports. However, his son later confessed to me that he was in the habit of watching indecent movies after his father went to bed.

Fathers cannot be too careful in this matter. I remember the time when one of my sisters told my father that she was having lustful thoughts as she read the newspaper accounts of sexual crimes, so my father stopped our subscription. I respected him for that decision. Now we have the greater problem of the Internet. If a father does not have protected access through programs such as CharacterLink, he is only inviting moral defeat in a son or daughter, as well as himself.

There is good reason why Paul gave this instruction:

"I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil" (Romans 16:19)

Today would be an excellent time to carefully evaluate things in your home that might be causing temptations or moral defeat. Just as Jesus, Nehemiah, and others cleansed the Temple, so we need to cleanse our homes and lives of those things that are displeasing to the Holy Spirit, because our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit.

Make sure you remove only what belongs to you. However, if your sons and daughters have brought sensual things into the home, including wrong music, you need to wisely and firmly deal with it. Peter's appeal would be a good starting point: "I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11). A testimony of progress in this area would be a marvelous entry in your journal today.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 5:28

"But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Matthew 5:29-30

"If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell"

James 1:14–15

"but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

James 4:4

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

Romans 6:11

"In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

2 Timothy 2:22

"Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

Galatians 6:8

"The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."

1 John 2:16

"For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world."

Reject "Yes, No" Promises!

A father watched with growing concern as the heart of his son grew more and more distant from him. The 15-year-old boy used to love being around his father, but now he looked for every reason to stay away from him. The father made several attempts to rebuild their relationship, but nothing worked.

When I talked to the son, it became obvious that he was bitter toward his father. The depth of his bitterness surprised me. Several years earlier, his father had promised to take him on a weekend trip, but had never carried it out. In talking with the father, I quickly discovered that he had made only a halfhearted promise that he felt he really didn't need to keep. Thus, he violated this command of Christ:

Command Eight

"Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37).

People count on us to do what we say we will do. The Pharisees of Christ's day had developed a clever arrangement to get out of keeping their promises. In making a promise, they would swear by something. Their intentions and sense of obligation to carry out their promises were revealed by the importance of that by which they swore. (See Matthew 23:16–20.)

Therefore, Jesus said: "… Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black" (Matthew 5:34–36).

When we make a promise to do something, we must be absolutely committed and sure in our minds that we really want to do it and that we can do it. We must keep our promises even if they require more sacrifice than we originally expected, as described in Psalm 15:

"... but honors those who fear the LORD, who keeps his oath even when it hurts. ... He who does these things will never be shaken" (Psalm 15:4–5).

A "YES" means that we will definitely do it and a "NO" means that we will definitely not do it. Notice the importance of this in James 5:12: "**Above all,** my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned."

We have an important commentary on a "yes, no" (insincere) promise in 2 Corinthians 1:19–20: "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ … was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes.". For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God." A "yes, no" promise violates the nature of God, brings condemnation to us, and can cause bitterness in those who receive such a promise. Let's purpose from this day forward that we will mean what we say and that we will keep our promises to others even if it requires sacrifice to do so.

Command 8: Keep Your Word

Related Character Quality

Truthfulness vs. Deception

Truthfulness is communicating by life and word that which is genuine and accurate.

One Hebrew word for truth is 'emeth. It means "stability, certainty, sureness." It is from the root word 'aman, which means "to build up or support; to foster as a parent or nurse; fig. to render (or

be) firm or faithful, to trust or believe, to be permanent. It is also translated as steadfast and verified.

When Jesus emphasized truth, He often started His sentence with "I tell you the truth...", as in John 3:3 "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

What Does Truth Do?

There is power in truth, because it is the very essence of God and the means by which He carries out His work in the world.

- **Truth brings us into Christ**—"He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created" (James 1:18).
- **Truth brings us to the light**—"But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God" (John 3:21).
- **Truth purifies our souls**—"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22).
- **Truth frees us**—"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).
- **Truth gives us power**— "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:4–5).
- **Truth leads us in the right way**—"Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me" (Psalm 43:3).
- **Truth equips us to worship God**—"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23–24).
- **Truth cleanses us of iniquity**—"Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil" (Proverbs 16:6). Lust and addictions hold many in bondage. This bondage comes from a spirit of uncleanness.
  The first step of purging is crying out to God for mercy. "and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me" (Psalm 50:15). The second step is to confess and repent. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The third step is to fill our hearts with God's truth and meditate on it day and night. "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word …. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:9, 11).
  We may also need to acknowledge the iniquities of our forefathers (see Daniel 9:16), regain surrendered ground (see Ephesians 4:27), and engage in serious fasting and prayer (see Isaiah 58:6).

Personal Evaluation: How Truthful Are You?

- Do you ask others to point out faults of which you may be unaware?
- Do you confront your faults with Scripture?
- Do you believe that you have no serious faults and think you are better than you are?
- Do you exaggerate your achievements to others?
- Do you lie or tell only part of the truth to escape the consequences of your actions?
- Do you flatter people to gain their approval?
- Do you misrepresent the Lord with inconsistent or negative attitudes?
- Do you give damaging reports of others to make yourself look good?

- Do you guard against false teachings by confirming everything you hear with the truth of Scripture?

Tell Yourself the Truth!

The most important conversations we have every day are not those we have with other people, but those we have with ourselves! Your spirit talks to your soul, and your soul, which involves your mind, will, and emotions, responds back to your spirit. When your spirit is in communion with God, it speaks truth to your soul, but your soul usually responds with resistance, unbiblical ideas, or discouragement. David gives testimony to this inward dialogue:

"Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (Psalm 42:5).

We will never be able to make the right kind of promises, or keep them, until we have inward agreement between spirit and soul. For example, when Satan tempts us to lie in order to escape the consequences of wrong behavior, the conscience, which is a function of the spirit, should declare to the soul, "You shall not lie."

In response, our souls may find reasons to justify a lie or a half-truth with the conclusion that we could not possibly admit that we were wrong, because then people would think less of us. The truth is that people will think more of us when we confess our faults, because they realize how difficult it would be for them to do the same thing. This is one of the reasons that God warns, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Proverbs 28:13).

David describes the requirements of a close walk with the Lord when he writes, "LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, **who speaks the truth** from his heart" (Psalm 15:1–2). Inward truth comes through meditation on Scripture.

"Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place" (Psalm 51:6).

The only way that we will be able to speak the truth to ourselves is by making sure that our minds, wills, and emotions are under the control of our spirits, which in turn are under the control of God's Spirit and God's Word. Then we will be able to resolve inward tension and experience the wisdom that God promises when truth reigns within us.

If you have not yet submitted your soul to be under the control of God's Spirit, I urge you to do so now by praying, "God, I now submit my mind, will, and emotions to the control of Your Holy Spirit and to the authority of Your Word." With this surrender, you can expect a new freedom in your soul and harmony with your spirit.

Command 8: Keep Your Word

Study Question

Q: Why did God deliver Abraham and Sarah in spite of the lie they told Pharaoh and Abimelech, and yet destroy Ananias and Sapphira for the lie they told Peter?

A: In Scripture, two accounts of lying reveal important insights into the nature and consequences of not being completely truthful.

The first example is that of Abraham and Sarah. They agreed to lie about their relationship as husband and wife and instead tell people they were brother and sister.

Their lie produced plagues and distress in the households of Pharaoh and King Abimelech. What they did seemed to go unpunished, except for the rebukes of Pharaoh and Abimelech. They even acquired valuable gifts under the false pretense of their lies.

In comparison, the lie of Ananias and Sapphira seems insignificant. Their lie did not bring them money; they were simply not as generous as they wanted people to imagine that they were with the money they were giving to the work of the Lord. For their lie, God brought immediate death.

An initial reading of both accounts of lying might lead to the conclusion that God was lenient with Abraham and Sarah and harsh with Ananias and Sapphira. This is not true, because both were severely punished for their deceptions.

In some ways, Abraham and Sarah received the greater punishment, because the iniquity of their deception was passed on to their children and grandchildren. Abraham and Sarah told a "half-lie," but their son, Isaac, went on to tell a full lie about his relationship to his wife. The deception practiced by Isaac was then practiced by Jacob, who deceived his father and stole Esau's blessing by disguising himself. Jacob's deception was then multiplied through his family. His sons deceived him by showing him Joseph's coat of many colors, which they had stained with the blood of an animal, causing him to think that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast.

Had Abraham and Sarah sincerely repented of their deception, this would have motivated them to warn their descendants not to follow their example.

The accounts of Ananias and Sapphira and Abraham and Sarah illustrate the truth of Paul's instruction to Timothy. "The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them" (1 Timothy 5:24). The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was immediately opened and judged. The iniquity of Abraham and Sarah followed after them and became more and more harmful with each generation. The longer a lie continues without exposure, the more destructive it becomes.

Don't Presume Upon the Future!

We may make promises, fully intending to keep them, however, if those promises depend on uncertain conditions, we are in danger of breaking our word. God warns: "Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (James 4:13–14).

"Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil" (James 4:15–16).

Notice that this warning to not presume upon the future is applied to a proposed business venture. Not keeping our word regarding financial matters is an area in which there is great potential for damage.

A respected man began to build a very large and impressive building. He did not have enough cash, so he borrowed money to build it. Both he and the bank were certain he could pay the money back, because he owned a valuable orange grove in Florida, which he put up as collateral. Unexpectedly, one night the area experienced unusually low temperatures and all of his trees died. This drastically reduced the value of the property, and the bank called for payment of the loan.

The financial and emotional strain on this man was intense, and the half-finished building stood for several years as a public monument of rebuke and shame for his presumption upon the future. By taking out a loan, we are assuming that certain things will happen or remain the same so that we can pay it back.

When our needs or plans go beyond our resources, it is time to call on the Lord, not the bank.

A marriage counselor reported to me that most of the divorces he saw came as a result of the husband's mismanagement of finances. If we need expensive items, there are many creative options that can be explored, such as negotiating a lower price, selling unneeded possessions, buying a used item, asking parents and others for counsel, learning to do without the item until

the money is saved to buy it, or crying out to God to meet the need so He can demonstrate His power to you and your family.

A financial need that you think requires borrowing money may actually be a tremendous opportunity to develop faith and creativity. We rob ourselves and others of the powerful working of God through faith when we put our trust in "good credit" instead of relying on God to meet our financial needs. I appeal to you to make getting out of debt a priority and to resolve not to borrow money. This commitment is foundational for daily success.

Keep Your Word to God!

If we don't keep our promises to God, how can we expect to keep our word to people? When men face extreme physical danger or find themselves in desperate situations, they often will make vows. This scenario is what produced the expression "foxhole conversions." Soldiers in the foxholes who expected to die cried out, "God, if you save me, I'll serve you for the rest of my life." God saved them, but they soon forgot their promises.

"When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow ..." (Ecclesiastes 5:4).

This warning about keeping vows made a great impact on me as a teenager. I memorized the full warning: "When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?" (Ecclesiastes 5:4–6).

During my life I have made several vows. Through them God has directed and blessed my life. However, He has also held me accountable to keep them. In high school, I listened to a fervent soul-winner explain the importance of witnessing for Christ. I vowed that I would talk to an average of three people a day about the Lord.

I did this during high school but later became so busy as the director of a youth ministry that I neglected this commitment. One day, the Lord released me from my official youth ministry responsibilities and reminded me about the vow. In order to catch up, I began going down to the city of Chicago each night looking for groups or gangs of young people to tell about the Lord. What I learned through those encounters became an important foundation to the Basic Seminar. The average of three people a day has now been fulfilled for the rest of my life!

God gives great rewards to those who make promises to Him and are faithful to fulfill them.

Some people question the wisdom of making a vow to God, yet David was a man after God's own heart and he made vows. "From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you will I fulfill my vows" (Psalm 22:25).

There is a father who has raised outstanding children that I have been observing for quite some time. When I asked him to explain his "secret," he identified two reasons for their success. First, he has encouraged his sons and daughters to make Biblical vows, and second, they have been involved as a family in Christian ministry.

What vows have you made to the Lord? Have you kept each of them? If not, now is the time to determine what is required and begin taking steps to fulfill your vows.

Harvest Moon

by Ken Pierpont

He was a farmer, a factory laborer, and a country pastor. He worked hard, lived simply, and loved his family. He farmed a small hill-farm and raised beef cattle and some grain for feed. In the summer, his grandchildren would come and bale hay, fish in the pond, and eat sweet corn and garden-ripe tomatoes.

When harvest time came, he would piece together his old one-row corn picker and oil it up for the season. It had seen many seasons. He pulled it behind a little Ford 9-N tractor with a wagon behind. It was a noisy contraption, nothing like these huge, modern, green monsters you see these days, shaving the grain off flat fields in wide gulps.

His whole operation was like that. Simple. Basic. His life was like that too. He worked hard, helped others, and kept his promises. That's what made it so hard one autumn when difficult circumstances closed in on him. He needed to harvest a few acres of his own corn. He also had promised to harvest a few ribbons of corn that wound around the hills on a friend's farm.

Problems came. First, equipment trouble. Usually, he was able to fabricate something or rig the equipment so the job could be done, but after he had harvested his own corn, his little corn picker coughed, sputtered, and quit. He would have to wait on parts. The factory where he worked had orders to fill and began to require overtime. He had to leave home before light and arrive home after dark.

He sat at the kitchen table over a cup of awful coffee while he wondered aloud what to do. His wife said, "There's nothing you can do. You will just have to tell the neighbor that your equipment broke down and you can't do it."

He thought long and hard. The idea didn't set well with him. His friend was depending on him.

"If you don't have the equipment, you just can't do it," his wife said.

"Well, I could do it the way we used to do it. I could harvest it by hand."

"You don't have time to do that with the overtime; besides, it would be dark."

He walked across the room and consulted the Farmer's Almanac.

"Says here we're due for a harvest moon this month. If it's clear, that will give me the light I need to work in the night after I get home. I think we can do it."

And that's what he did. The weather was cold and clear and the moon was brilliant.

After work, he made his way to the field, and his wife met him in the truck with dinner and a thermos of more awful coffee. Then he worked through the night to keep his word.

I know this story well, because the farmer was my grandfather. I was named after him. My grandpa worked hard and kept his promises. Sometimes, when I am tempted to cut corners or defer responsibilities, I think of my grandfather out under the harvest moon bending low and swinging his sharp corn-knife. I can hear the thump of ears of corn hitting the wood of the wagon floor. I can hear the music of geese honking their way across the cold October sky. I can see their silhouette against the harvest moon.

In the dark, early hours of the morning, his work is done. He pulls his tired body up into the seat of the old tractor and starts down the gravel road for home. The sun comes over the ridge, and behind him rows of corn stalks stand at attention in respect of a man who keeps his word.

Keep Your Word to Your Wife!

These writings are designed to teach you how to have daily success. In order for us to achieve that objective, we must deal with all the aspects of success, even ones that are difficult and sensitive, such as the vows that a man makes to his wife.

As we will see later, marriage is not just a promise to a woman; it is a blood covenant. The vow is made not only to the woman, but also to God, in the presence of many witnesses. To break such a vow is to bring serious damage to the potential for success. In fact, there are serious warnings in Scripture about not keeping the marriage vow.

At the altar a man does not say "till divorce do us part" but "till death do us part."

Years ago, I spent many hours trying to help a businessman solve some major problems he was facing. He would cry out to God for help, but it seemed as though God wasn't listening. Then he shared with me his "secret." None of his friends knew about it.

Thirty-five years earlier he had married his first wife, but their marriage had lasted only one year before it ended in divorce. All of these years he had been carrying a weight of guilt, not only for breaking his marriage vows, but for appearing to be someone that he was not.

I was then able to turn to Malachi 2:13–15 and explain to him why God was not responding to his cries for help. "Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth."

When this man asked God to forgive him for breaking his vows, God demonstrated His mercy and grace, with significant blessing. God also freed this businessman from guilt.

After his moral failure with Bathsheba, the major theme of David's Psalms was the marvelous mercy of a forgiving God.

One of a man's greatest resources for success is a loving wife who honors and respects him. Honor is not something that can be demanded; it must be earned. The best way to earn it is to remember your promises and make sure they are fulfilled. If you have lost your "promise list," don't worry! Your wife has it in her mind. Just ask her to remind you of the promises you have made and not yet fulfilled. Do it today!

Avoid Misleading Impressions!

If we want to have full and successful lives, God has some very specific requirements for us. "Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:12–14).

In order to fulfill the command to keep our word, we must identify and remove any guile from our conversation. Guile is deceit, which includes exaggerations, partial information, or half-truths that are designed to give a false or misleading impression. As stated in Psalm 32:2, God rewards the man who removes deceit from his spirit.

"Blessed is the man ... in whose spirit is no deceit."

One day, a young man was very attracted to a young lady and asked her to marry him. They had met each other at Bible school, and they both planned on being missionaries. She was very impressed with his spirituality and dedication to Christian work and felt confident that he would make a Godly husband and father.

He confessed to her that earlier in his life he had experienced a "little" problem with pornography. However, he assured her that it was now totally conquered and that he was walking in spiritual victory. This partial information led her to think he was more spiritual than he really was.

The fact was that he had an ongoing problem with lust which had never really been conquered; setting aside pornography was only part of the solution. After several years of marriage in which he hid his problem, it finally surfaced and caused tremendous anguish to his wife and children. When discovered, he left his family for another woman. If only he would have walked in the light of total truth, he could have experienced God's freedom and blessing. He also could have avoided God's strong condemnation of his hypocrisy. (See Matthew 23:27–28.)

Hypocrisy is appearing to be on the outside something other than what is true on the inside.

Giving false impressions is often motivated by fear of rejection. To conquer this, we must experience a death to our pride. God promises that if we humble ourselves He will give us more grace, and with that grace we will have the power to carry out His will. (See James 4:6.)

If we have given false or misleading impressions, now would be an excellent time to humbly explain the truth, so that mature believers could strengthen us through their prayers and counsel. This is the instruction of James 5:16: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."

Choose a Good Name!

God calls believers to live by a higher standard than the standard endorsed by the world. Nowhere is this more important than in the area of keeping our word. Those who reject the Gospel look for reasons to justify their reactions, and they will certainly find reasons to justify their thoughts and actions in anyone who does not follow the teachings of Christ.

The tragedy is that the marvelous message of eternal life may be rejected because of unfulfilled promises made by those who profess to follow Christ. By failing to keep his word, a believer damages not only his name but also the name of Christ, which makes the wisdom of Solomon's words even more important:

"A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold" (Proverbs 22:1).

When the world sees believers who actually fulfill their promises, especially when it requires sacrifice to do so, the world lifts them up as role models to be followed. Such is the case with the Melon family, owners of Correct Craft, Inc., a boat manufacturer located in Florida. Their story has been documented in college textbooks to teach ethics.

During the Korean Conflict, Correct Craft, Inc. was awarded a government contract to build 3,000 boats, and they geared up to fill the order. However, an unscrupulous inspector demanded a bribe before he would approve the boats. The owners, who were Christians, could not in good conscience do this, so more than 600 boats were rejected, and the company was forced into bankruptcy.

Because they were men of their word, the Melon family did not view bankruptcy as a release from their obligations. They started the slow process of rebuilding the company and paying back the debts they owed. It took 20 years of great personal sacrifice, but because of their commitment to stand behind their word, they were able to repay each of their creditors in full. God has blessed this company with a worldwide reputation as the leader in the ski boat industry and an inspiring example of integrity.

The promises that require the most unexpected sacrifice to keep will often result in the most eternal gain.

After meditating on the command to keep our word, it will be important now for us to write down any unfulfilled promises of which we have been reminded. Let's write down the steps that are needed to fulfill them and record the responses that result. Choosing to keep a good name by being a man of your word will be not only a powerful testimony but also a lasting heritage that you can give to your children. It will provide them with the most practical and powerful instruction on how they too can obey this important command. May God bless us with wisdom and understanding to always be men of our word.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 5:37

"Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one".

Psalm 15:1–2, 4

"LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart. … who keeps his oath even when it hurts."

Psalm 101:7

"No one who practices deceit will dwell in my house; no one who speaks falsely will stand in my presence."

Exodus 20:16

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."

Ephesians 4:25

"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body."

Ecclesiastes 5:4–5

"When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it."

Proverbs 10:19

"When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise."

Psalm 19:14

"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer."

Give More Than Is Required!

One of the most serious causes of failure in the areas of relationships, finances, and health is having a resistant attitude toward those whom we have offended or to whom we are obligated. If an individual is found to be guilty of an offense or has failed to fulfill an obligation, and he is subsequently required to make restitution, his resistant spirit will be revealed when he chooses to do only what the law demands. After all, he thinks he has God's Law on his side, because the Law stipulates "an eye for an eye, or a tooth for a tooth"—certainly no further compensation is due! (See Exodus 21:24.) Jesus challenged this limitation with four mandates.

Command Nine

Turn the other cheek. Give your coat and your cloak also. Go the second mile. Give to those who ask you. (See Matthew 5:38–42.)

All of these "second-mile" responses relate to offenses or obligations that were understood by the Jewish people. If a man insulted another person with indecent words or actions, he could expect to be slapped in the face. That might satisfy the outraged person, but it would not accomplish God's higher purposes until the offender's other cheek was offered.

If a judge ruled that a man caused financial damage to another, Jesus said he was not only to repay whatever he owed, including his coat, but should also give his cloak, which often served as his blanket and was "protected" by the Mosaic Law. (See Exodus 22:26–27.)

Because God's people had disobeyed His commandments, God placed them under the harsh rule of the Romans. One law was particularly repugnant to the Jews. It required a Jewish man, upon demand, to carry the heavy military pack of a Roman soldier for a mile. Jesus said they should carry the pack a second mile.

All Jewish men were in covenant with each other. This required them to give to anyone who lacked basic necessities of life. For a needy person to have to ask meant that the wealthy man was not alert to the conditions of his fellow covenant members.

Going the first "mile" satisfies the requirements of man's law but fails to fulfill the higher law of God's love.

As I wrote this, God gave me a clear application for this command. A specific individual has been asking me to give him a certain amount of money, yet I have resisted for two reasons. First, he had previously affirmed that there was no debt. Secondly, I was aware of strong reaction that would come from another individual if I gave the money.

As I was pondering this, the phone rang. It was the individual whom I knew would react. We discussed the matter, and we agreed that it would be God's will to give the money. I have a sense of excitement, because on the one hand it will mean significant personal sacrifice, and on the other hand, it will provide an opportunity for God to show His power. May God give each of us the courage to obey His higher law of love by giving more than is required.

Command 9: Go the Second Mile

Related Character Quality

Deference vs. Offensiveness

Deference is putting the welfare of others ahead of our own personal pleasures.

When Paul instructed believers to prefer one another in honor, he defined the essence of deference. In Romans 12:10, the Greek word rendered preferring is proegeomai, meaning "to lead the way for others." It is a strong word that denotes commanding with official authority, to be chief and having rule. Thus, as we defer to others, we experience the paradox spoken of by Jesus: "and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 10:44).

Deference is making personal sacrifices in order to help others be successful and putting off words, attitudes, or actions that would cause others to be offended or weakened. We should defer whenever it will benefit the cause of Christ. Deference and discretion work together. "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense" (Proverbs 19:11).

Examples of Deference

Scripture contains significant examples of those who demonstrated deference, and their testimonies provide precedents for parallel situations. Therefore, we are encouraged to meditate upon these testimonies so that we can accurately apply the precedents in new circumstances.

Deference to Government

When a tax collector asked Peter if Jesus paid taxes, Peter said, "Yes." However, Jesus asked Peter, "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?" "From others," Peter answered. "Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him. "But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours." (Matthew 17:25-27).

Deference to Children

Jesus gives a strong warning about offending children. "But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matthew 18:6).

The conscience of a child is very sensitive. Vulgar words and actions to which adults may have grown callous can be very hurtful and offensive to children.

Deference to Believers

When new believers who had renounced temple worship saw mature believers buying meat offered to idols because of its bargain price, they became offended, and a major controversy erupted in the young church. In this delicate matter, Paul appealed for deference by those on both sides of the controversy. He appealed especially to those who thought it was right to eat the meat. "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way" (Romans 14:13).

The great importance of deference can be seen in this narrative. Paul agrees with those who say that there is nothing inherently wrong with the meat. However, eating the meat becomes wrong if

another believer is offended by it or if it is eaten in spite of an inward caution given by the Holy Spirit.

Deference to the Word

After Paul affirms the need to "not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God" (1 Corinthians 10:32), he states his own commitment to deference: "even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved" (1 Corinthians 10:33). In the previous chapter, Paul explains how he demonstrated deference. "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible" (1 Corinthians 9:19).

Personal Evaluation: How Well Do You Show Deference to Others?

- Do you offend others by the things that you say, do, or wear?
- Do you protect your children from evil?
- Do you keep your home free from things that offend your children or cause them to struggle?
- Do you justify music or activities that offend or weaken fellow Christians?
- Do you offend people of other cultures or ethnic groups by the words you use to describe them?
- Do you make allowances as much as you can to accommodate those from other backgrounds and philosophies?
- Do you understand and follow protocol when visiting another country?
- Do you pay questionable taxes in order not to bring offense to the Gospel?

God's Mandate for Deference

Deference requires more than choosing to do things that are good. Deference requires that we choose things that are excellent, that we in no way hinder our own walk with Christ or the walks of others.

"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ" (Philippians 1:9–10).

Go With Right Attitudes!

There are several attitudes that could be expressed as we obey the command of Jesus to go the second mile. However, only one attitude is the right attitude, and it is the one that will allow us to experience the joy and freedom that Christ planned for us to have when He gave us this important command.

One day I was counseling a couple by phone. I knew the wife was getting ready to leave her husband, and I was trying to avert this tragedy for the sake of the Lord, the couple, and their children. During our conversation, I asked the husband if he felt they had a happy marriage. He responded, "Absolutely, we have had many years of happy marriage." The shocked wife blurted out, "Happy marriage! We have not even had one year of happy marriage." The husband was oblivious to the things that he had done which were causing unhappiness in his marriage. As a result, his wife left him.

During the divorce proceedings, the judge required the husband to pay a certain amount of money to the wife and children each week. Every time he paid this money, a wave of bitterness swept over him. Again he called me and asked what he should do to overcome this bitterness. I encouraged him to give more money to his wife than the judge required. He did not see how this could help, but when he followed the counsel he was amazed! His attitude of bitterness vanished and was overtaken by a spirit of genuine love. There is a Biblical principle here:

Love continues where obligation ends.

When this husband sacrificially gave more than was required by the judge, he began to experience a new sense of love for his wife and family. This is precisely what Jesus states will happen when our treasure is voluntarily given. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

The wife immediately recognized her husband's new level of love and sensitivity. It caused her to have a new hope that their marriage could work, and in time they were reunited in marriage. If the husband had only understood the principle of voluntarily investing more than is required in the lives of his wife and children at the beginning of the marriage, they would have avoided many years of heartache.

When a "honey-do" list is done out of obligation rather than genuine love, it has a bittersweet taste to it.

The attitude that makes the second mile successful is an expectation and excitement in putting our whole heart and soul into whatever we do as an expression of love for the Lord and for those whom we are serving.

A second-mile mind-set is essential for daily success. Now is the time to embrace it as a regular part of our thinking and doing.

Command 9: Go the Second Mile

Study Question

Q: Why did God promise Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that kings would bow down to their descendants and then bring their descendants down to Egypt for 400 years of slavery?

A: A second-mile response requires us to have the right heart attitude of genuine love for others. Just as God used events to draw the nation of Israel to Himself, He will use people, events, and circumstances to conform us into the image of Christ.

After God promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that they would become a great nation and that kings would bow down to their descendants, God used a famine to bring Israel down to Egypt where they remained for more than 400 years, many of those years in slavery to Pharaoh. This was actually a time of "child training" in the growth and history of the nation of Israel. Later, when God delivered them from the bonds of Egypt, He continually reminded them of the lessons that He had taught them while they were in Egypt.

There is an amazing parallel between the experiences of Israel in Egypt and events in the life of Christ. Both of these sequences reveal the training that God gives to prepare His people for second-mile responses.

- Both Jesus and the nation of Israel were born in the Promised Land but later fled to Egypt for survival.
- Jesus demonstrated obedience to authority when He was a child, and after being approached by His parents when they found Him in the Temple, He "went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them" (Luke 2:51). The nation of Israel learned obedience to their taskmasters, and they were humbled enough to cry out to God. (See Exodus 3:7.)
- Jesus was baptized, and the Holy Spirit came upon Him and filled Him for service. Israel was baptized through the miraculous parting of the Red Sea, and a cloud came upon them for guidance.
- Jesus was tested for 40 days in the wilderness, before beginning His ministry among people. Israel was tested for 40 years in the wilderness before they reached the Promised Land.
- Jesus received power to conquer evil and bring righteousness, and Israel was given power to overcome the pagan nations and establish God's Law.

This type of training in our own lives will help prepare us to respond with Christ-like love toward others. One of the most painful and difficult ways of sharing Christ's love is to rejoice while personal insults are being inflicted by others. When we are asked to go the first mile or are

grievously insulted, it is vitally important for us to remember what Christ gave up and experienced in order to pour out God's love upon us.

Command 9: Go the Second Mile | Day 59

Remove Label Barriers!

The command to go the second mile strikes at the heart of the walls we tend to erect against the people whom we don't want to help or be associated with. Every group—including cultures, political parties, and religions—tends to employ techniques to protect themselves from "outsiders" by assigning labels with negative connotations. One of the most grievous label barriers involves racial prejudice.

God identifies only one race in the Bible—the human race. Modern racial divisions came with the theory of evolution.

Notice that the complete roll call of God does not include races, "[Christ] purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). In Christ "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

The woman at the well was shocked when Jesus asked her for a drink, and she exclaimed, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink? For Jews do not associate with Samaritans." (John 4:9). The Jews are a people group because they are all descendants of Abraham, but Paul points out that by faith in Christ, Gentile believers become spiritual descendants of Abraham. (See Galatians 3:7.)

Label barriers prohibit us from entering into the most meaningful relationships in life. For example, Nathaniel said of Jesus, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46), and the early Christians resisted the newly converted Apostle Paul because he was a feared Pharisee.

The command to go the second mile brings us to a label barrier that hinders many Christians from actively carrying out God's will in the community. They view their government leaders as secular politicians rather than ministers of God.

Every government official is "God's servant to do you good. ... This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants" (Romans 13:4, 6).

Jesus had to condemn the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, but he did not erect a barrier against all Pharisees. Instead, he received a Pharisee named Nicodemus, and through their conversation we now understand the marvelous truth of the new birth through baptism. (See John 3.)

No doubt, the disciples flinched when Jesus told them to go to help a hated Roman soldier with his heavy backpack. Do we have a similar reaction when we hear titles such as Democrats, Republicans, Catholics, Protestants, Liberals, Atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, Communists, Fundamentalists, and so on? Let's tear down these barriers so we can fulfill the royal law of love. (See James 2:8.)

Command 9: Go the Second Mile | Day 60

Exchange "Things" for Freedom!

The love of material possessions that we grasp and guard, even to the destruction of God-given relationships, is the source of many of our conflicts. God knows that when we have an abundance of material wealth, the tendency to stray from Him is greater. Therefore, when "things" become idols, He arranges circumstances to free us from their grasp.

When we expect from things what only God can give, such as security, joy, and freedom, we turn things into idols.

This cycle is the pattern in our lives, even as it was in the nation of Israel. Therefore, God lamented, "When I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, the land I

promised on oath to their forefathers, and when they eat their fill and thrive, they will turn to other gods and worship them, rejecting me and breaking my covenant" (Deuteronomy 31:20).

When I began to fast for extended periods of time, I experienced an unusual phenomenon. The longer I fasted, the less the things of this world interested me and the things of God took on new and deeper meaning.

Later, when I told this to an artist named Severt Andrewson, he explained that God had refocused his attention on the things of God through a different experience. For years, he had labored over his paintings, and he had quite a collection in his home studio. One night, a fire broke out, completely destroying his house, studio, and art gallery, with all of their contents.

Following the fire, Severt remembers kneeling in the ashes with his wife, Ruth, and thanking God for His love and for what He would do in the future. After this event in his life, we contacted him about illustrating the *Character Sketches* books. Severt realized that God had perfectly orchestrated his past training and circumstances to uniquely prepare him for the task of creating wildlife illustrations for the *Character Sketches* series.

Paul learned the secret of winning more of Christ. "I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8).

One of the surest ways to start a family fight is to try to divide an inheritance. The love of money and the willingness to sacrifice lifelong friendships for more possessions has been astonishing to me as I have counseled many families. Even carefully made wills crumble under the vicious attacks of family members who march to court for their "fair share." They may increase the bottom line of their net worth, but they will only leave it to their children for the next round of bitter fights.

Are you willing to exchange "things" for freedom? Stop right now and say, "Heavenly Father, I surrender all my earthly possessions to You so that I can experience more of Your life and freedom."

Earn a Hearing!

A man who was very zealous for the Lord started sharing the Gospel with a neighbor. The neighbor just stared, giving no response to what was being said. In fact, the unsaved neighbor was not even listening to him; instead, he was thinking about his very close friend who had been cheated out of a lot of money by the one who was now sharing the Gospel with him.

No wonder Jesus gave more severe condemnation to the religious hypocrites than He gave to the harlots, publicans, and sinners! (See Matthew 23:13.)

Imagine the foolishness of attempting to witness to a Roman soldier after refusing to carry his pack.

There was open animosity between the Jewish subjects and their Roman authorities. In fact, a popular movement was begun by the Zealots, whose primary goal was to throw off the yoke of Roman control. The situation was so tense that the Pharisees were certain that they could defeat Jesus by simply questioning Him about whether or not they should pay taxes to Caesar. If He said yes, the Jews would be enraged and leave Him. If he said no, the Roman authorities would arrest Him as an insurgent. (See Matthew 22:17–22.)

Imagine the astonishment of the multitudes when Jesus gave the command that they were to go the second mile! Imagine also their inability to carry on much of a conversation during the first mile. The Roman soldier would probably regard his conscripted burden bearer as a mere servant and would expect him to be inwardly grumbling because of the task he was legally obligated to perform.

Then imagine the total change in attitude of the soldier when at the end of the first mile his servant would say, "I would like to carry your pack a second mile." No longer would the Jew be viewed merely as a servant, but as a friend. The conversation would have a whole new basis for

significance and would no doubt begin with this question: "Why are you doing this?" The Jewish man would then be able to explain the teaching he had learned from Jesus, and because this teaching had changed his life, the soldier would be open to hearing more.

By walking the first mile, we fulfill an obligation. By walking the second mile, we earn the right to witness.

Who are the ones whom you have tried to win to the Lord, but have found to be disinterested? This was the case of a young man who tried to win his father to Christ. His father replied, "When you do the things I have told you to do, I'll be more open to what you say you believe in." Walking the second mile demands a change in one's schedule and priorities, but as we serve with the motivation of love, God is free to bring about supernatural results. What second mile does God want you to travel today?

Experience Second-Mile Success!

William Carey is one of the great heroes of faith and is also an honored reformer in the history of India. The personal sacrifices and struggles that he endured to achieve his life calling are remarkable.

He labored for many years to translate the Bible for the people of India. In 1812, a fire destroyed Carey's massive polyglot dictionary, two grammar books, sets of type for 14 Eastern languages, and whole versions of the Bible. However, Carey was undaunted and said, "The loss is heavy, but as traveling a road the second time is usually done with greater ease and certainty than the first time, so I trust the work will lose nothing of real value … . We are cast down but not in despair." Through his lifelong labors, the Bible was eventually translated into languages that would reach a third of the world's population, and a college was established to carry on his work. His life teaches us an important lesson:

Success rarely comes to those who are prepared to walk only the first mile.

Jesus explains this point in a significant parable: "Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty" (Luke 17:7–10).

In the early 1900s a young man interviewed for a job at a car plant, but was told that he would not be able to have the job. As he looked around the plant, he was surprised to see how dirty and cluttered the floors were. The next morning, he arrived early and swept the floors. When the boss came in and saw what he had done, he said, "Son, you have the job." That young man was a "second-miler." He went on to become very successful in business, and he also became a military hero.

If we do only what is required of us, we are identified by Jesus as unprofitable servants.

Going the second mile to restore relationships and fulfill obligations should become a way of life in all areas, since Jesus made it clear that what we do for others, we actually do for Him. "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Colossians 3:23–24).

Would your employer say that you go the second mile on a job? If in doubt, purpose now to become a "second-miler."

Lunch Money

by Ken Pierpont

Doing more than is expected is a powerful way to show someone you love him. When you do more than others expect, it will probably be remembered for a long time. This happened to me one day.

I was driving a group of friends to the Basic Seminar that was being held at a Mennonite church in Holmes County, Ohio, about an hour's drive from our home.

On Saturday the seminar lasts all day and, for various reasons, I had to leave that morning without any food and without any money.

I was a little frustrated that I would have to go all day without eating, but consoled myself with the thought that I could fast, which would allow me to concentrate more fully on the rich teaching that I would receive. It was a beautiful day and the drive was pleasant through countryside that is dear to my heart. The company was good. I enjoyed conversation with my friends about the things of the Lord as we drove.

When we arrived, I found my place and settled in to enjoy the seminar. The morning passed swiftly and I noticed no hunger. When the noon hour came I went to the van to spend some time alone with the Lord. On the church grounds was a hill crowned with a giant maple tree. In the shade of the tree, people began to spread quilts and open large picnic baskets. Out came the food, and my resolve to fast began to wane. I watched the Amish and Mennonite moms draw meals from baskets and I knew it would be impossible to concentrate on the Lord with this feast going on in front of me.

I started the van and began driving around the village of Berlin. I found the Christian bookstore and spent some time browsing the shelves of books. I have loved books since I was a child. One of my favorite places on earth is a good bookstore. After standing there for a while, I sensed someone behind me and felt a hand on my back. I turned and was shocked to see my wife, Lois, standing there.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

She smiled. I looked down into her deep brown eyes. She said, "I couldn't stand the thought of you going hungry so I brought you some money." My heart welled up with love for her at that moment. We ate lunch together, and I thanked her for driving so many miles just to make sure I had lunch. We kissed each other goodbye; then I went back to the seminar and she made the hour-long trip back home.

Two things stand out in my mind as I remember that day. First, the fact that Lois would know I was hungry and care enough to drive two hours just so I would not have to go without food. Second, that when she arrived at the church and saw I was not there she knew exactly where to look for me.

I am a wealthy man. I have a wife who both knows me and loves me. I know she loves me because she is willing to "go the extra mile" to show it.

Command 9: Go the Second Mile | Day 63

Keep Your Balance!

It is easy to take this command out of context and apply it in ways that are both unwise and unbiblical. God is not instructing us to give our cheek to anyone who wants to slap it, nor our coat or money to anyone who asks for it, or even to go a second mile for anyone who commands us to do it.

Jesus did nothing of His own will. In the same way, we must follow only the will of our heavenly Father.

Over the years, various individuals have attempted to control me or my time with their problems. They were presumptuous in expecting unlimited time from me, and they were offended when it was not given. Actually, I wondered if they really wanted a solution.

These are obviously not "second-mile" situations. Often these individuals have rejected their God-given authorities and find satisfaction in controlling others. It is our responsibility to wisely,

lovingly, and firmly redirect them to those who are responsible for them, such as their parents, their spouses, or their pastors.

We must also realize that final decisions regarding the use of our time, energy, and resources should be made in submission to God's will and the authorities He has placed in our lives. We should check with them before trying to go a second mile.

The instruction to do good unto all men is best fulfilled by helping leaders do good to those under their jurisdictions.

For the past 15 years, we as a ministry have experienced unprecedented opportunities to serve large numbers of people in many countries around the world. On many occasions, we have been approached by those who want to promote their personal agendas. In each case, we have asked them to contact the official we are serving, and the leader wisely responded to each situation.

This protection has spared us from untold frustration and fruitless effort. It also fulfills the instruction of Galatians 6:10: "… do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

When someone asks us for something, we should first determine if we are under their jurisdiction. If so, we should quickly obey and be willing to go the second mile. If not, we should check with our God-given authorities (and wife) so that we are not operating in our own will. A valuable entry in your journal would be to write out situations in which you applied this command and the way that God blessed you or others as a result.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 5:38-42

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

1 Peter 2:21–24

"… Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."

Luke 6:31

"Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Proverbs 20:22

"Do not say, "I'll pay you back for this wrong!" Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you."

Proverbs 3:27

"Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act."

Welcome God's "Hewers"!

Do you ever wonder why God allows so many people to annoy, despise, and provoke us? They disrupt our lives and dominate our attention. One answer is given in a profound analogy. God compares believers to stones that are being perfectly hewn out so that they fit together with every other believer in God's Temple (see 1 Peter 2:5 and Ephesians 2:19–22).

The phrase fitly framed together is a present passive participle, which expresses continuous or repeated action that we receive. During the construction of Solomon's Temple, there were 80,000 "hewers of stone" in the quarries. Each stone was so perfectly prepared that it needed no

further hewing after it was put in place for the Temple (see 1 Kings 5:15–18; 6:7). If we view those who are hostile toward us as God's hewers, we will be ready for the next command:

Command Ten

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

David describes the "hewing" action of opponents: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. … Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart. … It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees" (Psalm 119:67–71).

This testimony has certainly been true in my own life and ministry. The most powerful truths presented in the Basic Seminar have been "hewn out" by critics. They have motivated me to study the Scriptures more intently to clarify and refine what I teach.

The Basic Seminar itself was the result of hewers who were associated with the first youth ministry I directed. The Board fired me, with the challenge to prove the effectiveness of the Biblical principles I had been teaching young people. The promise expressed by the Apostle Peter has become a reality for me:

"… after you have suffered a little while, [Jesus] will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (1 Peter 5:10).

One reason God commands us to love our enemies and bless those who curse us is that He has higher purposes for them than simply making our lives miserable. He wants us to cooperate with Him in the process of developing maturity in our lives. The command does not apply only to conflict from "outsiders," but also from those in our own families who "chip away" at us on a daily basis.

Let's purpose now to welcome those who react to us, not as intruders into our lives, but as hewers sent by God to assist Him in improving our character and conforming us into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Command 10: Love Your Enemies

Related Character Quality

Creativity vs. Underachievement

Creativity is cultivating wise thoughts, prudent words, and skillful actions to carry out God's will.

What Is the Purpose of Creativity?

The foundation of every character quality is genuine love, and one of the best ways to express love is through good works.

Creativity is necessary to effectively carry out good works. The great importance of good works is indicated by the many Biblical references to them.

- "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).
- "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8).
- "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10).
- "… in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God" (Colossians 1:10).

What Activates Creativity?

Creativity is activated by thoughts. Before God created the world, He determined in the counsel of His will that He would create man, provide a Redeemer, and establish good works for believers to follow. (See 1 Peter 1:18–21, Ephesians 1:4, Titus 2, and Ephesians 2:10.) If our thoughts are based on the Word of God, our creativity will be for good purposes. If our thoughts are not based on Scripture, our creativity will produce selfish or evil results.

Creativity is energized when thoughts are expressed in words. After God conceived creation in His mind, He spoke the words, and it came about. "God said, Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3),

and "God said, Let us make man in our image" (Genesis 1:26). The power of words in the process of creativity explains why God warns that every word must be carefully chosen before it is spoken. "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (Proverbs 18:21).

How Can We Increase Our Creativity?

Creativity is an expression of wisdom. "I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion" (Proverbs 8:12). Every believer has an opportunity to receive more wisdom by simply asking for it. "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). The conditions that God has established for wisdom are also important to follow. "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind" (James 1:6).

If we are serious about increasing our creativity, we should not only ask for wisdom but also cry out for it. "and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Proverbs 2:3–6).

The ultimate source of wisdom is the Scriptures. The more we study, memorize, and meditate on them, the greater foundation we will have for true creativity.

Listen to Your "Perfectors"!

The problem with God's "hewers" is that sometimes they are so loud, aggressive, and forceful that we close our ears to what God is trying to say to us through them. Often God is trying to tell us:

Find balance in your life and message, because truth out of balance leads to heresy.

One of the most powerful diagrams in the Basic Seminar describes the development of concupiscence. This diagram has a "perfector" story behind it. The diagram was first presented to the student body of a Bible college. After this and other teaching was shared, a spirit of revival spread throughout the campus. Based on this overwhelming response, the college president urged me to return the following year.

When I arrived on campus, I was informed that one of the professors did not agree with my teaching and had been freely sharing his reaction with the students. The president and I met with him, and I asked what caused him to disagree. He said that the chart on the development of concupiscence was incomplete.

I had diagrammed only the spiritual aspects. Following our talk, I realized that there were also psychological and physical developments. By adding these two dimensions to the chart, it took on a whole new perspective, with much deeper meaning and clearer information on how immorality develops in a person's life. In retrospect, I am very grateful to God for raising up this hewer, because millions of people have benefited from the outcome of the reaction that God stirred up in his heart.

Imbalance in one area of life will usually result in an opposite imbalance in another area.

Parents who become too strict with their children with rules in one area will often become too lenient with their children in another area. For example, one family overemphasized strict rules against any identification with the world, yet they failed to teach their children to love the Lord and walk in His ways. They emphasized religion, but not relationship. As a result they experienced reaction, not only from their children, but from other people as well.

As we continue to meditate on Matthew 5:44, we should ask ourselves if we have created enemies because they have seen imbalances or inconsistencies in our walk with the Lord. If this is the

case, then God may be using our enemies to send us a message. If we listen to them and correct our imbalance, we will have new reasons to bless those who curse us.

Neutralize Their Venom!

In the jungles of Africa, a missionary tramped through the tall grass toward a village. Suddenly, he felt a piercing bite on his leg and looked down to see a very poisonous snake. Within minutes he could expect to have excruciating pain, nausea, swelling, and weakness. However, none of these symptoms occurred, because he was prepared for this type of attack.

He reached into his backpack and pulled out a small unit that he used to give an electrical charge to the affected area, neutralizing the snake's venom.

When an enemy curses us with bitter words, the effect is the same as that of a poisonous snakebite. In fact, God describes bitter words as poisonous venom. (See Psalm 58:3–4 and James 3:8.) These venomous words will do their deadly work in our emotions unless we quickly neutralize them with a heart response of blessing. This is one of the reasons that Jesus commands us to bless those who curse us. No wonder Scripture states:

"The tongue has the power of life and death" (Proverbs 18:21).

Joseph was cursed by his older brothers but refused to curse them back. Instead, he looked to the Lord for his vindication. We see his attitude in the response he later gave to his brothers: "… You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20).

In another case, a father angrily shouted at his son, "You idiot! You will never amount to anything." These words went deep into the heart and soul of this son, and for years they damaged his ability to respond to his father or establish relationships with other people. It was only when he blessed his father that he was freed from the emotional bondage he was experiencing.

Blessings should begin by using the name of the Lord and can include the qualities that are deficient in the lives of our attackers. For example, a cursed son could say, "Lord, would you bless my father with true wisdom and understanding. Keep him strong with kindness and compassion. Cause your face to shine upon him that he might radiate genuine love, and give him grace to know and do your will."

Cursing our enemies is like drinking poison and waiting for our enemies to die!

I can personally attest to the power of this command as different individuals have attacked me with the most venomous words possible. When I ask God to bless them with the qualities that they seem to be lacking, my attitude toward them begins to change; God fills my heart with genuine love toward them and expectations about what He will do in their lives.

May God give each of us the wisdom and grace to counteract the damage of venomous words by learning to bless those who curse us.

Command 10: Love Your Enemies

Study Question

Q: If we are to honor the king and love our enemies, why did Elijah call down fire from heaven to consume the 102 soldiers whom the king of Israel sent to arrest him, whereas Elisha directed the King of Israel to welcome and feed the great host of soldiers whom the King of Syria sent to arrest him? (See 2 Kings 1, 6:8–23).

A: Scripture promises, "When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7). However, when our ways do not please the Lord, He will often stir up enemies to oppress us and draw us back to Himself.

This was God's continual practice with the nation of Israel. When they forsook Him and worshiped other gods, He raised up nations to war against them (see Judges 2:14). On other

occasions, He raised up prophets and judges and gave them supernatural power to bring judgment upon His people.

In Elijah's case, the king whose soldiers came to arrest him was evil King Ahaziah, who served Baal and "provoked the LORD, the God of Israel, to angerl" (1 Kings 22:53). In calling down fire upon them, Elijah was the minister of God's judgment to the King and to the nation that had turned from God.

On the other hand, in Elisha's day, the Syrian nation was used by God to afflict Israel. When the King of Syria sent "a great host" to arrest Elisha for revealing his secret strategy to Joram, who was the King of Israel, Elisha asked God to smite the Syrians with temporary blindness and then led them to King Joram. King Joram wanted to kill the Syrians, but Elisha instructed him to give them a banquet and send them back to the King of Syria.

The result was that "the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory" (2 Kings 6:23). This affirms the wisdom of this command and the instruction of Scripture: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:20–21).

Be a Power Channel!

Recently, a man named Steve called me to discuss a tragedy in his life and marriage. During our conversation, he literally broke down and wept. The frustration of years of trying to make his life and marriage work all came pouring out.

Anyone who saw this family would never have guessed they were having such serious problems. Steve had an attractive wife, Janet, and bright, happy sons and daughters. The tragedy was that he and his wife had become "enemies," and he had fallen in love with another woman.

The most grievous "enemies" are those whose love has turned to hate because of offenses and disillusionment.

The pattern of destruction in this marriage is all too common. Steve and Janet certainly expected to have a happy marriage; however, little offenses and wrong attitudes began to build up between them. Soon, Janet began withholding her affection from Steve.

He also saw growing evidences that she was not under his spiritual authority and was not looking to him for counsel or decisions. At this vulnerable point, the other woman came into his life. She offered him everything that he was lacking in his marriage, and he found himself helplessly controlled by passions that he hated and knew were wrong.

In a desperate attempt to salvage his marriage, Steve broke off his relationship with the other woman. He confessed that this was tremendously difficult for him, because any feelings of love he once had for his wife seemed to be dead. I assured him that the nature of genuine love means it cannot be killed. (See 1 Corinthians 13.)

Within ourselves we do not have the capacity to genuinely love others. It is only as we make the Lord our first love that He will give us the unconditional love we need for other people, including enemies.

When Steve said that his goal was to restore his marriage, I told him that this should not be his main goal. Rather, he should seek to restore his first love for the Lord, which he readily admitted he had lost. So, we read Revelation 2:2–5: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance …. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place …."

The failed marriage was a by-product of a failed relationship with the Lord. Therefore, to avoid similar destroyed relationships, let's renew our first love for the Lord so we can be channels through which He can freely give His powerful light and love to others, including our enemies.

Be More Powerful Than Enemies!

A well-known pastor in Romania looked out his front window as a military car drove up. Armed officers jumped out and rushed toward his front door. He was expecting them. They arrested him and took him to the police station. There they began their interrogation of Dr. Josef Tson.

They demanded, in harsh and angry voices, that he retract the paper he had written about Christianity, and they threatened to kill him if he refused to comply with their demands. He just looked at them with a great big smile. They asked, "Why are you smiling when we tell you we are going to kill you?"

He explained, "Your supreme weapon is to kill me, but my supreme weapon is to die for my faith! You see, my sermons are all over Romania. If I die, I will sprinkle each tape's message with my blood, and people will listen to them with new dedication. I will conquer Romania with my death, and I will also go to glory." His enemies realized the truth of his words and declared, "We will not let you be a martyr!"

The most powerful people on the face of the earth are those who have no fear of death.

Fear of death can have a crippling effect on our minds, wills, and emotions. It diminishes our potential for success. Jesus died to conquer this fear: "… by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14–15).

Paul applied this powerful truth when he wrote that "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you" (2 Corinthians 4:10–12).

The great paradox of the Christian life is that we are never more alive than when we "die" in surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ.

There must come a time when we totally surrender our lives to the Lord. This is the basis of genuine love and power for living. (See John 15:13.) My point of unconditional surrender took place one afternoon when I was a teenager. I was reading Foxe's Book of Martyrs and was deeply challenged by the example of these Christians who had endured terrible deaths for their faith. I bowed my head and said, "Lord, I will live for you and die for you!"

A marvelous thing happened. No longer was I concerned about how much pleasure I could get out of life. Rather, I was concerned about how much I could accomplish for the Lord before I died. Life became an exciting race against time. This commitment has given me meaning and purpose for each day, with no fear of death. If you have not already done so, I urge you to join me today in this exciting race by unconditionally surrendering your life to the Lord.

Be More Than a Conqueror!

Paul raised the triumphant banner of victory by declaring, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37). The "things" to which he was referring are tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, inadequate clothing, peril, and sword. (See Romans 8:35.)

Following this list, the Apostle Paul quoted a significant passage, found in Psalm 44:22: "Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" It is in these things that we are able to be more than conquerors. How?

The most powerful weapon in the world is love. By using it on our enemies, we become more than conquerors.

If we overcome our enemies, we are conquerors, but if we win our enemies over to God's truth by Christ's love in us, we are more than conquerors. When a hateful official came into the interrogation room, Dr. Josef Tson vividly remembered his previous visit and the painful beating

the officer had given him. Dr. Tson said, "I would like to ask your forgiveness for my screams when you beat me last time."

The surprised official asked why he would request forgiveness, and Dr. Tson answered, "Because I later realized that it was the week when my Lord Jesus Christ was whipped, mocked, and crucified for my sins. It was an honor to receive just a small bit of suffering so that I could show His love to you." This response softened the heart of the officer. He let Dr. Tson go home for the weekend to preach at his church.

During months of daily interrogation, Josef Tson's captors stated, "Everyone else we interrogate hates us. Why don't you hate us?" He replied, "Because every morning before I come here I pray that God will bless you, your wife, and your family. I love you and therefore I cannot hate you." When the six months of interrogation ended, with deep emotion one Communist official said, "Mr. Tson, I will miss you."

When we see the potential of our enemies becoming believers and we invest in their lives, we will grow to love them, because where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also.

Think of your worst enemy, and picture in your mind what he would be like as a believer. The same fervency with which enemies attack both the Gospel and believers could be used to advance the cause of Christ, as in the case of the Apostle Paul.

If we want to be more than conquerors, we must use the supreme weapon of agape love that Jesus describes: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Are we "laying down our lives" for our enemies by showing them God's unconditional love?

Classify Your Enemies!

An ugly civil war had erupted in the nation. An arrogant son had set himself against his famous father, King David. As David fled the capital city with his little army, an angry, vocal, and vitriolic enemy cursed David and threw stones at him. His actions angered David's generals, who said, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and cut off his head." (See 2 Samuel 16:9.)

David's answer was profound. It clearly explains the first classification of enemies—the ones we make because of our own failures. David replied, "… Leave him alone; let him curse, for the LORD has told him to" (2 Samuel 16:11). David knew that this enemy's actions and the rebellion of his son were part of God's punishment for his sin with Bathsheba. However, God has given us a promise regarding our enemies:

"When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7).

There is a second classification of enemies—those who are against God and His purposes. These enemies attack us because of our relationship with the Lord and our potential of damaging Satan's kingdom.

David certainly had more than his share of this type of enemy, beginning with his older brothers, who despised him for visiting the battlefront; Goliath, who defied the armies of the living God; and King Saul, who feared David's sudden rise to fame.

David's response to these enemies is described in many Psalms. "My slanderers pursue me all day long; many are attacking me in their pride. When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me? All day long they twist my words; they are always plotting to harm me" (Psalm 56:2–5). Then he uses his powerful weapon:

"Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me" (Psalm 56:9).

When we cry out, we are saying to God, "I unconditionally surrender to You and Your will for my life, and I desperately need Your intervention at this moment." With this spirit of humility, trust, and dependence, God is able not only to deal with our enemies, but also to work marvelously in our own lives, in ways we could not have imagined. (See 1 Peter 5:6–7.)

On this day of journaling, let's make a list of all of our enemies and classify each one by writing "mine" or "God's" after each name. We should then thank God for the benefits He has in mind for us in allowing them to oppose us. Then, we can take the appropriate steps in responding to each enemy.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 5:44

"But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you".

Romans 12:14, 18–21

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. … If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written : "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

1 Peter 3:8–9

"Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."

Matthew 5:9

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."

Luke 6:35

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

Be Perfect!

The command to be perfect sounds impossible! When we do something wrong, we often say, "Well, no one is perfect!" We even have Scripture to back up our conclusion: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). So, what does Jesus mean when He commands us:

Command Eleven

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect". (Matthew 5:48)

No doubt, our difficulty with this command is because of our understanding of the word perfect. The English word means "to be without any flaws or errors." For example, we say that a person earns a "perfect" score when he answers every question correctly.

The Greek word for perfect, which Jesus used in this command, has a different meaning. It is the word teleios. It means "complete" or "finished." It comes from the word telos, which includes the meanings of reaching the goal, fulfilling one purpose, and becoming a full-grown adult rather than remaining a spiritually immature infant or child.

Growing in maturity happens when we are conformed to the "express image" of Christ through His commands.

The term "express image" is a translation of the Greek word charakter. (See Hebrews 1:3.) Jesus reveals His character and true nature to us through His commands. Therefore, He promises,

"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14:21).

Every command of Christ has infinite wisdom and great power. When I began memorizing many of them from the Sermon on the Mount and applying them to my life, marvelous things began to happen. My school grades dramatically improved. God provided money in exact amounts in answer to prayer. I experienced a clear conscience and was able to forgive others.

As I shared these and other rewards with young people who were a part of Chicago street gangs and church youth groups, I began to see lasting results in their lives.

What commitments have you made to the Lord? Have you been able to keep these commitments? If not, you will be encouraged by what you read tomorrow.

Take the Ultimate Step!

My greatest joy is watching youth and adults grow to spiritual maturity. My greatest sorrow is seeing once-dedicated believers reject Biblical commitments. What causes a believer to turn his back on that which he has learned and received from the Lord?

Commitments are good, but they do not tend to last unless they are based on foundational decisions.

Profound insights on why commitments don't hold up are given to us in the account of the rich young ruler. He had strong commitments to the commandments of God. When Jesus named several of them, the rich young ruler stated, "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack" (Matthew 19:20).

Jesus said, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). These instructions constituted total, unconditional surrender.

When the rich young ruler heard this requirement, "he went away sad, because he had great wealth" (Matthew 19:22). He was willing to make commitments but unwilling to make a total, unconditional surrender of his life and all that he had to Christ.

Commitments are based on our control and conditions. Total, unconditional surrender is based on God's control.

When Jesus called His disciples, He did not ask them to make a commitment to forsake some things and follow Him for a few years. He required them to forsake all, take up their crosses, and follow Him for the rest of their lives, regardless of the cost.

Actually, the requirements that Jesus gave to the rich young ruler had a reasonable basis, because as a member of the Jewish nation, he had a covenant obligation to "love his neighbor as himself." This was one of the commands that Jesus recalled for him and that the rich young ruler claimed to be following. (See Leviticus 19:18.)

This same instruction is given to us. We are urged to totally surrender our bodies as living sacrifices, and then we are challenged to "Share with God's people who are in need." (See Romans 12:1–2, 13.)

Recently I asked a 22-year-old girl how her walk with the Lord was going. She said, "Not very good. I don't get much out of my daily Bible reading, and I am anxious about my future." She had made many commitments, but had never fully surrendered her life to the Lord. That day she did. When I asked her how she felt the next day, she exclaimed, "I have a new freedom!"

Have you made commitments that you have not been able to maintain because you have not yet totally surrendered your life to the Lord? I urge you to do this now, because it is only through total surrender that we will experience total success.

Command 11: Be Perfect

Related Character Quality

Sincerity vs. Hypocrisy

Sincerity is being as genuine on the inside as we appear to be on the outside.

The word sincere comes from the Latin sincerus, which means "whole, pure, genuine." It is most likely derived from the root sem-, meaning "one," and - cerus, from a verb meaning "to create." To be sincere is to be without duplicity, which is planned deception. The ultimate expression of duplicity is Satan and his messengers, who appear as angels of light but in reality are darkness and death. (See 2 Corinthians 11:13–15.)

The Hebrew word for sincerity is tamiym. It means "complete, whole, entire, sound; having integrity; to be complete or entirely in accord with truth and fact." The Greek word heilikrines is translated sincere and is made up of two Greek words: heile, which means "the sun's ray," and krino, meaning to "judge." The literal meaning of sincere could be rendered "to have our lives and actions found pure when judged by sunlight." Jesus explained, "Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (John 3:20).

The Reward of Sincerity

God looks for sincere and perfect hearts through which to demonstrate His wisdom and power. "For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him" (2 Chronicles 16:9). This statement was spoken to King Asa, who won a great victory when he relied upon the Lord but suffered a great defeat when he relied upon a military ally.

Paul discovered that when he relied upon the Lord with all of his heart, even though he was weak, he experienced God's strength. The Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The Key to Sincerity

Another New Testament word translated perfect is katartizo, meaning "to complete thoroughly, i.e. repair, adjust; to put in order." Peter wrote, "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (1 Peter 5:10).

God takes all believers through fiery trials that expose hidden defects and imperfections. When believers thank God for these trials and rejoice in the purposes for which they are given, God grants a corresponding measure of the power of the Holy Spirit and a perfection of the fruit of the Spirit in believers' lives. (See 1 Peter 4:12–13.)

Personal Evaluation: How Sincere Are You?

- Are you the same on the outside as you are on the inside?
- Do you hide secret sins from the light of Christ?
- Do you judge others about things of which you are guilty as well?
- Do you obey outwardly, yet inwardly resist instruction?
- Do you seek the Lord with your whole heart?
- Do you do good deeds for the praise of men or the glory of God?
- Do you allow the strength of God to shine through your weaknesses?

Be Perfect in Love!

Over the years, I have asked many young people if they love the Lord, and they assure me that they do. Then I ask them if they have fully surrendered their lives to Him, and they tell me, "No." They are holding on to treasures, plans, goals, desires, or passions and are afraid to yield them to God.

Their love for the Lord was only in word, because when we truly love others, we will be eager to give them all we have, even to the extent of laying down our lives for them.

The evidence of imperfect love is fear, because "perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18).

What is it then that we really fear? In many cases we fear losing control! Have you ever wondered why the nation of Israel conquered a heathen nation by God's power and then turned right around and worshiped those heathen gods? Why would they serve gods who were unable to deliver the people who trusted in them?

The answer is significant: We like to worship gods whom we can control. A conquered god meets this qualification. We tend to create gods who will allow us to do what we want to do. However, the things that our old nature desires bring disillusionment, boredom, and destruction. This dilemma is the basis of Christ's teaching:

"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35).

Yesterday I mentioned a young lady who found freedom by total surrender. A few days after she made this surrender, she told me that she was experiencing less freedom than she initially had experienced. I explained to her that as soon as we surrender our lives to God, He will begin working on specific areas and deal with them one by one. She gave a big smile and said, "That's exactly what is happening."

This is the point at which commitments would be in order. God wants us to commit our friends, money, music, schedule, ambitions, reputation, marriage, and possessions to Him. Paul confidently stated, "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" (2 Timothy 1:12).

God asked me to give Him each of these areas of my life, and it was a struggle to let them go. Yet, as I did, I grew in faith. In time, He gave back to me what I had committed to Him, but in a way that I never expected. For example, I gave my money to Him, and He began to provide for needs in exact amounts in answer to prayer. When I gave my friends to Him they left, but then He taught me how to make disciples. However, what I failed to give to God I lost anyway, but with much sorrow. My appeal to you is to surrender each area of your life to God as an expression of perfect love.

Be Perfect by Great Works!

One of the most painful questions you can ask a teenager is, "What do you plan to do with your life?" For many teenagers, hearing this question is like getting a jolt of reality combined with fear of failure as they hesitantly answer, "I don't know."

Most of those to whom I pose this question are believers and want to follow the Lord. However, when it comes to knowing "that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" for their lives, they are immature. They are unaware of the wonderful reality behind their birth:

Every person is first created in the heart of God to do great works and then is formed in the womb to carry out those works.

This awesome truth was revealed to Jeremiah when God stated, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5). The Hebrew word knew is an expression of intimate knowledge and interaction. It is the same word used of a husband being joined to his wife in a one-flesh relationship, as in "Adam lay with his wife" (Genesis 4:1).

The word formed is the same word used to describe God's forming "man from the dust of the ground" (Genesis 2:7). In other words, God chose, in His heart and mind, the great works that we would do, and then He designed us in the womb with precisely the right characteristics and capabilities to achieve those great works.

This is the message of Ephesians 2:8–10. We are created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Notice how these good works relate to our perfection:

"Now the God of peace ... equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him ..." (Hebrews 13:20–21).

There are five great purposes that God wants each one of us to fulfill or seek to help others fulfill. They are given in sequential order in the life of Adam.

The first and most important work is to establish and maintain an unbroken relationship with the Lord. The second is to demonstrate God's love and power through a livelihood. The third is to develop a life message based on obedience to God's commands. The fourth is to experience a loving oneness in marriage, and the fifth is to raise up Godly sons and daughters who are mighty in Spirit.

The rewards of loving God's commands are given in Psalm 112:1–2: "… Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands. His children will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed."

Let's search out the great works that God preordained for us and give our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength to accomplishing them so that we can reach new levels of spiritual maturity.

Command 11: Be Perfect

Study Question

Q: Moses forsook all the treasures of Egypt to serve the Lord and free His people from bondage. God commissioned Moses and sent him to Pharaoh, but on the way, why did God meet him in an inn and seek to kill him?

A: God appeared to Moses in the backside of the desert and commissioned him to return to Egypt and deal with Pharaoh. While Moses was on the way, God told him exactly what to say to Pharaoh. "This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son" (see Exodus 4:22–23). In the very next verse, we read, "At a lodging place on the way, the LORD met Moses and was about to kill him." What a startling statement! Why would God have such an intention? Based on what happened next, it becomes clear what caused God's displeasure with Moses.

God called Abraham to leave his country and kindred to establish a new nation, through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. God had given Abraham a sign of that covenant—circumcision. God gave very clear instructions that this sign was to be carried out by all of his descendants. It is obvious that Moses had failed to do this with his sons.

This failure of Moses to fulfill the covenant of God through circumcision indicated an incomplete circumcision of his heart. If left unaddressed, this would have tainted his ability to represent the nation of Israel as "the firstborn" of God the Father or to speak forcefully to Pharaoh about his firstborn.

If we are to have perfect hearts, we must expose all secret desires and activities to the light of God's truth and the washing of His Word.

Be Perfect in Discernment!

When God told Solomon that He would give him anything he asked for, Solomon could have asked for riches, fame, power, or long life. Instead, Solomon requested the one thing that would bring him all of these: "So give your servant a discerning heart … to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:9).

Mature believers live in a world of right or wrong, because they have exercised their senses to discern good and evil.

Scripture describes immature believers as newborn babies. They are to desire the sincere milk of the Word, that they might grow up to maturity. (See 1 Peter 2:2.) As we mature in wisdom and faith, we will not only understand the deeper truths of Scripture, but we will also understand what God views as right and wrong.

The relationship between spiritual immaturity and discernment of right and wrong is clearly explained in Scripture. Paul longed to share the deeper truths of God's wisdom with new believers, but he was unable to do so because they were spiritually immature: "Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:13–14).

Immature believers live in a world between light and darkness. They label as "amoral" the things that look gray to them.

Immature living leads to immature decisions and the consequences of making unwise choices. The owner of a dental lab was in need of an assistant. He interviewed a woman who had all the technical skills he required and concluded that she would be ideal. However, his wife told him that she had cautions about hiring this woman. She could not explain her cautions, especially because everything looked so good on the outside. Nevertheless, she urged her husband to look for someone else.

The husband needed an assistant immediately, so he overruled the cautions (discernment) of his wife and hired the woman he had interviewed. As time went on, the business began to lose money. One day, the owner received a call from the state police, asking if he was missing any gold. He checked the stock of gold in his dental supplies and discovered that his assistant had been stealing gold and selling it for her own gain.

This man is one of many who have paid a high price for lack of discernment. A big step towards maturity is recognizing that God will give your wife discernment that He will not give to you so that you will know how integral she is to your success.

How many times have you made a decision that your wife seriously questioned? How many times did she turn out to be right? God gave you your wife to bring balance to your life, which manifests itself in clear discernment. Now would be a good time to express Gratitude to your wife for her vital role in your success!

Command 11: Be Perfect | Day 76

Be Perfect in Your Faith!

No one will be completely successful in life without faith. By faith, great works are achieved for God, and "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). By faith, Noah built the ark. By faith, Moses refused the treasures of Egypt, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God and esteeming the riches of Christ more valuable than all the wealth of Egypt. (See Hebrews 11:24–29.)

There are different levels of faith. Scripture speaks of "little faith," "increased" faith, and "great faith" (see Matthew 6:30, Luke 17:5, and Matthew 8:10). Faith grows by the Word and is perfected by being tested and put into action; faith without works is dead.

"... the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:3-4).

What is the perfecting work of faith and patience? God describes the process. We are justified by faith, and by faith we have access to God's grace wherein we stand, and we "rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit …" (Romans 5:3–5).

"faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word [rhema] of Christ" (Romans 10:17). A rhema is a verse or portion of Scripture that the Holy Spirit brings to our attention with application to a current situation or need for direction.

Faith is perfected by works that are motivated by the rhemas of Scripture.

One Sunday morning, I was sitting in church listening to a speaker tell about the need to give Bibles to schoolchildren. These words of Scripture clearly came to my mind: "Do not store up for

yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19–21).

It was then that I surrendered my bank account to the Lord. As I gave it all away, I did not want more money in return; I wanted more faith. I knew that with faith I could obtain whatever I needed to carry out God's works. The results were not immediate. That is where patience must have her perfecting work. However, in retrospect, the whole IBLP ministry is the reward of that little faith!

When God gives a rhema for us to act upon, He often confirms it by a second rhema, that "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (2 Corinthians 13:1). What rhemas has God given to you that He wants you to take action on, so that your faith may be perfected through works and patience?

Be Perfect Through Weakness!

The longing of the Lord Jesus Christ for our perfection is stated in His prayer: "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you …. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:21, 23). In every believer, God has put weaknesses that are designed to make us one in Christ.

Those who are unaware of personal weaknesses tend to show immaturity and self-sufficiency, but those who know their weaknesses depend on one another.

The ultimate expression of maturity is demonstrating God's love by the power of the Holy Spirit. This happens as God works through our weaknesses. Paul learned this when he asked God to remove his infirmity. Jesus answered, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul's response to Christ's answer was to say, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

The key to loving others is recognizing our weaknesses and our need for one another.

Vital relationships are based on the awareness that each party has need for the other. God designed the Body of Christ so that no one member could be self-sufficient. In fact, He gives special honor to those parts of the body that are unattractive. (See 1 Corinthians 12:24.) This also must be true of a marriage. A wife who wants to be self-sufficient damages the most powerful motivation in her husband, which is to care for and protect his wife.

A missionary in Ethiopia stood before a group of tribesmen who had become believers and challenged them to reach out to the villages around them. One man in the group felt God calling him to share Christ with an unreached tribe of fierce warriors. When he expressed this to the group, they looked at him in astonishment and disbelief. How could he possibly make the trip? He was lame in both legs.

He explained, "I will get to the tribe by using my arms to drag my body." The others told him it was impossible, but he felt so strongly that God was calling him to this tribe that he left one night without telling anyone. A year passed, and the group thought he must have died, but then they received an amazing report!

The man had in fact almost died from his difficult journey, but when the tribe he was trying to reach saw that he was crippled, they received him and nursed him back to health. It was the custom in this tribe to show great honor to those who were crippled because a crippled person had once saved their village. They listened to his message and many trusted Christ for salvation as a result. His weakness was the one qualification that God used.

Why not write in your journal about your weaknesses and how God's strength can be perfected through them.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 5:48

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect".

2 Chronicles 16:9

"For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. You have done a foolish thing, and from now on you will be at war."

Colossians 1:28–29

"We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me."

Romans 12:2

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

1 John 3:3

"Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure."

Philippians 3:15–16

"All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained … ."

Be a Serious Disciple!

God is not impressed with lukewarm Christians. In fact, they are nauseating to Him! He would rather have us spiritually hot or cold, but not lukewarm. If we are lukewarm, He will spit us out of His mouth. (See Revelation 3:15–16.)

On the other hand, if we decide to seek God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, He will make Himself known to us. This is His promise: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). In the same way that God rewarded Uzziah, who at the age of 16 became the King of Judah, God rewards those who seriously seek Him.

"He sought God … As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success" (2 Chronicles 26:5).

However, Uzziah discovered the dangers that often come with prosperity and success. "… His fame spread far and wide, for he was greatly helped until he became powerful. But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall" (2 Chronicles 26:15–16).

God is very aware of the constant danger of our deceitful hearts becoming proud and the temptation to think that we have achieved that which, in reality, God has done for us and through us. Pride is the one sin that God hates the most and judges the quickest. Therefore, He gave three disciplines to keep us focused on Him and dependent upon His strength:

Command Twelve

Give secretly; pray secretly; fast secretly; "and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:18).

If we are totally honest with ourselves, most of us would admit that giving can often be motivated by the anticipated gratitude of the recipient rather than by the purely unselfish motive of obedience to God's prompting to give.

When we pray in a group, it is easy to become more concerned about how we sound to people than how we sound to God. As we fast, it is possible for us to become more conscious of the admiration of people than the approval of God.

The command of Jesus to do these disciplines in secret helps us avoid the temptation to seek public approval and encourages us to focus on seeking only God's approval. Since my youth, Psalm 27:4 has been a powerful motivation and direction in this area: "One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple." A confirming declaration is then given in verse 8: "... Your face, LORD, I will seek."

Let's make this prayer our meditation today and in the years to come!

Avoid the Danger of Stealing Glory!

The pattern is all too common: we see a special need in another person's life and we joyfully give to meet that need. The receiver then praises us for our generosity. We smile with satisfaction and go on. Then, we bask in the new attention and admiration that we are given.

However, this praise can quickly turn into resentment and even hatred. We don't understand why this happens. Why would he react to us, especially in view of all we have done for him? …

The words of that question reveal the problem: both of us are thinking in terms of what we have done for him rather than what God has done for him, through us. When people look to us, rather than to God, for provision of needs, they put us on a pedestal and give us the glory that belongs only to God. When we fail to meet new needs that they have, they become disillusioned and tear down their "failed god." This is why God gives the following warning.

"I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols. ... Let them give glory to the LORD and proclaim his praise in the islands ..." (Isaiah 42:8, 12).

In order to avoid having people look to us to meet their needs, rather than to God, Jesus commanded, "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. … But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:1, 3–4).

Paul and Barnabas recognized the danger of stealing God's glory when the people of Lycaonia were preparing to worship them as gods. "they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: 'Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you …" (Acts 14:14–15).

If we allow people to look to us for what only God can give, we are all set up for destruction.

Years ago, a businessman wanted to join the little youth ministry that I was directing. It was so under-funded that I refused to take a salary, but this man, who was eager to get into Christian work, assumed he would receive a salary from the ministry.

Rather than redirecting his trust to the Lord, I pictured for him things we could do together in the ministry. Later, when he saw that I was not able to provide what he expected, his enthusiasm and expectations turned to disillusionment and resentment. I had to go to him and ask forgiveness for raising expectations that I could not fulfill.

Are there people in your life, even in your family, who are looking to you as the source rather than God, for providing their daily needs? If so, now would be an excellent time to direct their attention to Him and to explain that God is the giver of every good gift.

Command 12: Practice Secret Disciplines

Related Character Quality

Faith vs. Unbelief

Faith is recognizing God's will in a given matter and acting upon it.

The Greek word for faith is pistis. It comes from the root word peitho, which means "to be persuaded, to convince by reason, to agree with evidence, to rely with inward certainty, to be confident." Faith is based on the promises of God, which are so certain that waiting for them is not discouraging, and acting upon them is natural. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." (Hebrews 11:1).

How Do We Get Faith?

An initial measure of faith to believe in God is given to every person in the world. Jesus commended the faith of little children by stating, "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Mark 10:15).

Faith for salvation comes by hearing the Word of God. "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). After salvation, faith grows as we engraft Scripture and act upon it. Before Scripture was written, the great men and women of faith often heard directly from God. Noah was warned of God to build the ark, and Abraham was called by God to leave his country. (See Hebrews 11:7–8.)

How Does the Word of God Activate Faith?

There are two primary Greek words that describe Scripture which are translated word in the New Testament. The first, logos, refers principally to the total inspired Word of God and to Jesus, Who is the living logos. (See John 1:1.)

The second word is rhema; it can describe specific Scripture that the Holy Spirit gives us for personal application.

"Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word [rhema] that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word [rhema] of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

"Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word [rhema] of God" (Ephesians 6:17).

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word [rhema]" (Ephesians 5:25–26).

"If you remain in me and my words [rhemas] remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7).

Why Faith Is Important?

- "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6).
- We are justified by faith (made perfect in God's sight). (See Romans 3:28.)
- We are saved from our sins by faith. (See Ephesians 2:8–9.)
- We are sanctified and cleansed by faith. (See Acts 26:18.)
- Our hearts are purified by faith. (See Acts 15:9.)
- We have access by faith to God's grace. (See Romans 5:2.)
- We can "move mountains" by faith. (See Matthew 17:20.)

Faith Is Expressed in Actions

"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith

by what I do" (James 2:17–18). In God's Hall of Fame, those who had faith acted upon it. By faith Noah built an ark. By faith Abraham went out from his homeland. By faith Moses rejected the treasures of Egypt and chose to suffer affliction with the children of Israel. (See Hebrews 11.)

Personal Evaluation: How Strong Is Your Faith?

- Do you watch for rhemas as you read through Scripture?
- Do you memorize and meditate upon the rhemas God gives you?
- Do you believe that God is living and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him?
- Do you pray in generalities or take specific requests to the Lord?
- Do you wait for God's provision, or do you borrow money for the things you think you should have?
- Do you have examples in your life of God working supernaturally through your faith?

Learn to Deflect Praise!

The command to practice Godly disciplines secretly is for the purpose of focusing on God's approval rather than on man's praise. Herod failed to understand this principle and paid the ultimate price for violating it. He gave an oration to the nations of Tyre and Sidon and "They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died" (Acts 12:22–23).

Greatness is not measured by how much praise comes to us, but how much goes to the one we are serving.

When King Nebuchadnezzar gave an ultimatum to all his counselors to interpret his dream or die, Daniel prayed fervently to the God whom he served. When God gave him the interpretation, Daniel immediately blessed the Lord and said, "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his" (Daniel 2:20).

When Daniel went before the king he could have said, "I can give you the interpretation of your dream." Instead, he directed attention to the Lord by saying, "There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come … this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than other living men" (Daniel 2:28–30).

When we do works that are worthy of praise and deflect glory to God, people praise the greatness of God working through us.

Notice what happened to Daniel after he directed praise to God: "The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery." Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men" (Daniel 2:47–48).

Jesus applies this principle of deflecting praise by teaching us to give alms anonymously. When a person receives a needed gift with a note stating that it is being given at God's direction and all praise should go to Him, he has a powerful motivation to worship God, and we have the joy of knowing that great praise will be given to God because of what we have done. (See 2 Corinthians 9:12–15.) God is then free to reward us.

It is an act of faith to give a gift to someone anonymously. However, when God rewards that faith, it is the basis for great joy. Who could you bless today by giving an anonymous gift so that they will praise and worship God?

Discover Power in "Closet" Prayer!

A couple prayed for five years that God would add another child to their family of three. Nothing happened. No doubt their seven-year-old son began to wonder, "Does God actually hear prayer? Does He really answer prayer?" The problem was not in God's ability to hear and answer prayer, but in their ability to understand and experience the power of "closet" prayer.

Jesus commanded: "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:6).

"Closet" prayer is fervent, uninhibited, unconditional, undistracted, intimate, and urgent.

"Closet" prayer is powerful. As James describes, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16).

When the wife learned about the power of fervent prayer at an Anger Resolution Seminar, she went home and tried it out. In a fervent appeal to God, she cried out for another child, and she even asked for a daughter. A few days later, she conceived. After this, they received a letter from a fertility expert that they had recently visited. He informed them that based on recent tests, there would be no way for them to conceive. Nine months later they had their child—a baby girl!

God responds to the fervent and undistracted appeals that are a part of "closet" prayer. We see this intensity in the powerful prayer of Daniel. "O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name" (Daniel 9:19). In this prayer we see another key to "closet" prayer:

"Closet" prayer is based on protecting God's name and advancing His Kingdom, rather than promoting our own agenda.

When we bring a request to God, is it to enhance our reputation, or the name of Christ? Is it to further our program, or to advance the kingdom of God? Prayer becomes mighty when we can relate our appeals to the goals that God has for our lives and for the world.

How many of our prayers are based on the model "closet" prayer that Jesus gave us? "Hallowed be your name … for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever" (Matthew 6:9–13). Try taking the needs that you have been praying about and evaluate them on the basis of how they relate to God's reputation, His power, His kingdom, and His glory. Then, go into a "closet," and make a fervent appeal on this basis. See what God will do!

Command 12: Practice Secret Disciplines

Study Question

Q: Since God requires openness and honesty in all of our dealings, why did He bless Esther and Mordecai for withholding her true identity from the one whom she married?

A: Esther lived during the reign of Ahasuerus. He ruled the vast Persian Empire from 486–465 B.C. His dominion extended from India to Ethiopia and included 127 provinces.

The Jewish people had been carried away from the Promised Land as captives and were living throughout his kingdom. They were generally despised by the people around them and had many enemies. Their enemies were well represented by Haman, who had the confidence of the king, and planned the destruction of all the Jews.

Haman knew that Mordecai was a Jew and made careful plans to destroy him. If Haman had known that Esther was also Jewish, he would no doubt have planned to destroy her as well. By withholding the identity of her Jewish heritage, Esther demonstrated both obedience and discretion. Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known, and the reasons for not doing so became obvious as the story unfolded.

Esther committed herself to serving the king in whatever ways she could through her marriage to him. Mordecai arranged his daily schedule to watch out for the welfare of the king and Esther. In the process of his surveillance, he discovered a plot against the life of the king and reported it to him through Esther.

When Mordecai and Esther learned of Haman's wicked plot to kill all of the Jews in the empire, they spent time in fervent prayer and fasting. (See Esther 4:16.) Their selflessness in protecting the king and serving him, in spite of who his top advisor was, paved the way for Esther's appeal on behalf of her people.

With their lives, character, and deeds, Esther and Mordecai won the respect and favor of the king. Therefore, the king was committed to helping them preserve their people during a time of crisis. The net result of God's working through their righteous actions was that the entire kingdom honored the Jews and the God whom they served.

Know the Functions of Fasting!

Jesus called His followers "disciples." Being a disciple requires being disciplined, and that is what this command is all about. Biblical disciplines are designed to bring our physical desires under the control of God's Spirit, because the flesh wars against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh. Nowhere is this more challenging than in the discipline of fasting.

Fasting adds intensity to our search for God, our study of His Word, our sincerity of faith, and our surrender to Christ.

The King of Nineveh called the city to fast as they sought God's mercy. (See Jonah 3:6–10.) Ezra proclaimed a fast at the river to appeal to God for protection. (See Ezra 8:21.) David fasted in his appeal for the life of his son. (See 2 Samuel 12:16.) Esther fasted in preparation for making her request before the king. (See Esther 4:16.) Nehemiah fasted for the king's favor in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (see Nehemiah 1:3–4), and Daniel added fasting to his supplication for the return of the Jews to the Promised Land (see Daniel 9).

In each case, there was an important spiritual objective to be achieved. This focus was in direct contrast to the public show that the Pharisees exhibited in their fasting. "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:16–18).

God's goal for fasting is "to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke" (Isaiah 58:6).

Some Christians wonder whether fasting is intended for our day. Their question is understandable since the Church is doing far more feasting than fasting. However, when Jesus was asked by the disciples of John the Baptist why His disciples were not fasting, He explained that while He was with them they would not fast, but when He departed they would fast. (See Mark 2:19–20.) I know many great Christian leaders who have made fasting and prayer a vital part of their walk with the Lord.

Once, I asked some young people in a church youth group how many had ever gone one whole day without food. No one raised a hand. What a sad commentary on the lack of this discipline in today's church! If you were asked how often you fast for spiritual purposes, what would your answer be?

One husband fasted every noon hour for a month. During this time he memorized Scripture. With the money he saved from buying lunches, he bought a special gift for his wife, which she treasured. If you follow his example I know God will openly reward you!

Enjoy the Rewards of Fasting!

The rewards of fasting are tremendous! There are spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical benefits from going without food for a period of time. The length of a fast could be anywhere from one meal to 40 days.

Fasting greatly increases spiritual alertness and authority. When the disciples asked Jesus why they could not cast out an unclean spirit that was tormenting a boy, Jesus answered, "This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (Matthew 17:21).

Jesus entered the wilderness for fasting in the fullness of the Spirit, but He returned in the power of the Spirit. (See Luke 4:1–14.)

The first time I ever fasted was as a teenager while memorizing the Sermon on the Mount. I just assumed that because Jesus gave instruction to do it, I should try it. The first day was very difficult, because my physical appetites were so used to getting what they demanded. However, the longer the fast continued, the more I began to see deeper and richer truths in God's Word. I was experiencing the words of Jesus, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Later, during my months of working with inner-city gangs, I saw very few coming to salvation until I spent a day in fasting and prayer. The following week many who were "holding out" became believers, and God demonstrated His supernatural power in delivering young people from the bondage of sin.

One of the greatest rewards of fasting is finding relief from the bondage of sensual addictions.

The Apostle Paul explains the cause-and-effect sequence in the Christian life: if we sow to the flesh, we will of the flesh reap corruption, but if we sow to the Spirit, we will of the Spirit reap life everlasting. (See Galatians 6:8.) During a longer fast, sensual desires are dramatically reduced. After the fast they may reappear, but a new level of control should be present if the fast was carried out with meditation on Scripture.

There are also significant health benefits to fasting. During a fast, harmful toxins are eliminated from the body; the physical senses such as taste, sight, and sound are greatly sharpened; the immune system is strengthened (often resulting in many different diseases clearing up); and the factors that cause aging are greatly reduced.

The oldest person mentioned in the New Testament is Anna. Several factors indicate that she was continuing her public ministry at about the age of 110. However, more than 80 years of her life had been spent in regular fasting and prayer in the Temple. (See Luke 2:37.) These physical benefits are alluded to in Isaiah 58:8: "Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard" Why not plan now to enjoy the marvelous benefits of regular fasting!

Be Patient for Public Rewards!

John Wesley, who impacted history, stated, "Don't seek after a ministry; rather, anticipate the fruit of a disciplined life."

Paul pleaded with early believers to follow a disciplined life so that in later years God could work mightily through them. He stated, "In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (2 Timothy 2:20–21).

Every person who wants to excel must embrace the disciplines that are required to reach the goal.

During my teenage years, I sincerely wanted God's best for my life. He showed me that this would require the surrender of many things that my Christian friends enjoyed. Yet God seemed to be saying, "If you want my blessing on your life, then do not compare your freedoms with your

friends' freedoms, but rather compare your disciplines with Christ's." I adopted the title of a little booklet as my personal exhortation: "Others may, you cannot."

What things have you excused in your life because everyone else does them? Some of the most powerful books that have ever been written are the daily accounts of men and women of faith who described the victories and defeats of their daily disciplines. On this day of journaling, it would be excellent for you to record for future generations your experiences of developing spiritual disciplines.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 6:1-18

"… But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret … But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you … When you fast … put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you".

Colossians 3:23–24

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

2 Corinthians 9:6–8

"Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."

2 Corinthians 10:18

"For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."

Proverbs 20:6

"Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find?"

Silence Three Witnesses!

When we are brought before the Judge of all the earth and He requires us to give an accounting of our stewardship, we want there to be as little evidence against us as possible. (See 2 Corinthians 5:10.) In the command for this week, Jesus warns us about moths, rust, and thieves, which will witness against us if we mismanage His resources.

Command Thirteen

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19–21).

This command is based on the presupposition that all of our resources belong to God. We are stewards of His wealth, which has been entrusted to us for specific purposes. Therefore, we must give an account of how we invest each penny—yes, pennies! God counts pennies because He knows that if we are not faithful in that which is least, neither will we be faithful in much. (See Luke 16:10.)

The Lord expects us to make the wisest possible investments with the money He entrusts to us. One day a man walked up to his friend and said, "Did you know that you are a millionaire?" His friend looked surprised and said, "That is not possible, because I have been working at the same company for 35 years and my salary is $30,000 a year." The man smiled and said, "That means that you have been given more than $1,000,000." His friend was stunned to realize how much money had actually passed through his hands. The man then asked, "What is the value of your assets?" His friend reluctantly admitted that he had no assets, but thousands of dollars of debt.

Moths, rust, and thieves will be evidence of our excessiveness, depreciating investments, and extravagance.

Moths lay their eggs in things we store, rust appears on things we neglect, and our extravagance stirs up the envy of thieves. Because finances are so vital to a man's honor before his family, I have spent much time giving counsel to men in this area. One indicator usually tells me whether or not I can help an individual: his purchase of a car. If a man insists on buying a luxurious new car, I know he does not understand the factors of depreciation and extravagance.

Let's make it our goal to invest as little as necessary in earthly possessions, so that as much as possible is available to invest in God's kingdom. Heaven is where God wants our heart's treasure to be.

Purpose to Be a Sower!

Each time I heard a pastor read 2 Corinthians 9:7, I assumed that it referred to how much I decided to put in the offering plate that day. "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." However, this passage has a far greater application than just one offering. It speaks of a way of life—the dynamic life of the "sower." The context begins with the laws of the harvest: "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (verse 6). With this background, God invites us to purpose in our hearts to be sowers and determine how great a harvest we want to reap.

God gives sowers sufficient "bread money" and also "seed money" for sowing. He will then multiply the sowers' seed money.

This marvelous truth is corrupted by those who teach that if we give to God, He will return money for our wants. A sower must be content with "food and clothing." He should be excited about sowing for a growing harvest so that God will multiply "the fruit of our righteousness," which is the eternal thanksgiving to God of those who receive His provisions through us.

My first experience with this phenomenon came as a young teenager. A speaker challenged me to determine an amount of money over and above my expected income that I would then give to God's work. I wrote down an amount that seemed large. Every month, God provided that amount, often in unexpected ways. Then at the end of the year, He gave back to me double the amount I had given. (This became new seed money!)

If we focus on our needs, we will always be needy, but if we focus on sowing, we will always have what is sufficient for our needs.

Being a sower of the funds that God provides for "every good work" demonstrates the powerful cycle of God's grace. First, God gives grace (charis) to us. Then, we are to be channels of His grace to others through gifts (charisma), including monetary gifts. Others then give thanksgiving to God for His grace in us (Eucharist). Their praise to God will continue throughout eternity as the fruit of our righteousness. Paul states, "As it is written, He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." (See 2 Corinthians 9:8–9.)

Another amazing thing often happens. God prompts others to replenish our supply of seed. "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38).

One day I read the account of a man who advertised in his local paper that if anyone had a small bill they could not pay, he would take care of it. Poor people responded, and soon word got out about his giving. Others then began sending him thousands of dollars to use wisely for needy families! Have you purposed to be a sower? Are you enjoying the power of God's provision by His grace through your life? How much of your money is actually "seed money"? Let's all purpose to be mighty sowers!

Command 13: Store Up Treasures

Related Character Quality

Thriftiness vs. Extravagance

Thriftiness is multiplying my resources through wise investments so that I have more to give back to God.

Thriftiness is the basis for wise stewardship. Therefore, Jesus' teaching on stewardship provides an understanding of thriftiness.

The Greek word for stewardship is oikonomia; it identifies a steward's management of the property of his master. His faithfulness is determined by how successful he is in wisely using and increasing the resources under his care.

Aspects of Thriftiness

- **Thriftiness begins with being content.**
  A person who believes that happiness is measured by personal possessions will not be capable of true thriftiness. He will use up valuable assets for things that neither profit nor satisfy. Jesus warned, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).
  On the other hand, a person who is content with the basic essentials of life will have the natural ability to be thrifty. "But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that" (1 Timothy 6:8).

- **Thriftiness uses creativity to increase assets.**
  Just as the two faithful stewards doubled their assets, so Jacob found creative ways to multiply the flocks that were entrusted to him. A thrifty man will understand how God designed things to work and will use this knowledge to increase productivity.

- **Thriftiness keeps only purposeful possessions.**
  Jesus is the ultimate example of thriftiness. He owned only the things that were essential for life and ministry. When He sent out the twelve disciples, He said to them, "Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic" (Luke 9:3).

- **Thriftiness gathers up the fragments after a project.**
  When Jesus fed the five thousand, He demonstrated thriftiness by not allowing the remaining food to go to waste. "They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over" (Matthew 14:20).

- **Thriftiness saves during times of plenty.**
  When a person's income increases, it is his tendency to also increase his standard of living, spending the increase on personal comforts and luxuries. This tendency is identified in Scripture. "As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owner except to feast his eyes on them?" (Ecclesiastes 5:11).

How Thriftiness Differs From Stinginess

Thriftiness is using as few resources as possible for my own needs so that I will have greater resources for generosity to God and to others.

Stinginess is keeping back what should be given to others so that I will have more for myself. God condemns stinginess. "Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty" (James 5:4).

Personal Evaluation: How Thrifty Are You?

- Do you keep detailed records of your resources so you know how they are being spent?

- Do you save all you can so you can have available funds to give?
- Are you using your energies and resources primarily for yourself or for the needs of others?
- Do you study procedures to see how they can be more efficient and less costly?
- When your income increases, do you keep the same standard of living so you have more to give?

Pass the Stewardship Test!

I read with casual interest the parable that Jesus gave about the three stewards, until the day I realized that I was also a steward and would have to give an account to God of the way I managed His resources.

Each steward was given a different amount of money, along with sufficient time to make wise investments. Two of them doubled what they were given and were praised, while the remaining steward returned only what he had been given and was cursed. (See Matthew 25:14–30.) This account prompted me to make it my goal to live on as little as I could and to invest as much as I could in the work of the Lord.

A steward is not praised for protecting his assets, but for multiplying them to further the work of his master!

John Wesley demonstrated incredible stewardship throughout his history-making ministry. He counseled men to "earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can." His personal life was an example of frugality. He gave away large sums of money and at the time of his death possessed very little. However, he left a huge legacy in the history of England and America.

One of the practical ways to save money is to purchase used items. Dr. John Morgan, pastor of Sagemont Church in Houston, Texas, is a wise steward who encourages others to save money in creative ways. When someone tells him, "I would never buy a used mattress, because you never know who has slept on it," he makes the person laugh with conviction by asking, "What do you sleep on when you stay in a hotel?"

The seed in our bag does not produce a harvest, but the seed that we plant in fertile ground multiplies.

When it comes to buying, I continue to be challenged by an elderly widow on Social Security who sent a dollar a month to this ministry. One day she wrote: "I am sure it costs you more to acknowledge my gift than the gift I am sending; I wish I could give more, so I won't trouble you with any further gifts." I wrote back and explained that her monthly dollar was actually producing tens of thousands of dollars, because each time I was able to save even five dollars on a purchase I would think, "That is five months of giving from that Godly widow." Wise stewardship is not just a way of thinking, but a way of life.

Many years ago, a wealthy businessman told our staff that he and his wife took walkie-talkies to two different supermarkets and compared the prices of food. If the price was 10 cents per can in one store and 8 cents per can in the other, they would buy the 8-cent can. Our staff roared with laughter. After we finished, he said with convicting seriousness, "Your laugh tells me why I am a millionaire and you are not!" Wealthy people do not think in terms of dollars and cents, but rather in percents. A 2-cent savings on a 10-cent purchase is a 20% discount. Think of the savings if you were able to obtain a 20% reduction on a lifetime of spending! Let's have a millionaire mind-set the next time we make a purchase!

Value Your Greatest Asset!

Huge amounts of money are often spent on medical care in the final weeks of one's life. This speaks of the incredible efforts to extend life for even a short amount of time. Time is truly our

most valuable asset, because it can never be recovered. Without time we would have no capability to earn money or enjoy the things for which we have worked.

Time is a valuable asset that attracts many robbers.

Most of us don't realize just how valuable time is, nor do we recognize the robbers that steal it from us. One of the few recollections that I have from grammar school is a poem I learned in the fifth grade: "Lost, yesterday, somewhere between sunrise and sunset, two golden hours, each set with sixty diamond minutes. No reward is offered for they are gone forever."

God affirms the great importance of time when He instructs us to redeem the time because the days are evil. (See Ephesians 5:16.) How do we redeem our time? In order to redeem a coupon, we must turn it in for something of greater value. The same must be done with time.

First, we must receive each day as a gift from God and recognize that we will give an account to Him for how we spend our time. Next, we should evaluate the activities in which we are involved and determine if they are the most worthwhile ways to invest our time. Finally, by listing our daily responsibilities, we can look for ways to be more efficient in carrying them out.

For example, if we save just 20 minutes a day as a result of greater efficiency, we will have three full 40-hour work weeks added to each year! Based on this, think of how much extra time we would have if we eliminated an hour of unproductive activity each day!

When it comes to time and activities, the "good" things in life are the enemies of the "best" things in life.

The Apostle Paul did not say, "Choose things that are good," but rather, "Discern what is best" (Philippians 1:10). Regarding the use of time, the best counsel I ever received came from Jack Hamilton, who helped initiate Bible quizzing.

Jack befriended me as a teenager and one day said, "Bill, when you get to high school, ask yourself two questions before getting involved in any extracurricular activity. First, will this activity count ten years from now? And second, will it count for eternity?" He went on to explain the significance of considering these two questions. "Picture yourself plowing the first furrow in a field. In order to make it straight, you must line up two distant objects, such as a fence post and a distant tree. When these two line up as one, you will know you are plowing a straight line. If they become divided, you are on a crooked path."

As I made choices based on the answers to these questions, I was able to spend more time doing significant things for the Lord, such as presenting the Gospel to every classmate during my high-school years. Because of these choices, I have experienced the joy of lasting rewards. I urge you to evaluate the activities in which you are currently involved by asking yourself, "Will this count in 10 years?" and "Will it matter for eternity?"

Command 13: Store Up Treasures

Study Question

Q: Why did God preserve His holy Scriptures down through the centuries but allow His holy Temple to be robbed of its treasures and destroyed?

A: The Temple that Solomon built for the praise and glory of God was a magnificent treasure in the world. It was 90 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 45 feet high, and was overlaid with gold that had been gathered by David and others.

The magnificent treasures in the Temple began to be plundered in the reign of Solomon's son. (See 1 Kings 14:25–26.) King Asa further plundered the Temple by taking all the silver and gold out of it and using it to form a military league with the king of Syria.

Later, Nebuchadnezzar came and took away to Babylon all the gold and silver vessels, and eventually destroyed the Temple. Why did God allow this to happen? When Solomon dedicated the Temple, God made a conditional covenant with him. "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices … But if you turn away and forsake the decrees and commands I have given you and go off to serve other gods and worship them … Then I will uproot Israel from my land, which I have given them, and will reject this temple I

have consecrated for my Name. I will make it a byword and an object of ridicule among all peoples. And though this temple is now so imposing, all who pass by will be appalled and say, 'Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this temple?' People will answer, 'Because they have forsaken the LORD, the God of their fathers, who brought them out of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, worshiping and serving them—that is why he brought all this disaster on them" (see 2 Chronicles 7:12–22).

Israel's continual straying from the laws and ways of the Lord resulted in not only the destruction of the Temple, but also the scattering of God's people throughout the world. In God's eyes, the function of the Temple officially ended when Jesus Christ died. The veil that separated the holy place and the most holy was torn from top to bottom, signifying that there was no longer a division between God and His people. (See Matthew 27:51.) We now have direct access to God's throne through the finished work of Jesus Christ, Who paid the price for our sins. Each one who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ and confesses Him as Savior becomes a "temple" of God. It is through this temple that one is able to build treasures that will stand the test of God's fires and last throughout eternity. (See 1 Corinthians 3:9–16.)

Find Your True Identity!

Recently, a married couple came in for counseling. The wife was frustrated, and the husband was so depressed that he could not function. He had been laid off from his job as a health care provider and had been unable to find work for two years. His job had been his life and joy. In it he had found his identity in the community and among his friends. It had given him self-worth, which was the key to his problem.

Our true identity cannot be based on what we do or on what we possess, but only on our relationship with Jesus Christ.

We all need to have an identity, which gives us status and self-esteem. However, many people believe that they will gain an identity through a position in the workplace and community or through possessions, which others will admire or even envy. Others think that they will find an identity in pleasures they pursue.

These three false identities were actually at the root of Satan's temptations to Jesus when He was in the wilderness. First, Satan tempted Jesus with the identity of pleasure: "Tell these stones to become bread." The second temptation posed an identity through position: "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down." The third temptation presented an identity in possessions as Satan showed Him all the kingdoms of the earth and their glory. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." (See Matthew 4:1–10.)

If we look for an identity outside of a relationship with Christ, we will experience disillusionment and despair.

A few days ago I asked a 20-year-old student one of my favorite questions, "What do you want to do with your life?" The student answered, "Get a good-paying job." I then asked, "What else do you want to do?" The answer was, "Be a legislator." I then asked, "What do you want to do after that?" The response was, "Be an assistant to the President." This student was planning to find identity in possessions and position.

In contrast to this, I remember the time that I was being driven to the Taipei airport in Taiwan. I asked a 15-year-old boy in the car what he planned on doing in the future. He said that he did not know. Then my assistant, Michael LeFebvre, spoke up and said, "When I was 15, my one goal was to love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. God promises that we cannot even imagine what He will do for those who love Him." (See 1 Corinthians 2:9.)

In the process of surrendering my life to the Lord Jesus Christ, I abandoned the goals that I had for finding my identity. Instead, I focused on the Lord Jesus Christ, and I have experienced a marvelous freedom. It doesn't matter what happens to position, possessions, or pleasures, because

they are not the foundation of my life. My prayer is that each of us will experience the joy and freedom that comes by finding an identity in Christ alone

Command 13: Store Up Treasures | Day 90

Picture Eternal Treasures!

It is easy to picture treasures on earth—abundance of money, valuable possessions, expensive cars, an extravagant home, etc. However, it is much more difficult to picture treasures in heaven, which we cannot see. Yet, God instructs us to Store Up Treasures in heaven.

The human mind needs to picture things before the human heart can attach affections to them.

The rich young ruler faced a huge challenge when Jesus told him to give away all his earthly treasures in exchange for treasures in heaven. He could see the treasures on earth, but he probably could not picture heavenly treasures. Therefore, "he went away sad, because he had great wealth" (Matthew 19:22).

Paul makes a similar statement to believers. If we distribute our money to the poor, God will multiply the fruits of our righteousness, which will last throughout eternity. (See 2 Corinthians 9:9–10.) How can we picture the fruits of righteousness? This is important to understand since we are told to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then everything else will be added to us (see Matthew 6:33).

We can invest in at least four types of righteous fruit that are named in Scripture, knowing that they have eternal value. These types of fruit include children, who are the fruit of the womb (see Psalm 127:3); Godly character, which is the fruit of the Spirit (see Ephesians 5:9); generous contributions, which are fruit that abound to our account (see Philippians 4:17); and converts whom we disciple, who are the fruit of our rejoicing (see Romans 1:13).

God also promises eternal crowns, which He gives on the basis of our faithfulness. There is the crown of righteousness for those who look forward to Christ's appearing (see 2 Timothy 4:7–8), the crown of glory for those who disciple others (see 1 Peter 5:1–4), and the crown of life for those who endure temptations (see Revelation 2:10).

The praise of thanksgiving that others give to God for our generosity will ring throughout eternity in heaven.

While God keeps the records, it would be wise for us to ask ourselves several questions. Do we view children as burdens or as blessings? Is the fruit of the Spirit clearly evident in our lives? Do we actively seek opportunities to witness? How many disciples have we made? How much of our resources have we invested in the Lord's work? Are we determined to be faithful to the end?

Command 13: Store Up Treasures | Day 91

Learn How to Abound!

There is a potential danger in being a sower. Whenever riches increase, there is a temptation to set our hearts on them and use them for our own personal desires. Thus, God warns, "though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them" (Psalm 62:10). "for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle" (Proverbs 23:5).

If we fail to honor God with the firstfruits of our increase, we cannot expect Him to pour out His blessings upon us. (See Malachi 3:8–11.)

The devourer's work may be evident in unexpected losses or expenses, including theft, depreciation, accidents, diseases, hospital bills, business losses, bad investments, etc.

Years ago, a Godly carpenter was asked to do a job for a factory owner. When the owner did not have money to pay his bill, he gave the carpenter stock in an abandoned gold mine. A few months later, a new vein of gold was discovered in the mine, and the stock skyrocketed in value!

The carpenter sold the stock. He was asked if he planned to honor God with the firstfruits of his increase. (See Proverbs 3:9–10.) He replied that instead of giving any tithes or offerings, he planned to reinvest the money in an oil venture so that he would have even more to give to God. He and a close friend took all of their assets and invested them in that project. It turned out to be a scam, and they lost all of their money and had to pay lawyers' fees. Their grief brought an early death to their wives and then to themselves as well.

If we view ourselves as producers of wealth, rather than channels of wealth, we are in danger.

God is the One Who gives us the power to get wealth. He is the One Who increases or decreases our ability to give. Job understood this when he declared: "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21).

R. G. LeTourneau, developer of giant earth-moving equipment, was a great man of faith in the area of giving. Early in his career, God taught him the importance of tithing, but as his business grew, so did his desire to give more to the Lord's work than just a tithe. He stated, "… When you consider what God has done for us, we ought to do [more] for Him out of gratitude…." This desire led him and his wife to make a commitment to give 50% of both their personal income and their company's income to the Lord. As the business continued to grow, they still felt that they were keeping too much for themselves. They eventually gave 90% of their income to the Lord's work.

Paul gives us wise counsel on abounding with riches. We can learn how to abound only if we first learn how to suffer need with contentment (see Philippians 4:12). When we learn to be content with food and clothing, we are ready to abound. You would provide a great encouragement to your family by writing down examples from your life of sowing and reaping. Do you also have examples of how the devourer took funds that were not given to the Lord as they should have been?

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 6:19-21

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also".

2 Corinthians 4:18

"So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

1 Timothy 6:17–19

"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life."

1 John 2:15

"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

Proverbs 23:5

"Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle."

Matthew 19:21

"Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Seek the Right Kingdom!

There is no doubt about the importance of this next command. Jesus made it clear that keeping it should take first priority among all of the things we seek after.

Command Fourteen

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

During His earthly ministry, Jesus talked about two kingdoms. One was the future kingdom in which He will reign over all the earth. It seems that whenever the disciples began talking about this kingdom, it led to arguments. They wanted to know which one of them would be the greatest in this kingdom. (See Matthew 18:1.)

Later, the mother of James and John privately asked Jesus if her sons could sit on either side of Him in His kingdom. This request caused indignation among the other disciples. (See Matthew 20:20–21, 24.)

It is significant that the same spirit of debate and controversy occurs even today as various Christian groups try to figure out what will happen in Christ's future kingdom. Some have caused much division in the Body of Christ because of their vehement stands on future events.

The present kingdom of God is within us. Seeking it involves giving Christ complete jurisdiction over our hearts and lives.

The other kingdom Jesus spoke about was the kingdom of God that is within us. (See Luke 17:21.) Entrance into this kingdom requires an attitude of humility that was missing from the disciples' focus on Christ's future kingdom. When the disciples argued about who should be greatest, Jesus put a child in their midst and said, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3–4).

After the mother of James and John attempted to advance her sons, Jesus stated, "… whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve…" (Matthew 20:26–28).

The first prerequisite for entering God's present kingdom is humbly acknowledging the Lord Jesus Christ as the King of kings and Lord of lords and putting our faith in Him for salvation. This is foundational for developing the qualities of the kingdom in our hearts. "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. … Blessed are the meek: for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:3, 5).

Let's avoid arguing over future events and instead focus on seeking God's present kingdom by allowing Him to rule over all the areas of our lives.

Understand God's Kingdom!

A few years ago, I was in the Northwoods for my annual time of seeking the Lord, when my assistant expressed a problem that he was having. He had been a Christian for many years and had received a wealth of Biblical training, but somehow he wasn't experiencing the victory that he knew was possible in Christ. I told him that I was going to begin a study on the command to seek first God's kingdom and that we would talk further about his situation the next morning.

After he left, I realized that I did not fully comprehend the kingdom of God, nor could I picture it. Then I remembered that the commands of Christ have their foundations in the Old Testament and their applications in the New Testament. I decided to look for the Old Testament

basis for this command and began to see a number of parallels between the nation of Israel and the kingdom of God that helped me better understand the command.

The founding and structure of the nation of Israel is a significant analogy to the kingdom of God within us.

The nation of Israel began with one man (Abraham) who had faith in God and entered into a blood covenant with Him. Similarly, the present kingdom of God also begins with one person who has faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and who enters into a covenant relationship with Him. (See Ephesians 2:12–14.)

I also saw that the nation of Israel had laws given to them by God through Moses. The kingdom of God has commands given to us by God through Jesus Christ. Just as Israel's laws provided safety and guidance to the nation, so the commands of Christ give protection and direction for believers.

The analogies between the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David, and our old and new natures are abundant and profound. When Saul saw that David would be king, he tried to kill him. Similarly, our old nature carries on a continual warfare against our new nature. "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want" (Galatians 5:17).

Until our old nature, represented by Saul, is put to death, our new nature, represented by David, cannot reign.

The next morning, I shared what I had learned from God's Word with my assistant. When he understood the importance of putting his old nature to death in order to allow God's Spirit to reign, he was able to establish a deeper relationship and enjoy richer fellowship with the Lord than he had ever experienced before. Tomorrow, I will explain what my assistant did.

Command 14: Seek God's Kingdom

Related Character Quality

Initiative vs. Idleness

Initiative is recognizing and doing what needs to be done before I am asked to do it.

Initiative is expressed in two ways: by thoughts and by deeds. The Hebrew word chashab (translated think) defines the thinking phase of initiative. It means to "plan, calculate, invent, imagine." The Greek word most frequently used for doing, poieo, describes the action phase of initiative, meaning "to make, produce, execute, institute."

Initiative requires faith in discerning God's will through His Word and works in order to carry it out. Initiative that does not spring from faith results in doing our own will versus God's.

How Is Initiative Activated?

Initiative is activated by thoughts and words. Scripture teaches us that power for good or for evil is in our thoughts and words. "For as he thinks within himself, so he is" (Proverbs 23:7). "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (Proverbs 18:21). With our words, we can do the will of God or the work of Satan. Therefore, "by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:37).

When God formed the world, He generated creative energy by words. "the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (Hebrews 11:3). The words of God are recorded in the creation account: "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Genesis 1:3).

Words are also basic to the initiative of redemption. Jesus is the Living Word of God. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

God initiated our salvation through words, and we receive salvation by words. "That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." (Romans 10:9-10).

When Does Initiative Become Iniquity?

We can take initiative to do many good things; however, they may actually be works of iniquity if they are to advance our own agendas and do our own will. If we are to avoid iniquity, we must follow Christ's example and allow the Holy Spirit to produce in us the right initiatives and guide us in properly carrying them out.

It is the Holy Spirit Who gives us grace, which is the desire and power to do God's will. It is also the Holy Spirit Who guides us with Scriptural truths. We can take initiative based on the Word of God and know that we are in the will of God. This is the promise of John 15:7–8: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

When our chief concerns are to glorify God in all that we do and to "... do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10), we will be in a good position to establish proper initiatives.

Personal Evaluation: How Much Initiative Do You Have?

- Do you show initiative by rising early in the morning and seeking the Lord?
- Do you take initiative to seek direction for your life in God's Word?
- Do you show initiative by memorizing and meditating on Scripture?
- Do you show initiative by asking forgiveness and being reconciled with your enemies?
- Do you take initiative to honor the Lord's Day?
- Do you initiate good works in response to the Holy Spirit's prompting?
- Do you take initiative in sharing the Gospel with others?
- Do you exemplify initiative by keeping your home and car in good repair?
- Do you exercise initiative in learning how to write down the truths that God is teaching you?

Bring Your Mind Under Authority!

King Saul was head and shoulders above every other man in Israel. From all outward appearances he looked like a great king, but inwardly he was controlled by fears. When the Philistines came against him and the people began to scatter, he responded in fear by invading the priests' jurisdiction and personally presenting a sacrifice to God, rather than waiting for Samuel. This action disqualified Saul's descendants from ever ruling the nation. (See 1 Samuel 13:8–14.) Later when Saul failed to carry out the command of God to utterly destroy the wicked nation of Amalek, his excuse was, "I was afraid of the people." (See 1 Samuel 15:24–26.) Because of this disobedience, God rejected Saul from being king.

Jonathan is an analogy of the human intellect. Because it is connected with our sin nature, it cannot be allowed to rule our lives.

Jonathan had great accomplishments and the qualities of leadership and courage. The human intellect has the same. Jonathan loved David and knew that it was God's will for David to reign over the kingdom instead of him. When Saul learned of Jonathan's love and loyalty to David, he tried to kill Jonathan. In the same way, our old nature opposes our human intellect's surrendering its right to rule.

This conflict is described in Romans 7:22–25, "For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin."

It is significant to realize that David could not rule over the nation of Israel until both Saul and Jonathan had died.

Even after the death of Saul and Jonathan, it was necessary for the nation to choose David as their king, and after David was anointed king there was continuing conflict between the "house of Saul" and the "house of David." As time went on, however, the house of David grew stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker.

When my assistant understood these rich analogies, he exclaimed, "This is the answer! I am a Christian, but I have been taking knowledge into my natural mind rather than into my spirit. I have tried to use human reasoning to live the Christian life, and it hasn't worked." He understood the need for a conscious decision to place his mind under the authority of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit so that the righteousness of Christ could reign in his heart.

After we knelt in prayer and he made this decision, he asked, "Now how do I make a transfer of control from my head to my heart?" I explained that the Psalms were David's expression of heart-to-heart fellowship with God. He said, "I don't like to read the Psalms. They have very little meaning to me." However, after he went to his room and began reading the Psalms, he found he had a new appreciation for the spiritual truths contained in them, because now the Spirit was in charge of his mind. I urge you to put your mind under the authority of God's Word and God's Spirit today!

Command 14: Seek God's Kingdom

Study Question

Q: God created man to have fellowship with Him on earth and throughout eternity. Why, then, would He allow Satan to set up an opposing kingdom and deceive whole nations into following him to eternal destruction?

A: The very nature of God is love, and the nature of love requires that the one being loved have free choice in whether to accept or reject the love that is offered. God controls the universe, but He has given man the ability to make choices. Those who make right choices experience the power of God and the reward of eternal life. Those who make wrong choices experience sorrow and eternal death.

The kingdom of Satan is, in itself, a demonstration of the free choice of love. Satan was fashioned as a beautiful creation of God's splendor but chose to reject God's love and be his own boss. Paul affirms that everything that happens is under God's control as he responds in His foreknowledge to the will of people. "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath —prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory" (Romans 9:21–23).

Another reason God allows Satan's kingdom to exist is to cause believers to be continually aware of their need for God's protection, provision, and direction. Our need for the Lord increases our love for Him.

The ultimate purpose of God's overall plan is "that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:7).

Learn "Kingdom Law"!

Every civilized nation has a system of law. Laws are necessary to establish and maintain civil order. Wise laws provide the freedom and direction that citizens need in order to prosper.

"Kingdom law" reveals the wisdom of God in making each citizen healthy, prosperous, and successful.

It is easy to view God's laws as arbitrary and restrictive. That is how Satan wants us to see them. He beguiled Eve by suggesting that God was keeping something good from her and Adam by not allowing them to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (See Genesis 3.)

The reason why God gives laws is to protect those whom He loves and to show the world His love, power, and wisdom through their lives. God gave Adam and Eve specific commandments for this purpose. He chose the nation of Israel to demonstrate to the world the wisest system of laws ever given. He has also given kingdom law to all of Christ's disciples. Many of the laws God gave to the children of Israel detailed outward actions, but kingdom law, expressed in the commands of Christ, focuses on inward motives.

The more inner restraint the citizens of a kingdom have, the fewer laws they need for outward control.

The laws of God's kingdom are not only vital for Godly living, but also for expanding His kingdom to all nations. We are told to go and make disciples of all nations, "... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20).

When I finally understood the importance of the commands of Christ, I made a list of them from Christ's teachings as recorded in the gospels. Some commands were given to specific people for specific purposes, but I noted 49 general commands that are applicable for all believers to follow. These commands provide specific ways to love God and love others, and because this is the foundation of all wisdom, the commands of Christ are the focus of these daily studies. (See Matthew 22:37–40.)

Let's demonstrate our love for the Lord by keeping His kingdom law before our eyes and in our hearts by meditating on His commands. (See John 14:21.) That is the goal of this Daily Success program.

First Things First

by Ken Pierpont

My grandfather grew up near Chatham, Ohio in the days before every family owned a car. Once a week or so, the family would hitch up a buggy and ride to town for food and supplies. He often told the story about what happened on one of those trips to town. It was winter and the ground was covered with snow. The whole family piled into the sleigh.

As usual, they followed the river for about a mile and crossed at the bridge. The river was frozen over, so on the way home they took the short route over the ice. This was a serious mistake. As they crossed the water, the ice caved in. My great-grandmother was thrown from the sleigh. She was holding baby Orville who fell from her arms into the fast-running water.

My grandpa was about ten at the time. His brother Elmer was twelve. They were able to make their way to safety on the bank. Their parents stayed in the ice-clotted river, trying desperately to save baby Orville. He was in the water along with all the contents of the sleigh.

What happened next would live in grandpa's memory for the rest of his life. His little brother Orville, was rescued alive from the water. He went on to marry, raised a family, earn an honest living, and lived to an old age. I hear his wife, Audrey, had a mean ground hog recipe too, but that is another story.

The part of the story my grandpa loved to tell was what happened there on the bank of the river while baby Orville was bobbing in the icy water. His brother Elmer's concern was that the new groceries were thrown into the water and were being carried downstream. Elmer, seeing the gravity of the situation, began to call out instructions from the bank. Grandpa remembered his exact words 60 years later. He was shouting, "Save the Post Toasties. Hey, somebody, save the Post Toasties."

Orville's icy plunge happened more than 75 years ago. Elmer died before I was born, and this little incident is about all I know of him. I am sure he lived to regret his misplaced priorities. Buggies and sleighs have been replaced by automobiles, and hundreds of other brands of cereal have now captured the enthusiasm of children, but scrambled values are still a common problem. It would be funny if it were not so tragic. Since Elmer was only a boy at the time, we can forgive

him for being more concerned about a box of cereal than a baby. But when we mature, our values should mature with us. We should no longer value things over people, profit over principle, and time over eternity. We should not waste our time worrying about things that do not matter or working overtime for things we will sell at next year's garage.

Wise, mature men seek the kingdom of God first and His righteousness. They value the kingdom. They keep first things first. That way, they live with happy memories and no regrets.

Do a Kingdom Inspection!

Every kingdom has a territorial jurisdiction. In Christ's future kingdom, He will exercise His authority over all the nations of the earth. In His present kingdom, He wants to have jurisdiction over all the areas of our hearts.

We will seek Christ's kingdom in vain until we seek Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Scripture makes this truth clear by stating, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). Many Christians think they are fulfilling this requirement, but they fail the tests that God uses to confirm His Lordship.

These tests are described in a powerful little booklet that I was given when I was a teenager. It is titled My Heart—Christ's Home. The author uses the illustration of a house to symbolize the compartments of our hearts and suggests an examination of each room.

The recreation room symbolizes the types of friends we have and the activities in which we choose to participate. The study represents the types of books, magazines, and other input we take into our minds. The dining room reveals our appetites and desires. The bedroom exposes the level of our moral purity. The closets indicate unconfessed sin that we are holding on to. We may put a sign on our hearts stating, "God is the head of this home," but does He have control of all of the rooms?

We must understand that God wants to be Lord of every part of our lives. Many Christians will sing about Christ being "Lord of all," but in practice they reserve the right to make their own decisions in areas such as clothing, movies, television, the use of time, friends, and music. However, God wants us to honor Him in all the areas of our lives and to base our decisions on His Word.

For the Christian, there should be no division between the sacred and secular parts of life. We must honor God in all areas.

As a teenager, one of my first jobs was working as a stock boy in a grocery store. I had not worked there very long before the owner decided to play a certain type of music in the store. By today's standards the music would be considered mild, but the longer I listened to it, the more my spirit and conscience affirmed that this was not the kind of music that God wanted me to take into my mind.

I made an appeal to the owner, but he assured me that the music would not change. So, I chose to resign rather than damage my spirit. God honored that decision by not only giving me a better job but also by increasing the sensitivity of my spirit to the Holy Spirit. This became a great help to me in discerning the Lord's will in future decisions. I urge you to do a thorough "house check" to make sure that God is in control of every "room" in your heart and life.

Seek God's Kingdom for the Generations

by Ken Pierpont

Fervor For the Future

The nearer a person seeks the heart of God, the more he or she possesses a vision within for multi-generation faithfulness. This fervor is also true with the church. Thus, a church that grows cold and apostate is one that speaks little and cares less for the generations to follow. It is a church more concerned with happiness and prosperity than with its holiness and posterity. That

congregation concerns itself with its own comforts and with the world rather than the church its sons and daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren will inherit. They insist on their own preferences without regard to the effect such selfishness has on the next generations.

Yet when the Spirit brings revival and they begin to seek his kingdom, men and women of God grow close to the heart of God and begin to cherish God's values. These values include a desire for generational faithfulness to God.

Vision for the Eternal

The great missionary Adonirum Judson reflects this great attribute of seeking God's kingdom and learning more of His heart. The final weeks of his life, as recorded by his son Edward Judson in 1883, reveal that the great missionary experienced an awakening…As his physical strength ebbed, his inner man underwent a renewal of spirit. The effect of that renewal stirred his heart for the generations to follow, for the glory of God. These observations on the final days of Adonirum's life were written by his wife in a letter to his sister. Notice how he was taken more and more with Christ and with things eternal:

"There was something exceedingly beautiful in the decline of your brother's life—more beautiful than I can describe though the impression will remain with me as a sacred legacy until I go to meet him where sun shall never set, and life shall never end. He had been, from my first acquaintance with him, an uncommonly spiritual Christian, exhibiting his richest graces in the unguarded intercourse of private life, but during his last year it seemed as though the light of the world on which he was entering had been sent to brighten his upward pathway. Every subject on which we conversed, every book we read, every incident that occurred, whether trivial or important, had a tendency to suggest some peculiarly spiritual train of thought, till it seemed to me that, more than ever before, 'Christ was all his theme.' Something of the same nature was also noted in his preaching… He was in the habit… of studying his subject for the Sabbath, audibly, and in my presence, at which time he was frequently so much affected as to weep, and so overwhelmed with the vastness of his conceptions as to be obliged to abandon his theme and choose another. My own illness at the commencement of the year had brought eternity very near to us, and rendered death, the grave, and the bright heaven beyond it, familiar subjects of conversation."

When he was touched by God, he had a renewed unction in the exercise of his gifts, and he had a vision of a long unbroken line of his generations gathered around the throne of Jesus. He had taken such initiative to spread God's word all through his life and now, as he reached his last hours, he became overwhelmed with his sense of responsibility.

"I believe he has sometimes been thought eloquent, both in conversation and in the sacred desk; but the fervid, burning eloquence, the deep pathos, the touching tenderness, the elevation of thought, and intense beauty of expression, which characterized those private teachings, were not only beyond what I had ever heard before, but such as I felt sure arrested his own attention, and surprised even himself. About this time he began to find unusual satisfaction and enjoyment in his private devotions, and seemed to have new objects of interest continually rising to his mind, each of which in turn became special subjects of prayer. Among these, one of the most prominent was the conversion of his posterity. He remarked that he felt impressed with the duty of praying for their children and their children's children down to the latest generation. He also prayed most fervently that his impressions on this particular subject might be transferred to his sons and daughters, and thence to their offspring, so that he should ultimately meet a long, unbroken line of descendants before the throne of God, where all might join together in ascribing everlasting praises to their Redeemer."

Discovering the Heart of God

When a man walks with God and nears the throne of God, he acquires the heart of God—and the heart of God is for a godly posterity. Men and women of God are concerned, burdened with godly generations. They are not content to simply survive the entrapments of this present world and make it through safe to heaven. They want to build bridges of faith for those who follow them on the path. They want to plant trees of loyalty to truth so their generations can live in the shade and eat the fruit of them.

"Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come" (Psalm 71:17-18).

For the Sake of Our Children

As we seek God's kingdom, like Adoniram Judson, may Christ become the theme of our lives. Oh that God would give each of us a passion for Him that is not only instilled in our own hearts, but in the hearts of the generations that follow! I invite you to pray the following prayer:

God of Eternity and of all the generations to come in all the earth be honored and glorified by all people for all time. Be exalted in the ages to come. Today give us an eternal vision to see into the future with the eyes of faith. Stir up in us a spirit of intercession for the nations around us and the generations ahead of us. May we live and speak and work and pray and serve with that eternal impulse always beating within us. For Jesus' sake and for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. -Amen.

Seek "Kingdom Things"!

For many years when I read Colossians 3, I wondered what exactly it referred to as "those things above" which we are to seek after. "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:1–3).

I decided to list the things that I knew would be in heaven so that I could put my affection on them. My list included the people we lead to Christ, the treasures we lay up in heaven, and the crowns we will someday receive for faithfulness. Then I noticed an important element in the passage that I had overlooked: the throne room of heaven where Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father.

It is in the throne room of heaven that kingdom authority is exercised and victorious living is achieved.

One of the purposes for seeking God's kingdom and His righteousness first, is that through kingdom authority we are able to disable Satan and accomplish the work of God. For many years, I have followed the example of Michael the archangel in asking God to rebuke Satan in the name and through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. (See Jude 9.) This has been effective; however, Scripture teaches that in Christ, we are seated above all principalities and powers. (See Ephesians 1:19–22, 2:6.) Based on this position in Christ, we are able to wrestle against spiritual enemies. (See Ephesians 6:12.)

Before the throne of God, we can seek to disable Satan's influence in a given situation. We are able to do this by following the example of Jesus. Three times He was tempted by Satan, and three times Jesus quoted the precise Scripture that addressed the temptation. (See Matthew 4:3–10.) Satan has no defense when faced with the Word of God, and he must flee. This weapon is the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word [rhema] of God" (Ephesians 6:17). Satan may accuse believers before the throne, but Jesus is our lawyer and defender. (See Job 1:6–11, 1 John 2:1–2, and Revelation 12:9–10.)

By using the Scripture that applies to a given situation, we can disable Satan and enable the work of God to be carried out unhindered.

A 19-year-old Christian girl was deceived by Satan. She rejected all that she had learned about God and sought the pleasures of the world. No amount of coaxing, or even praying, changed her mind. One day, her mother read about kingdom living and applied what she learned about kingdom authority. She went before the throne of God and asked the Lord to bless her daughter with righteousness and purity of heart. Then, she resisted Satan with the Scriptures stating that children are a heritage of the Lord and that which is dedicated to the Lord is holy. (See Psalm 127:3 and Romans 12:1.)

At the same time this mother interceded with kingdom authority, her daughter suddenly realized that neither she nor any of her friends were happy unless they were drunk, and she purposed to reject her destructive lifestyle. Two weeks later, she returned to the Lord in tears of repentance and surrendered her life to Him. Kingdom authority is a powerful weapon against Satan, and it is worth every effort we make to seek after it and use it.

Expect Powerful Results!

The "unthinkable" happened only one time in more than 40 years of presenting Basic Seminars! More than 8,000 people gathered at the St. Paul Civic Center. Just before the opening session, three of us gathered for prayer. After I prayed, God reminded me that I had forgotten to ask Him to bind Satan from causing any disruption. I had hoped that one of the other men would cover this important point, but no one had!

We finished praying just moments before the session was to begin, so I quickly walked out onto the platform and started teaching. About 20 minutes later, I heard footsteps behind me. It was an official from the civic center. He asked for the microphone and announced that everyone must evacuate the building because they had received a bomb threat! Was there a connection?

Those who deny the reality of Satan are like boaters who deny the current as they are drifting toward a waterfall.

The babies were crying, the dogs were howling, and the women were talking when missionary Otto Koning arrived to preach the Gospel to a gathering of natives in Papua New Guinea. He realized that he had forgotten to bind Satan, and told the chief to keep the group assembled while he went outside for a few minutes.

He went to the edge of the jungle and told Satan that he must leave, quoting several Bible verses that applied to the situation he was facing. As Otto exercised his kingdom authority, based on his position in Christ, he heard the noise die down.

What made the difference? Satan was disabled through kingdom authority. Many times Otto found that when he exercised kingdom authority, natives who had previously been unresponsive to the Gospel would tell him "We can hear you now" and would "take the hand of Jesus" in response to the message of salvation.

The world is not impressed with an ineffective God, but will fear Him when they see His power.

Some of the most important journaling you can do today is to use kingdom authority and record the results. If Satan is not opposed, he will be free to accomplish his deadly agenda. He will blind the spiritual eyes of unbelievers so they cannot see the glorious light of the Gospel of Christ. (See 2 Corinthians 4:4.)

Satan will harden the hearts of unbelievers and believers. (See John 12:40.) He will deceive with lies and half-lies. He will appear as an angel of light to deceive, if possible, the very elect of God. (See 2 Corinthians 11:14.) He will do whatever he can to destroy believers or diminish their effectiveness and thereby hinder the work of God. We must realize that we are in mortal combat with a relentless but conquered foe, and we must learn how to resist him using kingdom authority so that he will flee from us! (See James 4:7.)

On this basis, let's exhort each other to seek first God's kingdom and to walk in a manner worthy of God, Who calls us into His own kingdom and glory. (See 1 Thessalonians 2:12.)

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 6:33

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"

John 3:3

"In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Luke 18:29–30

"… no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life."

Matthew 5:6

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

John 6:27

"Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

Philippians 3:7–8

"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ."

Do Not Judge!

God sets up judges to rule over civil matters and puts leaders in the church to judge spiritual matters and carry out church discipline. (See Romans 13 and 1 Corinthians 5:12–6:3.) In the future, "saints shall judge the world" and also "judge angels." However, Christ did not come "to judge the world, but to save the world" (John 12:47) in a demonstration of God's love. He wants this to be our focus as well. Therefore, He commands:

Command Fifteen

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye" (Matthew 7:1–3).

This is a difficult command to obey because it is easy to form personal opinions of other people based on our evaluation of their appearance, background, viewpoints, associations, etc. When we judge them as being unacceptable and beneath us, we fail to recognize the benefits that they can bring to our lives, and a wall goes up between us.

In the Book of Esther, Haman's life is an example of the subtle fallacy and inherent consequences of judging. He was irate when a Jewish man refused to bow down to him. Haman decided that this Jew and all those he represented should be annihilated from the empire and took steps to accomplish this. Because Mordecai had publicly withstood him, Haman planned a public execution of Mordecai with a gallows 75 feet tall. But, the results of judging that Jesus spoke of in this command occurred, and Haman was hanged on the very gallows he had built for the one whom he had judged.

The fallacy and destruction of judging others is failing to recognize the value that they bring to our lives.

God is aware of our tendency to judge others, especially fellow believers. He put all believers in the Body of Christ, and Paul points out that "the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor … . [because] God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other" (1 Corinthians 12:23–25).

The connection between the members of the body is also true of relationships in life. Haman did not realize that the man whom he despised was directly related to the Queen of the Persian Empire. For this reason, he received the wrath and condemnation of King Ahasuerus.

In contrast to this example, a family in Pennsylvania began to minister to a group of elderly people in a nursing home. They did not realize that the son of one of the residents was a prominent political leader. Through his influence, this family has now been given opportunities to serve government leaders. Let's purpose never to assume that a person is not important, and treat each one as someone whom God loves and for whom Christ died.

Be a Surgeon, Not a Judge!

In this command, we are instructed not to judge, but rather to do surgery—remove a splinter from another's eye; however, the prerequisite is to first remove the beam from our own eye. This is so we will be able to see clearly to remove the splinter. (See Matthew 7:5.) Surgical procedures such as this should be motivated by a desire to bring healing to another, whereas the responsibility of a judge is to determine the guilt of another person and enforce the consequences of the law.

We can expect a reaction if we try to correct another person without first correcting ourselves.

"We must not judge a man's state by a single act, nor of what he is in himself by what he is to us, because in our own cause we are apt to be partial. We must not judge the hearts of others, nor their intentions, for it is God's prerogative to try the heart, and we must not step into his throne; nor must we judge of their eternal state, nor call them hypocrites, reprobates, and castaways; that is stretching beyond our line; what have we to do, thus to judge another man's servant? Counsel him, and help him, but do not judge him."

The knife of the surgeon brings healing, but the sword of a judgmental tongue brings destruction and death.

David Brainerd was mightily used by God to bring revival to thousands of Native American Indians in frontier tribes. However, when he was a student at Yale College, an incident occurred that affected the rest of his life. A fellow student asked him what he thought of a certain professor. His quick response was "He has no more grace than this chair." When the college president heard what David had said, he demanded a public apology be given before the whole school. Feeling justified in what he had said in private, he refused to comply with the president's request for a public apology and was later expelled from the school.

After a time of deep soul searching and turmoil, he came to recognize his wrongdoing in judging a fellow believer and sent a written apology to the college. Once he humbled himself in this way, he experienced new grace and joy in his relationship with God and went on to become a great "surgeon of souls." Let's purpose now to become skilled surgeons whose words and actions bring healing, rather than become judges of others.

Command 15: Do Not Judge

Related Character Quality

Discernment vs. Judgment

Discernment is the ability to distinguish between good and evil, in order to make wise decisions.

What Are We to Discern?

When God told Solomon to ask for anything he wanted, Solomon asked for discernment. "give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:9). God commanded the priests of Israel to "teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean" (Ezekiel 44:23). God expects believers to become mature and skilled at using the Word of God through consistent application and by having "trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14).

The Importance of Discerning Between Good and Evil

In Scripture, the opposite of holiness is impurity, as indicated by the following passages:

- "For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (1 Thessalonians 4:7).
- "Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness" (Romans 6:19).

The Apostle Peter links New Testament holiness with the Old Testament instruction on holiness: "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:14–16).

In this passage, Peter quotes directly from the book of Leviticus, which says "I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves about on the ground. I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44–45). "… Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2).

How Do We Gain Discernment?

The answer is contained in Solomon's request of the Lord. "Give your servant a discerning heart … to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:9). An understanding heart is a "hearing heart." It listens to the voice of conscience, the words of Scripture, and the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

In James 1:5, we are urged to ask for wisdom and are assured that God will give it to all who ask for it in faith. Since God is not a respector of persons, we can expect that as Solomon was granted his request, so we will be granted a similar one.

One way that we can increase our perceptiveness in discerning between good and evil is given to us in Romans 12:2: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test [discern] and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Personal Evaluation: How Discerning Are You?

- Do you ask God for an understanding heart to discern between good and bad?
- Do you pursue holiness by rejecting all forms of uncleanness?
- Have you dedicated your body to God as a temple of the Holy Spirit?
- Do you ask God to remove anything in your life that would hinder you from hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit?
- Do you listen to both sides of a story before making conclusions?
- Do you consider a person's life and background before making a final opinion about him?
- When you see someone making a wrong decision, do you desire to help him make a wise choice instead?

Turn Judging Into a Mirror!

I enjoy telling the story of a day when, as a young boy, I walked into our kitchen and caught an older sister in the act of eating a cookie. I exclaimed, "You know those cookies are for dessert tonight!" She looked at me with a surprised, guilty expression. This gave me great satisfaction because usually she was the one catching me in the act of doing something wrong!

As I surveyed the "scene of the crime" I noticed that she had also poured a glass of milk. So I said with uncharacteristic confidence, "That is your second cookie, isn't it!" She looked at me with amazement and asked, "How did you know?" I replied, "The first cookie made you thirsty."

She marveled at her little brother's "wisdom." However, there was nothing to marvel about. I knew what she had done because I had done the very same thing the day before!

We have an amazing ability to detect and react to faults in others that we have not yet corrected in ourselves.

Paul affirms the fact that we judge in others the things of which we are guilty ourselves. "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?" (Romans 2:1-3).

The things to which Paul refers are terrible sins: " They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless." (Romans 1:29-31).

The reticular activating system is the part of the brain that determines what gets our attention. When I was a teenager, I was not able to identify the specific makes of cars. They all looked similar to me until I considered buying a Plymouth. Thereafter, my reticular activating system directed my attention to every Plymouth in sight. In the same way, when we are guilty of an action, our sensitivity to it increases, and we are more likely to notice this action in others. That is why it is especially important to search our own hearts when tempted to judge another person.

David overreacted in judging a man who had stolen a lamb because he had committed the same root sin.

James warns us about looking into a mirror but failing to correct the faults we see. "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:23-25). The next time we are tempted to judge another person, let's get out the mirror of God's Word and look at ourselves for the faults that we have noticed in someone else.

Command 15: Do Not Judge | Day 102

Conquer the Spirit of Judging!

Not long ago, I was meeting with a 19-year-old girl who had recently returned to the Lord after a time of tragic rebellion. I asked her about the counselors who tried to help her before she decided to go her own way.

When I mentioned the name of one of her counselors, she exclaimed, "I had a hard time with her, because whenever she looked at me I sensed a judgmental spirit." I asked her how she could tell simply from a look whether or not someone was judging her. She said, "The way she looked at me made me feel that she was evaluating my dress and appearance and wanting me to conform to her standards."

This testimony illustrates a common pitfall of those who try to help others by using personal authority rather than positional authority. A counselor must be careful to communicate God's principles, rather than his own personal standards, if he is to be effective. Understanding the difference between positional authority and personal authority is at the heart of determining whether someone is judging or discerning how to help another person.

Personal authority commands, "You must follow my rules." Positional authority appeals, "You must follow God's rules."

Sheriff Ray Nash has given Police Dynamics Seminars throughout the world. He explains how "personal authority" is often at the root of police brutality. When a police officer feels that a person is violating "his" rules, he loses sight of the fact that his authority is limited to enforcing the laws of those whom he represents.

This distinction between personal authority and positional authority is also at the heart of the warnings we read in James. One who judges has usurped God's authority and is using it in a personal way. "Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor" (See James 4:11–12.)

When we are more concerned with the outward reformation of a person, rather than his heart condition before God, we are not showing genuine love.

When we see people whose dress or appearance is immodest, what is our immediate concern? Do we want to help them conform to a more appropriate style of dress or do we use those outward indicators as motivations to pray for their inward walks with the Lord, and their relationships with parents and others whom God has placed in their lives?

Looking past the appearance to the heart takes training, because "Man looks at the outward appearance" (1 Samuel 16:7). To conquer a judgmental spirit, we must learn to see as God sees and look on the heart. Let's ask God to help us see the true needs of people and purpose to show them His genuine love.

See Through Hurting Eyes!

A newly married woman named Sara was shown to the desk that she would use in her new office job. As she sat down, cynical coworkers stared at her cheerful smile and inquired, "What are you so happy about?" She burst out, "I've just married the most wonderful man!" Her new colleagues rolled their eyes and said with sarcastic tones, "You just wait; all men are the same. He's going to let you down."

Many of the actions and attitudes that we judge in those around us are the result of expectations that we have failed to fulfill.

One person spoke up, "I bet he won't even remember your anniversary." Sara took up the challenge and stated, "Oh, my husband would never forget our anniversary! If you knew him, you would understand."

When their wedding anniversary drew near, Sara's coworkers teased her by asking, "How much do you want to bet he will forget your anniversary?" She assured them that they were wrong and made preparations for the special day.

At six o' clock that evening, the anniversary meal was ready. All the special touches from a loving wife were completed, and Sara had carefully chosen a gift for her husband Jeff. She waited, and waited. Finally, the phone rang and she heard Jeff's voice: "Honey, some things have come up at the office and I'll be home late tonight. Don't bother waiting up for me."

Her bitter disappointment over the event was intensified by the ridicule that she knew she would receive at the office the next day. When her husband got home and saw her sadness, he asked, "What's the matter?" Sara said, "You forgot our anniversary." A sudden realization of his neglect came like a shock. Then he tried to excuse it by saying, "You know how important my job is; we'll just celebrate some other way."

We may see our offenses as insignificant "splinters"; however, from the perspective of others, they are beams.

Jeff thought Sara would forget about the incident, but she didn't. In time, she began transferring more and more loyalty to her job and began complaining about little faults in her husband. He reacted and accused her of being overly critical and neglecting her responsibilities at home. Imagine that! He was judging her for the same thing that he had done, which had started the problem in their relationship.

Celebrating an anniversary is like saying to your wife, "You are of great worth to the Lord and to me, and I want you to know how much I love and treasure you." To forget an anniversary is to

communicate the opposite message. Have you forgotten anniversaries, birthdays, or other significant events? What steps can you take today to ensure that you will not miss any of these valuable opportunities to show your wife and children your love for them and commitment to them?

Command 15: Do Not Judge

Study Question

Q: David's wisest and most trusted advisor was Ahithophel. Seeking his counsel was like inquiring "at the oracles of God." Why, then, did Ahithophel join Absalom's revolt against David and give counsel to kill David?

A: Ahithophel was a wise and trusted counselor of David. He was so wise that it was said of him, "the advice Ahithophel gave was like that of one who inquires of God. That was how both David and Absalom regarded all of Ahithophel's advice" (2 Samuel 16:23). With such wisdom, it would seem obvious that Ahithophel would remain loyal to David when David's son Absalom rose up and rebelled against David.

However, Ahithophel turned against David and not only joined Absalom, but also gave Absalom counsel on how to kill David. When Absalom decided not to follow the counsel of Ahithophel, Ahithophel went home, put his house in order, and hanged himself. (See 2 Samuel 17:1–4, 14, 23.)

What Ahithophel intended to do to David, he did to himself. But why? A possible answer is found in the genealogies of Ahithophel. Ahithophel was a Gilonite (see 2 Samuel 15:12). Eliam was the son of Ahithophel (see 2 Samuel 23:34). Eliam was the father of Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11:3). Ahithophel could have been the grandfather of Bathsheba, and just as Absalom had purposed to kill Amnon for immorality with his sister, so Ahithophel may have become bitter and purposed to kill David for defiling his granddaughter.

Ahithophel and Absalom were of like spirit and died for their judgments against David. Both had concluded that David was not fit to rule the nation and sought to remove him from this position. Their destruction illustrates the damage that comes to those who judge others. (See 2 Samuel 15:12, 17:13, and 18:15.)

Begin a Reformation!

The wife glared at her husband as I sat down at the table with them. She started right in: "I do not even like to look at this man!" He had confessed to her some past problems with lust, and she was irate. Nothing he said could appease her. While her deep disappointment was certainly understandable, her shock did not take into account the frailty of human nature and the fact that we are all prone to sin.

"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10).

After listening to a few more painful minutes' worth of verbal assaults, I said to the wife, "There is no doubt that you have been hurt by your husband's moral failures. However, could it be that your response to these deep hurts has actually fallen into the category of bitterness and unforgiveness?" She acknowledged her bitterness and said that she had tried to forgive her husband many times, but it was just too hard.

It was then that I saw a parable of Jesus from a new perspective. In Matthew 18, the king called in his servant who owed him the equivalent of 15–20 years' wages. There was no way the servant could have ever paid that debt, and yet he said to the king, "Please give me time, and I will pay it all back." The king had mercy on him and forgave the entire debt. Then the servant found a fellow servant who owed him a comparatively small amount and demanded that the debt be paid. When the fellow servant asked for time to pay it back, he was refused and thrown into prison.

The actions of the unforgiving servant reveal his lack of Gratitude to the one who forgave him and released him from his huge debt.

I said to the wife, "In your mind, your husband's sin of lust is far greater than your sins of bitterness and unforgiveness." Then I explained that she would never be able to forgive her husband for his sins until she recognized the magnitude of her own sins against God and the great mercy that He had shown her. When she asked how she could do this, I said, "Focus on the excruciating pain and death of the Lord Jesus Christ and realize the fact that we are responsible for His death. 'But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

Judging one another is a result of diminishing the seriousness of our own sins and magnifying the seriousness of the sins of others. A reformation begins when we understand the horrendous wickedness of our own sins in the presence of a holy and righteous God. Then we can say, "We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws … . O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name" (Daniel 9:5, 19). The next time we struggle to forgive another person, let's remember the incredible debt of sin that we have been forgiven!

Command 15: Do Not Judge | Day 105

Remove the Plank!

The purpose of "removing a plank" from our own eye is to "see clearly to cast out the [speck] out of [our] brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5). One of our natural tendencies in "speck removal" is to tell a person that we noticed a fault in him and that he should take care of it. This approach is almost certain to cause him to bristle with indignation and react to us by saying, or at least thinking, "Who does he think he is to correct me?"

A second approach we often take is to tell a friend about another person's "speck" and have him talk to that person. When he says, "People are offended by your actions," the person will not only react to the informant for listening to gossip, but he will also react to the one who did not come directly to him with the problem.

A third tendency we have is to avoid any confrontation and say nothing about it, but in our heart judge the person as being unspiritual or sinful. The problem with this response is that our heart attitudes will be revealed in our words and actions toward the person. He will sense in us a lack of openness and a judgmental spirit. Therefore, there must be a more effective method for addressing the faults of others.

"Speck removal" should be approached with humility and caution. It requires a spirit of genuine love and great discernment. It is important to communicate acceptance, understand all the factors of a situation by asking appropriate questions, and wait for the right timing to approach the matter. One of the most effective ways to help another person is to share a similar problem from your own personal experience and the way you overcame it.

When we humbly explain the steps we took to cast a beam out of our own eye, others will ask us to help them remove their splinter.

At a recent conference with about 500 men in attendance, I announced that a man named Paul Speed had learned the secret of conquering lust and would be happy to help any other man do the same. Not one man responded to this offer. However, at another conference with about the same number of men and their wives, Paul and his wife publicly shared how he had come to experience daily victory in this important area. Following his session, men and couples thronged around him and wanted to talk. The next day from morning until evening, he and his wife shared with others the steps they could take to walk in victory.

Pride hinders people from asking for our help, but we can conquer that pride by humbling ourselves before them.

This is the day for journaling. What a rich resource of insights you will leave to your children if you explain how you judged various individuals and then used this judgment as a mirror to identify similar faults in your own life. As you explain the steps you took to conquer your faults, you will motivate your children to follow the same steps, and they will praise God for your humility and obedience. It is natural for men to want their families to honor them, but remember, "Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor" (Proverbs 18:12).

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 7:1-3

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?".

James 4:11–12

"Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?"

Galatians 6:1

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."

Romans 2:1

"You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things."

Romans 12:3

"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."

Identify Holy Things!

We will miss some of the most important opportunities in life if we fail to identify holy things. Moses learned this while in the desert. God got his attention with an unusual burning bush, but Moses did not receive his divine assignment from God until he recognized that the ground on which he stood was holy ground. (See Exodus 3.)

The Philistines were delighted when they captured the Ark of God, until plagues broke out among them and they realized that they were dealing with something far more holy and sacred than they had imagined.

Merchants thought they were doing God a service by changing secular money into Temple coins and providing sacrifices for travelers to purchase, but Jesus took whips and drove the merchants out of His holy Temple. God's concern today is that we also recognize holy things and treat them with the honor and reverence they deserve. Thus, Jesus commands:

Command Sixteen

"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces" (Matthew 7:6).

In the New Testament, the Greek word most frequently translated as holy is hagios, which describes things pertaining to God or that which is separated unto Him. There are two types of holy things: those that are intrinsically holy, such as our holy God, the holy Scriptures, and God's

holy name; and those things that are made holy by their dedication to God, such as our bodies and our possessions. Before God can do a mighty work in us, we must recognize holy things.

Over the years, I have been amazed by how many teenagers have serious thoughts about suicide. In fact, parents would be shocked to know how prevalent this is among their own sons and daughters. In trying to help these teenagers, I have often said to them, "Since you will lose your life anyway if you kill yourself, why don't you dedicate your body to God?" They respond that they cannot do this. They seem to be locked in to a course of self-destruction from which they cannot break free. As I ask them more questions, it usually becomes apparent that they have given their bodies over to the pleasures of sin. The combination of guilt and being slaves to sensual pleasure is bringing them to destruction. This is the message of God's warning in 1 Corinthians 6:19:

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own"

As believers, we must never forget that we were bought with the precious blood of Christ and must therefore glorify Him in body and spirit because they belong to Him. (See 1 Corinthians 6:20.) If we yield the members of our body to Satan, we are casting that which is holy to the dogs, and we will experience the consequences of such actions. Therefore, as a primary step to fulfilling this command, let's make sure we have presented our bodies to God as living and holy sacrifices. (See Romans 12:1.)

Separate Holy from Unholy!

Why is it so important that holy things be separated from unholy things? Because God is holy and has called believers to be a holy people set apart for Himself. Peter tells us that we are a holy nation, a royal priesthood, and a people who have been called out of darkness into God's marvelous light. God desires that the world would see the zealous good works of His holy people and glorify Him because of them. This is why it is so critical that we abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul and dilute our influence and impact on the world. (See 1 Peter 2:9–12 and Titus 2:12–14.)

Being effective salt and light in the world requires that we have an inward separation from that which is unholy.

Paul confirms the importance of separation from the world in a passionate appeal to the Corinthian believers: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?"

"For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty. Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1).

God's goal is that the Bride of Christ be "without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:27).

In addition to avoiding obvious compromises with the world, it is important that believers evaluate the spiritual training they receive and confirm its accuracy with the holy Word of God. (See Acts 17:10–11.)

I will always be thankful for the time that my father removed our family from a church that had rejected the foundational truths of Scripture. My father was a leader in the church, but when he wrote an article on how to be born again, the pastor rebuked him, stating that this church did not believe those things.

It was after leaving that church and beginning to attend a Bible-believing church that our family became serious about reaching our community with the Gospel. Ministries began in our home, including children's meetings, adult Bible classes, and youth meetings, which eventually resulted in the development of the Institute in Basic Life Principles.

I urge you to seriously evaluate whether the activities and influences that are a part of your life are ones that increase your desire for God and His holiness or whether they are ones that diffuse your interest in spiritual things and diminish your impact on the world.

Command 16: Do Not Throw Pearls

Related Character Quality

Discretion vs. Simple-Mindedness

Discretion is the ability to avoid words, actions, and attitudes that could result in undesirable consequences.

Discretion, when properly used, will protect a man's health, wealth, and wisdom. "Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you" (Proverbs 2:11). There are several different Hebrew words that are translated discretion or discreet. These words, together with the context in which they are used, describe the meaning and application of discretion.

In Scripture, a close synonym to discreet is the word prudent. Just as discreet behavior avoids damaging situations, so a prudent person understands cause-and-effect sequences and acts accordingly. "A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it" (Proverbs 22:3).

- **Discretion develops an understanding heart.**
  An understanding heart is also a listening and obedient heart. "My son, pay attention to my wisdom, listen well to my words of insight, that you may maintain discretion, and and your lips may preserve knowledge" (Proverbs 5:1–4).
- **Discretion distinguishes right from wrong.**
  "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion" (Proverbs 11:22).
- **Discretion treasures and uses wisdom.**
  To treasure something is to guard it and delight in it. "My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck" (Proverbs 3:21–22).
- **Discretion responds to the motives of people.**
  Solomon became successful and famous because he had wisdom, understanding, and discretion. However, near the end of his life, he lost his discretion, and his heart was drawn away by immoral women. "Discretion will protect you … It will save you also from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words" (Proverbs 2:11, 16).
- **Discretion turns knowledge into wise counsel.**
  Proverbs was written "for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight … for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young" (Proverbs 1:2–4).

Personal Evaluation: How Discreet Are You?

- Do you know how to determine the value of an activity?
- Do you say what is on your mind without first evaluating its possible effect on others?
- Do you learn from others' mistakes so that you do not repeat them?
- Do you choose to do what is right regardless of the cost and to avoid all appearance of evil?
- Do you refrain from spreading gossip, slander, and damaging reports?

Recognize Dangerous "Dogs"!

We typically view dogs as friendly family pets and refer to them as "man's best friend." However, in Bible times, dogs freely roamed the countryside. In this wild and hungry state, they presented a constant threat of danger to those who encountered their fury.

Wild dogs are highly symbolic in Scripture, representing that which is low and contemptible. When a wicked man cursed King David, David's General reacted, "… Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king?…" (2 Samuel 16:9). Paul warned in Philippians 3:2, "Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil …."

We are not to judge the motives of people, but we are to discern the dangerous nature of "dogs" and "swine."

God condemned the leaders of Israel by stating: "Israel's watchmen are blind, they all lack knowledge; they are all mute dogs, they cannot bark; they lie around and dream, they love to sleep. They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain …" (Isaiah 56:10–11). Solomon uses a characteristic of the dog to describe the nature of a foolish man: "As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly" (Proverbs 26:11).

To help us understand the analogy in this command, we must realize that the nature of both wild dogs and swine is different from our human nature. They are not impressed with the "jewels" that we have. They are concerned only with satisfying their physical appetites, and they do not care whom they hurt or abuse in the process. If we offer them jewels, they will lunge for them, but when they realize that they were misled by our attention to them and see our failure to fulfill their expectations, they will trample the jewels we have given them and turn to attack us.

The primary point of Jesus' command is that we cannot give that which is holy to one whose very nature has no comprehension or appreciation for holy things.

As we seek to share Christ and the treasures of His Word with those around us, it is important for us to remember that simply giving holy things to unholy people will not make those individuals holy. They must first come to repentance for their sins. Then their hearts and their spirits will be reborn, and they will be given the holy nature of God. This rebirth will allow them to understand and appreciate spiritual things.

Let's purpose to discern the ability of listeners to appreciate or comprehend the spiritual truths we want to give them, and let's follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit in what we share.

Discern "Pearl Tramplers"!

If we cast our pearls before swine, the pearls will be trampled underfoot, and then the swine will turn and try to destroy us. We do not usually think of pigs as ferocious animals, but the swine that Jesus referred to would have been wild scavengers—unclean animals according to the Levitical Law.

In the ancient Hebrew understanding, a pearl refers to "wise sayings" such as those in the book of Proverbs. These "gems of wisdom" are precious and need to be valued and wisely used. Solomon warns, "Do not speak to a fool, for he will scorn the wisdom of your words" (Proverbs 23:9).

God wants us to love everyone, which is why we must learn how to respond wisely to wrong attitudes.

The Hebrew language includes five different words that are all translated in English as fool. Great insight can be gained by understanding their precise definitions.

- **A Simple Fool** (pethiy) is extremely vulnerable and believes everything he is told. He is without knowledge, is easily seduced, and will suffer consequences for following foolish advice. He desperately needs the instruction of a wise mentor.

- **A Reactionary Fool** (eviyl) is thickheaded. He believes his own way of thinking is always right, and his mouth gets him into trouble. Arguing with him is useless because he will learn only through punishment. It is important that his authorities be aware of his activities.
- **A Silly Fool** (keciyl) has rejected the wisdom of God and is arrogantly set on doing what brings immediate pleasure. He glories in things he should be ashamed of. His motives and methods are subtle, and close association with him should be avoided because of his capacity to lead others astray. He needs serious reproofs.
- **A Scorning Fool** (luwts) rejects the rules and mocks those who make them, embracing that which is an abomination to God. He initiates contention and division. A person who tries to correct him will suffer for it. He should be avoided and requires severe discipline from his authorities.
- **A Committed Fool** (nabal) is proud and self-confident. He is his own god and seeks to gratify his lower nature. He is dedicated to drawing others into his wicked ways and teaching them to do greater evil. We should have no association with him; instead we should pray for God to change his heart

A "pearl trampler" may be outwardly pleasant and congenial, but in his heart he rejects God's control of his life.

Scripture states, "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm" (Proverbs 13:20). Unsuspecting parents have allowed their sons and daughters to "fellowship" with foolish friends, not realizing that their children are being exposed to great spiritual danger. Parents should not only seek to protect their children, but also should train them to discern and wisely respond to different types of fools. May the Lord give each of us the wisdom and discernment to recognize and respond to "pearl tramplers."

Command 16: Do Not Throw Pearls

Study Question

Q: Jesus praised the Good Samaritan for helping a wounded stranger. Why did He then tell a Canaanite woman He could not help her suffering daughter because He could not give what He had to the dogs?

A: In our day, a dog is regarded as "man's best friend." In Biblical times, however, dogs were often wild, hungry, and looked down upon. In the Bible, three words are translated "dog."

The Greek word Jesus used in this command is kuon. It is the same word Paul used in a figurative sense when he wrote, "Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers" (Philippians 3:2).

The Hebrew word for dog is keleb, meaning "dog" or, figuratively, "a male prostitute." This Hebrew word was referred to in the Law. "No Israelite man or woman is to become a shrine prostitute. You must not bring the earnings of a female prostitute or of a male prostitute into the house of the LORD your God to pay any vow, because the LORD your God detests them both" (Deuteronomy 23:17–18).

In the account of the Canaanite woman, Jesus used a different Greek word for dog. He used the term kunarion, which means "a puppy."

"The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour" (See Matthew 15:25–28.)

It was not a lack of compassion that motivated Jesus to deny the initial requests of this woman. Instead, His final answer to her would indicate that He was carefully discerning her motives and testing her faith.

When she first began calling after Jesus to help her daughter, He ignored her. The disciples urged Him to send her away, because she kept shouting at them. Instead, He responded: "I was sent

only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). Then, she began to worship Him and pleaded for help. This is when He told her it was not good to give the children's bread to the dogs.

Her recognition of the fact that Jesus was the only One Who could help her daughter and her persistence in pleading for His mercy and assistance revealed her great faith, which pleased God and stirred His heart of compassion towards her, resulting in a miracle.

Learn to Answer "Pearl Haters"!

On various occasions during His earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus was confronted with many questions from those who did not recognize His value or the wisdom of His words. His wise responses provide us with excellent examples of ways that we should discern the motives behind questions and answer different types of fools without casting our pearls before swine.

"Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes" (Proverbs 26:4–5).

Types of questions Jesus received and His responses to them:

- **Rhetorical** questions are ones to which no answer is expected or to which only one obvious answer may be given. A wise man will use a rhetorical question to present a listener with truth, but a fool will use it to emphasize his false ideas. When the Pharisees asked Jesus if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, Jesus responded to them with two rhetorical questions of His own, leaving them no choice but to agree. (See Matthew 12:11–12.)
- **Argumentative** questions are born out of pride. They stir up debate and controversy over conflicting points of view and force the listeners to take sides. When the Pharisees questioned Jesus about the basis of His authority, He exposed their divisive intensions and then addressed the topic of their questions, presenting truth about Himself through parables. (See Matthew 21:23–46.)
- **Deceptive** questions involve trickery and ingenuity in an attempt to ensnare the ones who answer them. They have "no win" answers. At the prompting of the Pharisees, one person asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. The intent behind the question was to cause Jesus to either defy the Roman government or to anger the Jews, who hated the Roman occupation. Jesus responded with perceptive questions of His own and then explained the principle related to the situation. (See Matthew 22:16–22.)
- **Insincere** questions do not express the genuine feelings of the questioner and cannot be taken at face value. Following Jesus's arrest, the high priest asked Him about His disciples and His doctrine. However, the high priest was not seeking to learn about Jesus but rather to find something about Him to condemn. Jesus did not provide the requested explanation. Rather, He pointed to the crowd who had listened to His teaching and told the high priest to ask them. (See John 18:19–23.)

"And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful" (2 Timothy 2:24).

When someone challenges you with a foolish or unlearned question, do you become defensive and argumentative, or do you discern if he is open to truth and determine how to effectively present it? Let's follow the instruction of Proverbs 16:23: "A wise man's heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction."

Raise Up Holy Generations!

The stillness of the morning was broken by the ringing of the telephone. The father answered it and heard his daughter's voice: "Dad, there is a boy I want you to meet. Could we stop by later today?" The father sensed trouble, but agreed to the meeting.

When the daughter and her friend arrived, the mother and father were shocked. They never would have imagined that their beautiful, Godly daughter would have ever chosen to associate with such a boy, much less want to introduce him to her family. The situation grew even worse as the parents learned that their daughter had attended drinking parties at college and was pregnant with this boy's child. The parents were crushed, stunned, heartbroken, and dismayed!

God's purpose throughout history is to raise up a Godly seed that will proclaim His truth to the nations.

The grief of these parents could best be described by Ezra when he learned that the spiritual leaders of the people had "not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices… They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them…. When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled….

"I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the LORD my God and prayed: 'O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. … O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence" (Ezra 9:1–6, 15).

The glory of children is their father, who is entrusted by God with the responsibility to protect and train them. (See Proverbs 17:6 and Ephesians 6:4.)

This was Ezra's instruction to the fathers of his day: "Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance" (Ezra 9:12).

If you were warned that someone was planning to sneak into your home and steal a very large sum of money that you were storing in a dresser drawer, wouldn't you take special precautions to protect it? Your children are far more valuable than any amount of money you may have!

God has created men to be courageous, mighty protectors. Let's do whatever is necessary to protect sons and daughters from those who would seek to devour them, and let's teach them to fear the Lord so they will be equipped to raise up Godly generations.

Treasure God's Jewels!

Sometimes a song will have such meaning to me that it brings tears to my eyes. One example is the hymn "When He Cometh." The third verse says, "Little children, little children, who love their Redeemer, are the jewels, precious jewels, His loved and His own. Like the stars of the morning, His brightness adorning, they shall shine in their beauty, bright gems for His crown."

The formation of a pearl and the raising of a child have many similarities in both the process and the result.

When Jesus wanted to describe the kingdom of heaven, He selected a gem that represented ultimate perfection to the Hebrew mind. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45–46).

Jesus also placed great value on children when He told His disciples, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14). It is a great tragedy that many parents today look at children as burdens and not blessings. They do not realize the great potential of each child who is raised in the fear of the Lord.

I once heard a story about a tourist who purchased an inexpensive necklace in a Paris trinket shop. When he returned home, he decided to have it appraised and was shocked when the jeweler offered him $25,000 for it!

He decided to have another expert jeweler examine the necklace and was amazed to receive an offer of $35,000 for it! The astonished man asked the jeweler why such an ordinary necklace was so valuable. "Look through this glass," replied the jeweler. There he saw a small inscription that read, "From Napoleon Bonaparte to Josephine." This necklace had belonged to Napoleon's wife. The new owner did not recognize the value of the necklace until he saw it from the perspective of the jeweler.

We will not fully appreciate the value of children until we see them from God's perspective as precious jewels.

The best thing you could add to your journal this week is a list with the names of each member of your family and reasons why they are of great value to you and to God. At first, you may not have much to write, but as you think about it more, ideas will come to your mind, and the more you will appreciate the great treasures that God has given you in your family. There will then be little thought of ever "casting them out"!

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 7:6

"Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces".

Philippians 3:2

"Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh."

Proverbs 19:25

"Flog a mocker, and the simple will learn prudence; rebuke a discerning man, and he will gain knowledge."

Proverbs 23:9

"Do not speak to a fool, for he will scorn the wisdom of your words."

Proverbs 9:6–8

"Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding. Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult; whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse. Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you."

Proverbs 14:6–7

"The mocker seeks wisdom and finds none, but knowledge comes easily to the discerning. Stay away from a foolish man, for you will not find knowledge on his lips."

Matthew 10:14

"If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town."

Ask for "Good Things"!

One day, a teenage boy informed me that he did not believe in prayer. I asked him why not, and he stated, "Because one time I begged God to answer my prayer and He did not do it." I responded, "If you asked God for the right thing, you can be sure He gave it to you, because He promises that 'everyone that asks receives.' Maybe the problem was that you were not asking for the right thing."

Command Seventeen

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7:7–8).

In this command, God compares His giving to that of a loving father; thus, He reasons, "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?" (Matthew 7:9–11).

Good things from the Lord are also spoken of in the Psalms. "Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits … who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Psalm 103:2, 5).

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights" (James 1:17).

Just as every good gift comes from God, we can be sure that all the things He gives us are indeed good. At times, we may ask for things that we think are good but that would actually bring us harm if we received them. Our omniscient heavenly Father wisely and lovingly does not grant us these requests.

In addition to providing for our needs, God wants to use us as channels of blessing and provision to others. By cooperating with Him in giving to others, we can participate in the advancement of His kingdom. For this reason, the context of this command is significant. The disciples had observed Jesus praying and said, "Lord, teach us to pray." Jesus then gave them a model prayer. It begins with a focus on God's name: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." This is followed by a primary concern for God's kingdom: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

Then, our needs are presented: "Give us each day our daily bread." Next, we are challenged to forgive as we would wish to be forgiven: "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us." The final request is to "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil [the evil one]." Then the reason is given for God to answer this prayer: "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

When we are more concerned about the name and reputation of God and His kingdom than we are concerned about our own needs and desires, we will have a powerful basis for prayer. Let's take a closer look at the things we pray for to determine if they are "good things" and if our motives in asking are right. (See James 4:3.)

Ask With Fervency!

Why is it that sometimes we pray and seek for good things, but nothing seems to happen? One answer is that we may not be praying with sufficient fervency. This is the instruction of James 5:16: "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

Elijah "was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops" (James 5:17–18).

Fervent prayer fulfills the requirement to seek God with our whole heart so we can find Him. (See Jeremiah 29:13.)

God records the fervency of Elijah's praying: [he] "bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees" (1 Kings 18:42). Seven times Elijah fervently prayed for rain. Daniel's fervency is also recorded for our instruction: "So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes" (Daniel 9:3). He prayed for 21 days!

A Christian couple was experiencing financial pressures and purposed to get out of debt. They began praying that God would bring a buyer for some land that they owned. After two years of praying, not one person had even called about the property. The financial pressures were becoming more intense. One day they learned about the power of crying out and fervently asked God to sell their land. Within 24 hours God brought a buyer who paid the full price they were asking!

A fervent cry is important because it represents an unconditional surrender to a holy and loving God.

It is evident from God's dealings with Israel that His number-one concern was that they would keep their focus on Him. For 40 years God trained Israel to look to Him each day for their daily bread, but as soon as they entered the Promised Land, they began looking to other gods.

For this reason, God brought about circumstances that would motivate them to turn away from other gods and cry out to Him for the deliverance that only He can give. (See Psalm 50:15.) In crying out, we must not only be fervent; we must also be patient. Remember that God heard Israel's cry for deliverance from the bondage of Egypt, and He sent them a deliverer. However, Moses came as a baby and they had to wait 80 years for him to lead them out of bondage. In the meantime, God was preparing them to fully trust Him and to be giant killers in the Land of Promise.

If we have prayed for God to solve an impossible situation and nothing has happened, let's ask ourselves if we have prayed with the fervency of total surrender and are cooperating with God during our time of waiting.

Command 17: Ask, Seek, and Knock

Related Character Quality

Resourcefulness vs. Wastefulness

Resourcefulness is making wise use of that which others would normally overlook or discard.

A resource is something that is available for anticipated needs. The Biblical concept of resourcefulness is "to gather." "He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son" (Proverbs 10:5).

God uses physical needs to motivate us to maintain a daily dependence upon Him. Therefore, He instructs us to pray, "Give us each day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). Many people ask God for things and are given them, but they neglect to take the next two steps of seeking and finding. Thus, they conclude that God did not hear or answer their prayer.

The goal of increasing our resources must not be to heap up treasures for ourselves but to increase the ability to give to others. "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8).

How Resourcefulness Preserved Life

- **During the Flood**

  After God determined to judge the world with a flood, He instructed Noah to build an ark in order to preserve his family and all the creatures that could not swim. In addition to preparing the space needed to house the animals, Noah and his family had to demonstrate resourcefulness by gathering the food that was needed to survive.

  "You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. … You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them" (Genesis 6:19, 21).

- **During a famine**

  A second excellent example of resourcefulness was the preparation made for a famine during the days of Joseph.

  Through a dream, God warned Pharaoh that there would be seven years of abundant harvest followed by seven years of famine. Joseph resourcefully designed a plan to prepare for the famine.

  "They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine" (Genesis 41:35–36).

  Believers are instructed to establish personal habits of resourcefulness in order to distribute to the necessity of saints. (See Romans 12:13.) "Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you

should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made" (1 Corinthians 16:1–2).

The Power Behind Resourcefulness

As resources are increased through wise and creative gathering, it is easy to convince ourselves that we are the ones responsible for the added wealth. Therefore, we must continually remind ourselves that it is God "who gives you the ability to produce wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:18).

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17).

Personal Evaluation: How Resourceful Are You?

- Do you keep accurate records of the resources God has given you?
- Would God be pleased with the way you are using the resources He has given to you?
- Do you watch for valuable resources that others are discarding?
- As you increase your riches, is your motive to have more to give away or to heap up possessions for your own pleasure?
- Have you asked God for things and expected Him to give them to you without taking the steps to seek and find them?

Ask With Confidence!

God will always act in accordance with His Word. What an awesome opportunity this affords us to know the will of God! Our responsibility is to study His Word and have it continually before our eyes so that we can obey it and draw upon it when a need arises. This is the basis for effective prayers.

Daniel looked to God's Word given in the writings of Moses and Jeremiah to understand God's will regarding the Jews captivity. Based on this understanding of God's will from Scripture, Daniel prayed for God to carry out His sovereign will. (See Daniel 9.)

What greater source of confidence could we have than God's Word, which states, "Everyone that asks receives" (Matthew 7:8).

Years ago, after a Basic Seminar in Seattle, Washington, a couple asked me if I would pray with them for a child. They had prayed for several years and had not yet received a child. As I asked several questions of the couple, I also asked the Lord for the Scriptures on which I could base my prayer.

He brought to my mind His first command to mankind, "Be fruitful and increase in number." He also brought to mind the words of Psalm 127:3–5, "Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them." Then I remembered the words of Jesus: "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me" (Matthew 18:5).

As these Scriptures filled my mind, a great source of faith filled my heart, and I had great confidence that God was going to give this couple a child. After we prayed, I made them promise to bring the child to the seminar the next year. Sure enough, the next year during a break, I saw this couple pushing a baby stroller toward the platform so that I could see the answer to our prayers.

The preparation of an effective prayer often requires more time than the presentation of the prayer.

The vital importance and effectiveness of basing prayers on the Word of God is clearly stated in John 15:7: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." The commands of Christ that we are learning are the words of Jesus. Thus, John writes, "and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what

pleases him" (1 John 3:22). Let's learn the Word of God so that we can confidently present our requests to Him, knowing that they are in accordance with His will.

Seek and Find!

It would be hard to estimate the number of Christians who pray for a needed item, and after a time of waiting, conclude that God did not give it to them. This conclusion is not always the case since the Scripture states, "For everyone that asks receives" (Matthew 7:8).

The problem may not be God's failure to give, but it may be our failure to seek and find what He gave: "He that seeks finds." The sequence of giving, seeking, and finding is illustrated in the world of nature. God states that He feeds the fowls of the air and the beasts of the field. (See Matthew 6:26.) However, He does not spread out their food each day, but rather provides it in such a way that they must seek it out.

It would require a huge room in heaven to contain all the unclaimed gifts that God has given in answer to prayers.

Years ago, our Printing Department expressed an urgent need for a five-color Heidelberg press. We asked God for it and believed that He had given it to us. Then I sent them out to look for it. They informed me that the kind of press we were looking for cost approximately $600,000. I explained that we did not have that much money, and therefore, they must keep looking for the press that God had provided for us.

Later, they returned with great excitement. They had found a better Heidelberg press, and after negotiations and trading in one of our old presses, it would cost only $300,000! We all felt a peace that this was God's provision but asked Him to confirm it. The day before we were to make our final decision, we received an unexpected gift of $300,000! When visitors take tours at Headquarters, we are privileged to explain this supernatural provision. Leaders from other nations have literally praised God because of this provision, even though some of them had previously stated that they did not believe in God.

Seeking God requires initiative and diligence on our part.

A young couple in Illinois asked God for a home that they could buy without going into debt. By exercising thriftiness and resourcefulness, they were able to save $10,000 each year toward the purchase of their home. After five years, a distant relative heard about their commitment to purchase a home debt-free and sent them a totally unexpected gift of $35,000!

With $85,000 they went out "just to look" and found their "dream house." However, it was priced at $125,000. They told the owners that this was exactly what they were looking for and they hoped that it would be back on the market in four years when they had enough money to buy it. The owners were so impressed with this couple and their commitment to not go into debt that they sold them the house for $85,000!

Let's realize that God delights to demonstrate His love and power to those whose hearts are fully devoted to Him and who seek and find the gifts He gives.

Command 17: Ask, Seek, and Knock

Study Question

Q: Why did God promise to deliver His people from the bondage of Egypt and then lead them into a wilderness with no water or food?

A: God is love, and love deepens by intimate fellowship. When God led the nation of Israel into the wilderness, He wanted their needs to draw them close to Him for intimate fellowship (see Deuteronomy 8:2). During their 40 years in the wilderness, God continually provided for their needs as they trusted in Him. When God provided food for the people, He told Moses that He wanted them to know "… that I am the LORD your God" (Exodus 16:11–12). God also demonstrated His power and provision by preventing their clothes and shoes from wearing out or becoming too small. (See Deuteronomy 8:4.)

God's number one challenge with the nation of Israel was keeping their focus and attention on Him. He warned them "not to forget Him" and even lamented the fact that they would become proud and "not need Him" after they built houses, accumulated possessions, and had all of their physical needs supplied. (See Deuteronomy 8:11–14.)

Similarly, God desires a close relationship with each one of us and wants us to depend on Him for everything we need. He urges us to tell Him every detail of our needs in earnest and thankful prayer. (See Philippians 4:6.) When we experience needs, God wants our hearts to be turned toward Him, acknowledging our need for His intervention. Crying out to God in fervent prayer demonstrates our unconditional surrender to Him, involves a plea for His infinite mercy in our lives, and also reveals our confidence in a power greater than ourselves.

By following the Biblical instruction to ask, seek, and knock, we will not only experience God's provision for our every need, but will also enjoy the fellowship of a deepening love relationship with God as our hearts are turned towards Him.

Command 17: Ask, Seek, and Knock | Day 117

Seek the Best First!

A philosopher once observed that there are two great tragedies in life. The first tragedy is not getting the desires of our heart. The second tragedy is getting them! The problem is that we think we know what we want, but when we finally get it, it is not what we thought it was going to be. We are disappointed and become disillusioned.

For this reason we must first seek the face of the Giver before seeking His gifts. There is a built-in reward for all who do this. A 16-year-old King of Israel discovered that "As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success" (2 Chronicles 26:5). Notice that God does not say that He will bless our labor for Him, but He will bless our seeking of Him. In fact, He reproved the church at Ephesus for losing their first love for Him, even though they were busy doing good works. (See Revelation 2:15.)

God wants us to seek His face rather than His hand.

One of the practical reasons for seeking the Lord is so that He will give us the right desires. Then we will want the right things. "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4).

The most important reason, however, is that God created us to have fellowship with Him. All of the circumstances in life are designed to promote and strengthen this fellowship. David understood this when he wrote, "One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple" (Psalm 27:4). Then David gives a powerful personal testimony in Psalm 105:4 and Psalm 34:10:

"Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always." "those who seek the LORD lack no good thing."

As a teenager, I would read these verses and want to apply them, but I wondered how to do it. Then one day I discovered the words of Psalm 63:1–6, "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you … . My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night."

I began to go to sleep meditating on a passage of newly memorized Scripture. I would share it with the Lord over and over, each time emphasizing a different word and trying to picture its application in my life. God began to prosper my life with all the good things that He knew would bring success. Because there is nothing more important in life or foundational to daily success, I am praying that nothing will hinder you from seeking the Lord's face!

Command 17: Ask, Seek, and Knock | Day 118

Knock With the Right Name!

Why is a good name rather to be chosen than great riches? (See Proverbs 22:1.) It is because a name is more than a label; it represents the character and nature of the person who has it. This is why Jesus instructs us to use His name when we pray.

"And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:13–14).

The name of Jesus is bigger than the word Jesus. It represents many important attributes that identify His person, character, function, authority, and power. For example, He is our Redeemer, Protector, Shepherd, Provider, and Counselor. He is our Light, Bread of Life, Living Water, Wisdom, and a host of other characteristics. His names testify to the fact that He is everything we currently need or ever will need.

When we bring a request to our heavenly Father, we should understand the nature of the Lord Jesus that directly relates to that request. If we are asking for physical healing, we could use the name of Jesus as our Great Physician, because He is the One Who makes the spirit, soul, and body whole. If we ask for wisdom, we can use the name of Jesus as our Mighty Counselor.

When Hezekiah appealed to God for deliverance from the enemy, he recognized the precise attribute of God that related to his need. He began with these words: "O Lord God of Israel." "Israel" means "God prevails." It was the name given to Jacob after he wrestled with the angel and said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." Then Hezekiah stated, "You alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth." God assured Hezekiah, "... I have heard your prayer." (See 2 Kings 19:15–20.)

"Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you" (Psalm 9:10).

Jesus asked His disciples, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" They responded by giving names: "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Then Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" Peter responded by saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus told Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven." (See Matthew 16:13–17.)

When we ask, seek, and knock, do we recognize the authority and power behind the precious name of Jesus? He is "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come." (See Ephesians 1:15–23.) Let's learn as many of Jesus' names as we can so we can more fully understand and appreciate His character and nature and look to Him to meet all of our needs.

Command 17: Ask, Seek, and Knock | Day 119

Knock With Persistence!

When Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, He told them a story about someone who had encountered an unexpected need. This example is a powerful illustration of the command to ask, seek, and knock.

At midnight a man in need knocked on the door of his friend and asked for some loaves of bread. Even though the friend knew the man's name and accepted him as a friend, he would not get out of bed to meet the need until the man was persistent. "though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs." (See Luke 11:5–8).

Boldness reinforces fervent prayer. It confirms our passion to have God do great things.

The fervent prayers recorded in Scripture reveal the great passions of men and women of faith who have earnestly sought after God and His kingdom. Without a passion, our lives are bland and mundane; with a passion, they can be dynamic and productive.

The reformer John Knox had a passion and vision to reach the nation of Scotland with the Gospel. Though persecuted by the Church of Rome and others, he continued to boldly proclaim

the truth of God's Word. He would frequently pray with fervency and power, "O God, give me Scotland, or I die!" God heard those cries and worked through John Knox to bring about a great awakening in that nation. What passions do we have that call for fervent praying, diligent seeking, and persistent knocking?

If we ask, seek, and knock, God will open up the right doors.

In this command, Jesus did not identify what the "door" represented. However, other Scripture verses explain the significance of a door. The first door that Jesus will open up is a greater understanding of Himself. He stated, "I am the gate" (John 10:9). He will then open up a door of faith. (See Acts 14:27.) Through faith, He will open up great and effectual doors of opportunity. (See 1 Corinthians 16:9.) With these doors will come a further "door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ" (Colossians 4:3).

It is God Who opens these doors, not us; and we are told in Revelation 3:8 that when God opens a door, no man can shut it. Over the years, I have asked God to open many different doors of opportunity, and I have seen Him do so in marvelous ways.

In your journaling this week, it would be meaningful to record any significant prayers that you have not yet seen God answer. Think through the searching and knocking that you can do in order to appropriate what you asked God for. Your personal experiences related to this command will be a valuable spiritual heritage from which your family and others can gain insights and encouragement to ask, seek, and knock.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 7:7-8

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened".

Matthew 7:9–11

"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?"

James 4:3–4

"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."

John 14:14

"You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

Psalm 81:10

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it."

Psalm 34:10

"The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing."

What You Desire, Do for Others!

A distraught father called and asked me what he could do to help his 16-year-old son. He said, "My son is basically a good boy; he just does foolish things and gets himself into trouble. When I ask my son why he does these things, his answer is always, 'Because nobody likes me!' " This father has a perfect opportunity to teach his son the meaning and application of Christ's next command.

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

If we want others to like us, we must first show acceptance to them. In order to do this, we must consider two questions. First, "Why should I accept others?" The answer is found in the law and the prophets, which Jesus summarized as loving God with our whole hearts and loving our neighbors as ourselves. (See Matthew 22:37–40.) We should accept others because God loves them and created each one for His divine purposes. Furthermore, we should accept others because we are all related to each other! We all came from the same set of original parents, Adam and Eve.

The next question is, "How are we to demonstrate love?" This command provides the answer to this question—the things that we want people to do for us are the very things that we should do for them. For example, we want to be recognized as a person who has value and importance, and thus we should treat others with honor. Jesus helps us develop this perspective by explaining that whatever we do to the least of our brethren, we are actually doing to Him. (See Matthew 25:40.) This concept should motivate us to honor and highly esteem each person we meet. If they are special to God, they should also be special to us!

The level of our respect and esteem for others will be instantly recognized by them, and they will usually respond to us in the same manner.

A heart that is stretched to meet the needs of other people will never be the same size again.

This command can be viewed in one of two ways. If we have the motive of giving to others, it provides us with practical ways of knowing how to meet the needs of others. However, if we are more concerned with having our own needs met, we will have the tendency to use it to get things from other people. Those we try to help will perceive our intensions and question whether we are doing something to benefit them or to benefit ourselves.

Doing good to others requires us to understand and practice genuine love, which is giving to others with no motive or thought of personal reward. It is this perspective upon which "all the law and the prophets" hang. Today, let's do for others those things that we would desire for ourselves with the motive of genuine love!

Command 18: Do To Others | Day 121

Treat Others Like Royalty!

This command is very clear and practical. If we want others to treat us like royalty, we must treat them in the same way. By making a list of how we would like to be treated and by meditating on God's Law, we can compile an effective strategy for how to treat others.

We usually recite the Golden Rule as follows: "Do to others what you would have them do to you." However, the order given in Matthew 7:12 indicates that we are first to determine all the things we desire from others, and then do those same things for them.

The Golden Rule will be fulfilled in our lives when God's Law is the basis of our daily decisions.

Notice how God's Law gives clear direction on how to fulfill basic human desires:

- **Recognize the importance of each person.** God created each person in the world in His own image and sent His Son to die for him. (See Genesis 1:27 and John 3:16.)
- **Respect inalienable rights.** God requires punishment for those who assault others and death for those who shed innocent blood. (See Genesis 9:6.)
- **Honor and protect a good name.** Those who bring false accusations and damage to others' reputations are to be severely punished. (See Deuteronomy 19:18–19.)

- **Protect private property.** If someone steals a sheep, he is to restore four sheep, and if he takes an ox he is to return five oxen to the owner. (See Exodus 22:1.)
- **Assist during emergencies.** Not only does the Law require helping friends, it also requires protecting the property of our enemies when it is endangered. (See Exodus 23:4–5.)
- **Warn of unforeseen danger.** If we fail to warn those who are in danger, God will hold us personally responsible for what happens to them. (See Ezekiel 33:8 and Proverbs 24:11–12.)

When it becomes our priority to fulfill the desires of other people, we will reflect the character that Paul praised in Timothy when he said, "I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 2:20–21). By fulfilling the basic desires of others, we also fulfill the Law.

"The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:14).

The application of this command is often in tangible ways that do not "make sense" to our human minds. One example is that of a man who owns a football liner manufacturing company. He made a practice of helping his competitors whenever he saw that they had a problem. They were amazed that he would do this. As the years passed, many of these companies decided to drop this particular product line and directed their customers to the one who had helped them. Today, this Christian man's company has a virtual monopoly on the production of football liners.

Let's purpose to do good to others, not for what we can get from them, but for how we can demonstrate Christ's love to them.

Command 18: Do To Others

Related Character Quality

Sensitivity vs. Callousness

Sensitivity is exercising my senses so that I can perceive the true spirit and emotions of those around me.

The Biblical word for sensitive is tenderhearted. Scripture instructs us: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

How Did a King Develop Sensitivity?

Josiah was only eight years old when he became King of Judah. The biography that God wrote of his life concludes with an amazing tribute: "Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses" (2 Kings 23:25).

According to the record, the key to his greatness was his tender heart. The account also explains how he developed it.

1. He purposed to please God.

God's summary of the life and ministry of Josiah is this: "He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD" (2 Kings 22:2). As a boy, Josiah set his heart to follow the Lord in the same way that Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself by participating in heathen customs.

2. He chose a Godly role model.

It would have been easy for Josiah to follow the evil ways of his father and grandfather. Instead, he chose to walk "in all the ways of his father David" (2 Kings 22:2). King Josiah used David's life as a pattern for righteous living, because David was known as a man after God's own heart.

3. He kept his focus on the Lord.

Josiah maintained Godly balance in his life as he diligently followed the Lord. He "not turning aside to the right or to the left" (2 Kings 22:2).

4. He restored the place of worship.

In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, he began a program to renovate the Temple and restore the worship that was prescribed by God to take place in it. He began by collecting an offering to "repair the temple of the LORD" (2 Kings 22:5).

5. He humbled himself when he heard the Word of God.

In the process of repairing the house of God, a copy of the Scriptures was discovered and read to King Josiah. "When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes" (2 Kings 22:11).

6. He acknowledged the iniquities of his forefathers.

Josiah realized that the judgment of God was upon the nation because his forefathers had rejected the ways of God. He said, "Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us" (2 Kings 22:13).

How God Rewarded a Tender Heart

When Josiah sent officials to inquire of the Lord concerning the evil that was to come upon the nation because of the transgression of his forefathers, God said to him, "Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD" (2 Kings 22:19).

Personal Evaluation: How Sensitive Are You?

- Do you seek the Lord with your whole heart?
- Do you allow bitterness or toleration of evil to cause callousness in your spirit?
- Do you cut off communication with family members?
- Have you chosen a Godly role model to follow?
- Have you established a time and place to meet the Lord every day?

Do you listen for the voice of God's Spirit speaking to you through Scripture?

Receive Honor by Giving Honor!

Honor is one of the greatest gifts that a father could receive from his family. Honor begins with a choice to place high value and importance on others, viewing them as priceless treasures and granting them high esteem. Honor is foundational to the success of a marriage and family.

God commands children to honor their parents (see Exodus 20:12), but many times children refuse to do so. In these cases, the father cannot demand it, but he must seek to earn respect through his own application of this command.

Fathers who want to be honored by their children must first honor their children by viewing them as priceless treasures from God.

It is easy for a father to read the Scripture, "Honor your father and mother" (Ephesians 6:2) and expect or demand that his children obey it, but Proverbs 18:12 gives wise counsel: "Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honor." Fathers can demonstrate humility by treating their sons and daughters with the dignity and respect that is fitting for children of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

As I have worked with families over the years, I have been amazed at the way some fathers dishonor their sons and daughters. I have listened as they have belittled and ridiculed them. I have seen how fathers have neglected their children, failed to fulfill promises, compared them unfavorably to other young people, scolded them for lack of perfection, and failed to praise them for significant achievements.

In spite of these hurtful offenses, many fathers then have asked me to convince their children to honor them. It is both possible and right for the children to do this, because giving honor to parents should be done in obedience to God and is based on their parents' position, not their performance. However, fathers must accept responsibility for their offenses and begin to lead their families by showing honor to their wives and children.

An effective way for a father to win honor from his children is for him to honor his own father and mother.

I know a president of a successful company who enjoys the deep respect of his sons and daughters. However, this relationship didn't just "happen." This man showed honor not only to his children, but also to his own father. This was especially difficult for him because he was not honored when he was a child. He grew up over a tavern, and his father was continually harsh and demanding towards him. He endured much verbal and physical abuse, but because this man turned to the Lord, he was able to forgive these offenses and follow God's ways.

One day he was standing on a ladder in the lobby of his business, hanging a large picture of his father. His father happened to stop in and gruffly said, "What are you doing?!" His son stepped down from the ladder, came over to his father and said, "Dad, I love you and I want all of my employees to honor you the way I do." Tears came to his father's eyes as he hugged his son and for the first time in his life said, "Son, I love you." Let's set the example by making sure our focus is on showing honor to others rather than demanding it for ourselves.

Command 18: Do To Others | Day 123

Consider the Connection!

The command to do to others what we want them to do to us begins with the word "So". This word gives us a signal to consider the connection between the thoughts that precede it and those that follow it. In this case, the passage reads: "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:11–12).

Love is giving others what they need even when it is different from what they want.

Because God fully understands us and loves us as a father, He deals with us according to our needs, not according to our wants. We must demonstrate this same kind of love to others. Parents often miss this important point when dealing with their children. As a result, children often get what they want rather than what they need.

When sons and daughters want permission to make independent decisions, wise parents will teach them that they do not have the authority to grant their children this freedom. (No one is free to make independent decisions. Even Jesus did nothing of His own will, but only what His heavenly Father directed Him to do.) Parents can then take the opportunity to teach their sons and daughters how to discern God's will in each decision. (See John 6:38.)

When a friend asks you to loan him some money, you can explain, "If I loan you money, I will turn you from being my friend into being my servant, because the borrower is servant to the lender. I do not want to make you my servant, so let me determine if God wants me to give you the money as a gift. Meanwhile, please tell me the actual needs you are facing." (See Proverbs 22:7.)

A person who wants to borrow money is usually more in need of wise counsel than of more money. Therefore, loaning him more money may only cause him to become more entangled in financial problems and pressures. By giving him wise counsel on how to organize his spending and how to live within his means, we can deal with the root of the problem.

We will learn how to treat others as we consider the wise, loving, and practical ways that God deals with us.

Doing unto others what we want them to do unto us must not be merely a calculated strategy to get what we want for our own personal ambitions. Rather, it should be a means of connecting people with the love and truth of God so that He can meet their deepest needs. If this is our goal, then we are ready to follow this command. Let's ask God for His wisdom on how to demonstrate His love in our dealings with others.

Command 18: Do To Others

Study Question

Q: The consuming passion of King Saul was to kill David. When Saul died and David became king, why did David bring Saul's grandson to his palace and treat him like a member of the royal family?

A: Hated by King Saul, hunted by soldiers, and constantly fleeing for his life, David was subjected to years of persecution. However, David made a covenant before God with Saul's son Jonathan. Their love and commitment to protect each other was deep and binding.

When Jonathan died, David wanted to honor his covenant with Jonathan, so he asked if there were any surviving members of the household of Saul. David's servants told him about Mephibosheth, who was a lame son of Jonathan and grandson of Saul. David issued an order for him to be brought to his palace. Mephibosheth may have reasoned that David was going to kill him. However, David said, "Don't be afraid," David said to him, "for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table" (2 Samuel 9:7).

David honored his commitment to Jonathan by being sensitive to the needs that the members of Saul's family faced after Saul's death. In order to completely fulfill the command, "Do to others..." we must have sensitivity towards their needs and remember our own times of helplessness. By envisioning the perfect response we would desire from others during times of crisis and then offering that response, we can be used as channels of God's love.

Give to Receive From God!

Doing to others what we would want them to do to us has a very specific application in the area of finances. We are instructed by God to distribute to the necessity of saints (see Romans 12:13). We are also told to give to our enemies without expecting anything in return (see Luke 6:35). In fact, if one fails to provide for the basic needs of others, especially fellow believers, Scripture says the love of God isn't in us (see 1 John 3:17).

We cannot out-give God. When we are obedient in giving to others, He will return even more to us, often using unexpected sources.

"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap" (Luke 6:38).

One day I learned of a special financial need in another ministry. God prompted me to give a specific, "painful" amount of money to them. He also made it clear that I was to give it from my personal funds, not from ministry funds.

After writing the check and sending it off in the mail, I was notified of an unexpected gift that our ministry had received, which was significantly more than the amount I had just given. This did not happen just once, but has been a consistent pattern over the past 55 years.

There are many examples in Scripture that illustrate how God responded with a blessing in a person's life after he or she chose to bless the lives of others. For example, the Shunammite woman was given her heart's desire—a child—after she provided for the needs of the prophet Elisha (see 2 Kings 4:8–17). The same was true for the widow of Zarephath, whose supply of food was extended for three years after she gave her last meal to Elijah (see 1 Kings 17:8–15).

Generosity follows the laws of the harvest: the more we sow, the more we reap.

In Luke, the command to Do To Others is related to money: "Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:30–31).

God affirms the principle of giving to the needs of others and the benefit received from Him. "If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs" (Deuteronomy 15:7–8).

When we give to others we must give expecting nothing in return, and we must recognize that God is the One Who sees and will repay us. God loves a cheerful giver (see 2 Corinthians 9:7) and delights to see His children following His example of generosity. Let's begin to look for those who have needs that we can meet, expecting nothing in return.

Forgive to Be Forgiven!

A company president worked diligently to build up his business into a large and successful corporation. His products were recognized internationally as the best in their field and everything seemed to be going well for him. As he grew older, he decided to turn the day-to-day management over to his son and continue to oversee the company as chairman of the board. His goal was to have more time for other interests in his life.

A law firm was hired to work out the details, but during the transition things went drastically wrong. The end result was that the father was eliminated from the business entirely and the son was put in complete control. The shock of being pushed out of his own business was a grief, but the source of even greater anguish was the alienation that had surfaced between him and his son. Why did this happen?

Seeds of resentment from the hurts by parents can grow up into a crop of rebellion in the lives of their sons and daughters.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid offenses in our daily interactions with family members. However, these offenses must be quickly identified and forgiven; otherwise, they can fester into deep wounds and cause future grief and sorrow.

Chris and Anne Hogan have had amazing success in helping couples and families identify and resolve offenses by teaching them how to have a "courageous conversation." They begin by giving each person a series of questions to answer and having the other person repeat back exactly what is said. This facilitates true communication and allows the parties involved to hear the perspective of the other person.

During the conversation, the "real" issues will usually surface. For example, in another family business there was alienation between two brothers because the one who had been president was replaced with the other. Hostilities had escalated until there were major barriers, but during a "courageous conversation" the brother who had been replaced said with tears, "The real issue is not the position in the company, but our broken relationship as brothers." They were able to exchange forgiveness and restore fellowship with one another.

Jesus warns that if we do not forgive others, our heavenly Father will not forgive us. (See Matthew 18.)

Every one of us has faults that can be offensive to those around us. Many times we are not even aware of how we have hurt other people. These hurts will often remain undiscovered and unresolved until we humble ourselves and ask others to tell us how we have offended them and then ask for their forgiveness. It is easy to see our need for others to be patient with our faults and to show us forgiveness and love. In turn, it is essential that we maintain a generous attitude of forgiveness towards the faults of others.

God demonstrated His great love for us by forgiving us of all our sins, removing them from us as far as the east is from the west (see Psalm 103:12). In light of all that we have been forgiven, let's

follow God's example and readily forgive the offenses of those who have hurt us, especially within our own families.

Earn Trust by Telling the Truth!

Truth is a key foundation of a civilization. It is the basis of all contracts and covenants. If there is no truth, there can be no trust. The importance that God places on truth is reflected not only in His commandment, "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" but also in His future judgment of those who do not tell the truth. Scripture states, "… all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur …" (Revelation 21:8).

Speaking the truth to others begins by speaking the truth to the Lord and to ourselves in our own hearts. (See Psalm 15:2.)

Obviously, if we expect others to be truthful, we must be truthful to them. Many people tell lies because they fear the consequences of telling the truth. This was the case with Abram when he lied to Pharaoh about his wife. Abram said to Sarai, "When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live" (Genesis 12:12). Because he feared for his own safety, Abram subjected his wife to serious moral danger.

People also tell lies in order to gain what they do not deserve. This was what Jacob did when he lied to his father about who he was in order to steal the blessing from his brother, Esau. Gehazi lied to Naaman in order to get gold and clothing; instead, he received the leprosy from which Naaman was healed.

Some lies, such as half-truths or withholding information with the intent of leading a person to the wrong conclusion, do not seem as serious to us as do "full" lies, but that is not God's perspective. Joseph's brothers presented their father with Joseph's bloodied coat, leading him to believe that a wild beast had killed Joseph, when they knew full well that they had sold him into slavery. God's severe judgment upon them for their deceptive actions lasted for generations.

Two primary motivations control our words and actions: desire for gain or fear of loss.

In his instructional video series on financial freedom, Jim Sammons gives one illustration after another of how he was confronted with business ethic situations in which telling the truth would result in financial loss. However, on the other side of the loss God honored him with far greater gains. One example was the time he was visited by an IRS agent. The agent was obviously looking for inaccuracies and unreported income. Jim answered the man's gruff questions, including "Do you use your car for business purposes only?" Jim's immediate answer was "Yes." Later, he realized that he had at times also used it for personal needs.

When the agent returned, Jim said, "I need to ask your forgiveness for not telling you the truth about my car. I have used it for some personal trips as well as for business." The agent was so impressed with his humility and honesty that he said, "Well, if you are going to be that honest in this matter, I can trust that you are accurate in the rest of your reports."

Sometimes the benefits of following this command may not be seen immediately, but regardless of the results, Christ wants us to obey Him. In your journal this week, record examples of how God rewarded you when you did for others what you would want them to do to you.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 7:12

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

Luke 6:38

"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Psalm 37:4

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

Romans 12:10

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves."

1 John 3:17

"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"

Philippians 2:4

"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

1 Corinthians 10:24

"Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others."

Galatians 6:10

"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

1 Peter 1:22

"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart."

Find the Way of Life!

If you had the opportunity to choose anything you wanted, what would you choose? If you chose riches, they would come with sorrow (see 1 Timothy 6:9–10). If you chose pleasure, it would come with poverty (see Proverbs 21:17), but if you chose an abundant life, you would have everything worth having. This in fact is the purpose for which Christ came: "that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). This is the choice spoken of in Matthew 7:13–14:

Command Nineteen

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

As believers, we must decide between following a broad way that leads to destruction and following the narrow way that leads to life. I will never forget the day I made the choice to understand and follow God's way that leads to life. It was January 21, 1964, during my first time of seeking the Lord in the Northwoods. That day, I began reading Psalm 21: "O LORD, the king rejoices in your strength. How great is his joy in the victories you give." I thought to myself that this would not apply to me since I am not a king.

I continued reading: "You have granted him the desire of his heart and have not withheld the request of his lips." The Holy Spirit used those words as an invitation for me to ask for the desire of my heart. What did I want most from God? I remembered Solomon's request for an understanding heart, yet even in all his wisdom he failed to keep his heart focused on the Lord.

What I wanted most was to understand God's way of life. So I looked up and prayed, "O Lord, give me life. Let me understand and experience it and help me be able to explain it to many others." When I looked back down at the chapter, I read verse 4 and a thrill of joy ran through me as I read these words: "He asked you for life, and you gave it to him—length of days, for ever and ever …."

It was only a few months later that the Basic Seminar began. In that seminar, I simply share what God has taught me from His Word about His way of life.

Life begins with a choice to receive Jesus Christ as both Lord and Savior. (See John 1:12, 3:3.)

Life continues by choosing to walk in the narrow way of the Lord as explained in Christ's commands. When His commands become an active part of our lives through memorization, meditation, and obedience, we will then have the joy of being able to share them with others! Let's commit ourselves to following the narrow way and make the choices necessary to experience God's abundant life!

Walk in the Light!

Scripture gives a clear distinction between the path of the righteous and the path of the wicked. "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble" (Proverbs 4:18–19). If we are unsure of how to find the narrow way that leads to life, we should begin by looking for the "lighted" path.

The way of life is illuminated with the words of God: "My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body. Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:20–23; see Psalm 119:104–105).

If we are stumbling in a particular area of our lives, we should ask ourselves if it is because we have left the well-lit narrow path.

Walking in the light requires that we confess our faults one to another, and pray one for another, that we may be healed. (See James 5:16.) This must be done with discretion, because we are not to cause others to mentally picture the details of sin. Scripture states, "For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret" (Ephesians 5:12).

This kind of walking in the light allows us to enjoy rich fellowship with other believers. "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

If we are trying to cover our sin, we have wandered off the path of life, because in God there "is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

The vital importance of maintaining a clear conscience is evident in the testimony of a wife and daughter of a respected church leader who were being tormented by lewd and immoral dreams. They would tell the father about them and he would pray for them, but the dreams continued and became even more evil. Both the wife and daughter felt defeated in their walk with the Lord.

Finally, the father confessed that he had been looking at pornography on the Internet at work and was failing at maintaining his moral standards. He wept as he realized the pain and danger that his family was experiencing because of his "secret pleasures." As soon as he confessed his failures, his wife and daughter stopped having these terrible dreams, and he was able to regain moral freedom. Scripture promises, "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Proverbs 28:13).

One of Satan's greatest deceptions is to convince us that our secret failures will not affect anyone else. This is not the case, though, because as believers we are all joined together in the Body of Christ. "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). When a man marries, he and his wife become one flesh. Therefore, what he does secretly affects his wife and exposes his children to destruction. Let's recognize this truth and humble ourselves with true repentance and confession so that we can experience the fellowship and victory of walking in the light.

Command 19: Choose the Narrow Road

Related Character Quality

Decisiveness vs. Double-Mindedness

Decisiveness is choosing to do what is right based on accurate facts, wise counsel, and clearly defined goals.

When Daniel faced a decision in Babylon about whether to obey the king's edict or God's commandment, it was not a difficult choice, because he had predetermined that he would obey God, whatever the cost. "But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine" (Daniel 1:8).

God wants each of us to determine early in life that we will choose to do what is right, whatever the cost. He said, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

The Foundation of Wise Decisions

The first step in decisiveness is choosing whom we are going to serve with our lives. Our natural inclination is to serve ourselves. It is easy to devote our time, energy, and creativity to making money, believing that by getting money, we will enjoy all the material possessions that money can buy. We may realize, however, that it is wrong to serve money, and we may try to serve God as well as money. However, Jesus warned, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (Matthew 6:24).

Deciding to follow God means setting aside everything that competes with Him. "Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped …. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve … But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:14–15).

How to Base Decisiveness on God's Word

Wise decision making must be based on God's will, not on our own sinful desires, because "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (Proverbs 14:12). Therefore, God warns, "He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe" (Proverbs 28:26).

Every decision that Jesus made was based on His heavenly Father's will. He stated, "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me" (John 5:30). God's will on a specific matter will be based on universal, non-optional principles of life that He established throughout all His creation and that He explains and illustrates in the Bible. These principles can be incorporated by asking the following questions when making a decision about a specific issue:

- Is my use of resources consistent with the purposes for which God created them (money, food, clothes, marriage, family, time, friends, etc.)?
- Whose jurisdiction am I under for this decision? (parents, employer, government, or church) Decisiveness must never violate the overall jurisdiction of God and the moral principles of His Word.
- Can I make this decision with a clear conscience? Any caution from conscience or the counsel of authorities must also be considered.
- Am I in harmony with all those involved in this decision? Decisions based on bitterness or anger are wrong and costly.
- Have I yielded my rights on this matter? George Müller was a great man of faith and learned to understand the will of God in specific decisions. He explained that the secret was getting his own heart in such a state that he had no will of his own. A practical way to accomplish this is to list all of the benefits of each choice and to purpose to thank God for whatever choice He indicates is His will.
- Will it weaken or damage anyone else? We are not to do anything that will cause a "weaker" brother to stumble, be offended, or be made weak. (See Romans 14:21.) Because of this, we are even to "Avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22).

- Is this fulfilling God's calling on my life? God calls each believer to fulfill an important role in the advancement of His kingdom and the damage of Satan's kingdom. Every decision we make must be in harmony with these objectives. One's calling will involve praying for and serving all authorities with good works and assisting the fatherless and widows, as well as the poor and those from other nations. Our primary calling is given in the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19–20).

Personal Evaluation: How Decisive Are You?

- Have you made a commitment to do what is right, regardless of the cost?
- Have you decided to serve God rather than money, fame, or pleasure?
- Do you seek wise counsel before making a decision?
- Have you purposed to discern God's will in every decision and then to do it?
- Do you fast and cry out to God for wisdom in decisions?
- Do you make decisions based on impulse or on God's Word?
- Do you reject advice that is contrary to Scripture?

Expect a Narrowing Path!

Let's take a closer look at Proverbs 4:18: "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day." Picture in your mind the beam of a flashlight.

The shining light is Jesus. John describes His splendor and brilliance: "His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. 15 His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace … . His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance" (Revelation 1:14–16).

A beam of light will get narrower and brighter as we approach it. So will the path to life.

The path of light will not only get narrower as we approach its source, but it will also get much brighter. If we travel half the distance to a light source, the brightness will not be twice as much, but four times stronger!

We also know from the experience of Moses that being in the light of God's presence causes our faces to shine. "… the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory" (2 Corinthians 3:7).

There is an additional factor to consider as we walk the narrowing path. The bright light of Christ will reveal more and more of the imperfections in our lives. What we used to consider as acceptable in semidarkness becomes intolerable in the spotlight of God's holiness.

Enoch trained his descendants to find the narrow path, while the rest of the world followed the crowds to destruction.

The name "Enoch" contains a wealth of insight on walking with God. Enoch represented the seventh generation from Adam. Twice Scripture states, "Enoch walked with God." (See Genesis 5:22–24.)

Because he walked with God, his relationship with the Lord steadily became closer and more intimate until one day God translated Enoch to heaven without death.

The theme of Enoch's life was the holiness of God (see Jude 14–15). The investments he made to teach his descendants the ways of God left a lasting impact on the world. His son, Methuselah, lived longer than any man did, and two generations later, his great-grandson, Noah, was the only righteous man who remained on the earth!

When it comes to finding the path of life, we cannot afford to be "broadminded." Let's follow Enoch's example of walking in closer and closer fellowship with God and invest a lasting heritage of truth in sons and daughters. If we are faithful to do this, the world will recognize that we have been with Jesus because of His radiance reflected in our lives!

Reject the Broad Road!

God knows that if we learn the details of evil we will be enticed to carry them out. This is why He warned the nation of Israel not to learn the corrupt ways of the wicked (see Leviticus 20:23); however, "they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them. … Therefore the LORD was angry with his people" (Psalm 106:35–40).

One way we can measure our love for the Lord is by the degree to which we guard our minds from the knowledge of evil.

The human heart has always been the battleground for the war between good and evil. We will experience victory when we meditate on God's Law day and night and obey it, bringing every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. (See Psalm 1, John 14:21, and 2 Corinthians 10:5.) Evil advances when Satan is allowed to plant doubts about God or His Word in our hearts and then lure us away with the short-lived pleasures of sin.

For God to rule in our hearts we must have zero tolerance for evil. Therefore, God instructs us to "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Romans 12:9). God also tells believers, "I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil" (Romans 16:19). Not only should we hate what is evil, but we should also recognize its inferiority to God's way, because "the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight" (1 Corinthians 3:19).

Satan's strategy is to infiltrate God's people and diminish their effectiveness. God's way is to separate His people from the world so they can be bright witnesses.

The sober realization of the damage that comes to sons and daughters who are exposed to the details of sin should motivate fathers to guard and protect them. In addition to receiving protection, children need to be taught the principles of God's Word so that they will have a basis for discerning between good and evil. (See Psalm 119:104.)

It requires no effort to float downstream toward the destruction of a waterfall, but vigilance and God's strength are required to go against the tide that would seek to pull us and our families away from the narrow path. Because our success in life depends upon the path we choose, let's make sure we have chosen the Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and let's help each other to be alert to Satan's tactics for luring us to his broad path that ends in destruction.

Command 19: Choose the Narrow Road

Study Question

Q: After pronouncing His creation "good," why did God regret having made man and determine that everyone besides Noah and his family had to be destroyed?

A: When God sent the Flood to destroy the earth, there was only one man who found favor in His eyes—Noah. Noah was a preacher of righteousness, but no one listened to him because they had completely corrupted their ways before God.

God describes what took place: "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown. The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain" (Genesis 6:4–6).

"Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways." (Genesis 6:11–12).

Because mankind chose to do greater and greater wickedness, their lives were consumed by lustful and violent passions. They failed to recognize that the path they had chosen would lead to destruction. Noah found favor with God because by faith he chose the narrow path of obedience to God and was saved along with his family.

Command 19: Choose the Narrow Road | Day 131

Focus on Your Goal!

The crowds in the stands were cheering wildly as their teams fought for the winning points. Suddenly one of the players fumbled the football. Another player scooped it up and began running toward the goal line. However, his teammates' excitement quickly turned to dismay as they watched him run toward the opponents' goal line! In the scramble he became disoriented and actually ran the wrong way. This Rose Bowl blunder earned this player the nickname "Wrong Way Riegel."

Running with all your might towards the wrong goal (or no goal) will not result in success.

Today's fathers are desperately trying to meet all the demands of their jobs and take care of many other obligations and pressures. Yet, while they are busy with their work, a disaster is taking place. Bright sons and daughters who have great potential to be used by God are being drawn into the traps of the world—trends of wrong music, wrong friends, wrong goals, and wrong decisions. Wives and mothers are frustrated with lack of purpose in their families and disillusioned by continual disappointments.

When there was no leader in Israel, every man did that which was right in his own eyes. (See Judges 17:6.)

Someone has wisely observed that if a businessman would manage his company the way a father manages his family, he would certainly go bankrupt. We cannot allow our most valuable "team members" to go in wrong directions because of our lack of effort to point them toward the right goal!

One father I know gathered his family members together and made a plan to establish their course. As a family, they discussed their God-given goals and the strategy they would follow to reach them. Some of the key points they addressed in their "family charter" were these:

- What is the purpose of our family?
  (Deuteronomy 6:5–7; Psalm 112, 127; and Matthew 5:13–14)
- What is the goal of our education?
  (Joshua 1:8–9; Psalm 1, 119:97–99; and 1 Corinthians 2:9–16)
- What is the purpose of our lives?
  (Philippians 3:10, Romans 12:1–2, and Matthew 28:19–20)
- What is the purpose of our money?
  (Malachi 3:10–12 and 2 Corinthians 8, 9)

It is vital that fathers accept the role of spiritual leader in their homes, and that their lives provide a clear model for carrying out Biblical goals and walking on the path of life. Developing your own "family charter" by writing out questions like these, and seeking the Lord together as a family to discover and determine their answers, will do more than you can imagine to build the unity of your "team" and point your family towards the right goal!

Command 19: Choose the Narrow Road | Day 132

Learn to "Stand Alone"!

In order to Choose the Narrow Road that has only a few people on it and to reject the broad way that is crowded with people, we must learn how to "stand alone" for what is right. This ability is vital, because when the world realizes that you are not going their way, they will put pressure on

you to conform. Jesus spoke of this in His prayer: "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world" (John 17:14).

"Standing alone" for God's truth begins with an inward conviction and is expressed in outward words and actions.

To stand alone for God's truth means to go against the crowd and make decisions based on what is right, not on what is popular at the moment. Our actions should not be merely reactions to people; they should be the results of wholehearted love for the Lord and a wholesome fear of Him. (See Psalm 119:97–104.) When we oppose those who are asking us to go against our convictions, a spirit of meekness rather than condemnation is essential. (See 2 Timothy 2:24–26.)

Elijah stood alone when it seemed that the whole nation was rejecting God's ways. In the process, he learned a valuable lesson: there were 7,000 others who were silently standing with him. When we stand alone for truth, others are emboldened to follow our example.

Millions around the world revere the name Eric Liddell. He would have been a relatively obscure runner had it not been for his decision to stand alone. Representing Great Britain in the 1924 Olympic Games, he learned that the qualifying heats for his strongest event—the 100-meter race—would take place on Sunday. Because of his conviction to dedicate Sunday as a day of rest, set apart for the Lord, he declined to run, thereby disqualifying himself for the finals.

He was questioned, misunderstood, and ridiculed for his decision to forfeit his participation in a race that he was likely to win. However, God is the One Who writes last chapters. Eric ran in the 400-meter race instead, a distance he rarely ran competitively, and not only won the gold medal but also set a new world record! In the end, his courage and success as a champion runner caused the world to stand up and cheer!

We must run the race of life with discipline and dedication to the Lord, regardless of the sacrifices we must make along the way.

Being willing to stand alone for what is right is vital for success in every area of life. It requires Scriptural convictions that we are willing to live for and, if necessary, die for. Are you committed—at all costs—to following the Lord on the narrow way? Are you prepared to stand alone when necessary?

Strive to Enter!

There is an important key to understanding this command that needs to be included. I believe Luke reveals it in his Gospel when he quotes Jesus as saying, "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door" (Luke 13:24).

This puts an important new perspective on the command. We do not just open up the strait gate and walk in unopposed. There is a battle that goes on within our souls, because our enemy does not want us to find the way of life. Paul stated, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

In Scripture the door is used as a symbol of decision making and of managing internal affairs.

To make every effort is to strive to achieve the goal, as Paul described in Colossians 1:29: "To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me."

This implies that there are hindrances in the development of a walk of faith and that there is a need for intense determination on our part to win the prize. Paul explained this: "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever" (1 Corinthians 9:25).

Paul goes on to explain, "Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:26–27).

In the Christian life, "striving" is not our performance of God's will, but it is our surrender to God so that He can carry out His will in us.

One of the disciples asked, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" Jesus' answer was that few would find the way of life. (See Luke 13:23–28.) When I first heard this as a boy, I was motivated not only to enter the narrow door myself, but also to make whatever personal sacrifices were necessary to help others do the same.

In your journal this week, write out the personal disciplines that you have established or purpose to establish, in order to walk on the narrow path that leads to life. Let's ask ourselves what attractions or distractions on the broad road are hindrances that we need to overcome through God's strength. Then, let's picture ourselves in a literal wrestling match such as Jacob experienced. He became a prince with God and was greatly blessed, because in his striving he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26). Let's follow his example, because our greatest asset is the blessing of the Lord.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 7:13-14

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

Ephesians 2:1–6

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."

Proverbs 4:26–27

"Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil."

Isaiah 30:21

"Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."

Isaiah 55:8–9

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Proverbs 4:18

"The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day."

Recognize the Nature of Wolves!

A wolf is a strong, aggressive, and rapacious beast of the wilderness. It continually searches for weaker prey and is relentless in tracking it down. A hungry wolf can be a ferocious foe. When caught, a wolf's victim is likely to be torn to pieces. A wolf may use craftiness to get near its prey, but its conquest is a bold act of violence.

One wolf can be dangerous, and a pack of wolves is tenacious and treacherous. They take turns biting the legs of a fleeing elk or larger animal until finally, due to weakness and loss of blood, it collapses to become their next victim. Thus, Jesus commands:

Command Twenty

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them ..." (Matthew 7:15–16).

The first characteristic of these "wolves" is that they approach the flock of God under the pretense of religion. They claim to be messengers of God, yet they are diviners of lies saying: "This is what the Sovereign LORD says'—when the LORD has not spoken" (Ezekiel 22:28).

The second distinctive is that these wolves take every possible measure to be accepted by unsuspecting believers, often arising out of their midst. They look like them, talk like them, and act like them, but they do not think like them, nor do they have the power of God's Spirit in them.

The Greek word for wolf is lukos, which means "whitish hair [covering]." It comes from leukos, which means "white." This matches the sheep's clothing and the warning of Paul: "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light." (2 Corinthians 11:13–14).

The third mark of a wolf's nature is its ravenous appetite. Its persistent hunger drives it on a continual search for new victims. Paul gives a further description: "Having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires" (2 Timothy 3:5–6). Paul recognized such wolves among his own followers and stated:

"I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock" (Acts 20:29).

Paul continued, "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! …" (Acts 20:30–31).

Dads, are you watching? Do you know what to look for? Are you allowing or even welcoming into your home false messengers who, under the guise of religious talk, music, entertainment, magazines, etc., are drawing away the hearts of your sons and daughters to themselves?

This is a matter of life and death! Let's follow Paul's example in shepherding those whom God has placed in our care by teaching them God's Word so that they are well grounded in truth and able to recognize and escape the deceptive and deadly intentions of wolves.

Be a Fruit Inspector!

In this command, we are told that we can recognize false prophets by their fruits, but what should we be looking for? First, a fruit inspector must determine if a message is true by comparing it to the standard of God's Word. The Bereans were expert fruit inspectors because they searched the Scriptures daily to see if the things that the Apostle Paul taught were actually true (see Acts 17:10–11).

Another factor we should look for is the result of the teaching in the life of the one giving it and in the lives of those following it. Peter explains that false teachers "follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings … . With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable" (2 Peter 2:10, 14).

To be classified as "good," fruit must exhibit certain characteristics that can be observed by a fruit inspector.

The type of tree determines the type of fruit. Because of this, we can expect to see good fruit coming from the lives of those who are indwelt by God's Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:22–23 explains the type of fruit that results from God's work in a person's life: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control. Notice that this is one fruit with nine qualities to look for.

The nutrients and level of care that a tree receives will affect the quality of the fruit. Christ said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. … Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. … If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:1-8).

"A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit" (Matthew 7:18).

Why should we be fruit inspectors? Peter warns of "… false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them…" (2 Peter 2:1). The tactic of false prophets is to infiltrate churches and homes, appearing to be true disciples. It is for this reason that we must become skilled fruit inspectors, comparing everything we are taught with the truth of God's Word in order to protect ourselves and our families from being led astray.

Command 20: Beware of False Prophets

Related Character Quality

Alertness vs. Carelessness

Alertness is being aware of that which is taking place around me so that I can have the right responses to it.

Every physical sense has a corresponding spiritual sense. Through our physical senses we can be alert to the physical world, and through our spiritual senses we are able to understand the spiritual world. A mature believer is one who has exercised all his senses to discern both good and evil. (See Hebrews 5:14.)

What to Beware of:

- "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Matthew 7:15).
- "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1).
- "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).
- "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8).
- "Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh" (Philippians 3:2).
- "be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position" (2 Peter 3:17).

How Can We Develop Greater Alertness?

- **Recognize that we are in perpetual warfare.**
  Since Satan's fall, evil has warred against good and Satan has aimed to kill, steal, and destroy Godly generations and the foundations of righteousness. (See John 10:10.) Scripture urges us to be "good soldiers" of Jesus Christ (see 2 Timothy 2:3). A soldier gives up his personal desires and comforts for the sake of the cause for which he is fighting. As believers,

we also are to forsake worldly pleasures so that we can fight the good fight of faith. (See 1 Timothy 6:12.)

- **Realize that our enemy is a master of deception.**
  Jesus warned that Satan is a liar and the father of lies (see John 8:44). The Apostle Paul pointed out that Satan is able to disguise himself as an angel of light. "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:13–14).
- **Ask God for spiritual understanding.**
  When Solomon became king, he asked God for keen spiritual senses: "So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:9). Paul prayed that the believers in Ephesus would be aware of their position in Christ and thus live victoriously. "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (Ephesians 1:18).
- **Understand that life involves cause-and-effect sequences.**
  Alertness is motivated by the realization that many actions have predictable results and that the laws of the harvest apply to all levels of life. Scripture warns us to not be deceived. Whatever we sow, we will also reap. (See Galatians 6:8–9.) We reap what we sow, we reap where we sow, we reap more than we sow, and we reap in a different season than we sow.
- **Have a Biblical response to each danger.**
- **Be alert to resist**—Our first line of resistance must be to check every thought that comes to our minds. As soon as we recognize that a thought is not from God, we should resist it and bring it into captivity to the obedience of Jesus Christ (see 2 Corinthians 10:4–5).
- **Be alert to avoid**—Danger can come from association with the wrong people and wrong ideas. Paul wrote, "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them" (Romans 16:17).
- **Be alert to escape**—When we recognize temptation, we are promised that there is also a way to escape, if we are alert to see it. "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).
- **Be alert to flee**—Joseph was alert to danger when confronted with the evil request from Potiphar's wife, and consequently he fled. Similarly, we are instructed to flee youthful lusts and situations that would lead to fornication. (See 2 Timothy 2:22 and 1 Corinthians 6:18.)

Personal Evaluation: How Alert Are You to Danger?

- Do you daily remind yourself that you are in a spiritual war?
- Do you compare everything you are taught with Scripture?
- Do you guard your daily time with the Lord and His Word?
- Do you reject all whisperers and talebearers?
- Do you protect your good name by doing only what is right?

Do you ask God for daily guidance and find His will?

Embrace the Basic Doctrines!

The agenda of false prophets is to attack the basic teachings of Scripture. Therefore, our best defense is to know and embrace these foundational truths of "the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).

When we anchor our faith on basic truths, we will not be "blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Ephesians 4:14).

Basic Doctrines of the Christian Faith: (partial list)

- **The inspiration and infallibility of Scripture:** "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). (See also 2 Peter 1:21 and Proverbs 30:5.)
- **The deity and humanity of Christ:** "the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. … The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:1–14). (See also John 14:9 and 1 John 4:1–3.)
- **The virgin birth of Christ:** The angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20). This fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son" (Isaiah 7:14).
- **The resurrection of Christ:** "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:14). (See also Romans 6:4.)
- **The sinfulness of man:** "just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).
- **The plan of salvation:**

  1. Hear the message

  "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17)

  2. Believe in Jesus Christ

  "I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins" (John 8:24)

  3. Repent

  "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:10)

  4. Confess

  "That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Romans 10:9-10)

  5. Baptism by immersion, for the forgiveness of sins

  "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16)
- **The imminent return of Christ:** "The Lord himself will come down from heaven … we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17).

There are many additional important teachings in the Bible, such as the six-day Creation account, the reality of Satan, and the eternal destruction of unbelievers in a literal hell. We must be rooted and grounded in these foundational truths, because they will form the basis from which we can discern false teaching.

Right doctrines lead to right living, while distorted doctrines produce corrupted behavior. Therefore, God challenges us to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 1:3), "Fight the good fight of the faith" (1 Timothy 6:12), and "pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away" (Hebrews 2:1). Let's accept the challenge today to be grounded in the truth of God's Word so that we will be able to easily discern and reject false teachers.

Test All Prognosticators!

Many people have a persistent passion to know what the future holds. They are drawn like magnets to the daily horoscopes, fortune-tellers, and religious leaders who assure their followers that they know precisely what will happen in the future.

To all of these people God responds, "All the counsel you have received has only worn you out! Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month, let them save you from what is coming upon you" (Isaiah 47:13).

God has revealed His truth to us through the closed canon of Scripture, to which nothing is to be added and from which nothing is to be taken away.

The disciples were not above this longing to know the future. They questioned Jesus about when the end of the world would come and when He would set up His kingdom. Jesus replied, "the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Luke 12:40). "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32).

Many have tried unsuccessfully to predict the day of Christ's return. In the nineteenth century, William Miller predicted that Jesus would return between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. It is estimated that 50,000 followers prepared for the event, many selling or giving away their property and gathering on hillsides in white robes. When nothing happened, William Miller said that he had made a miscalculation. Some embraced a new date of October 22, 1844. Once again they were disappointed and the event became known as the "Great Disappointment."

By comparison, many preparations are made for predicted dates, but little attention is given to Christ's command to be ready at all times for His return.

The return of Christ is a focal point of history. Therefore, Satan will do all he can to cause confusion regarding it. "First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:3–4). We are also told, "For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible" (Matthew 24:24).

Furthermore, the return of Christ is a cardinal teaching in Scripture. "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:3). Jesus explained that He could return at any moment, and that we should be ready. Are you living in such a way that if He would return today you "may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming" (1 John 2:28)?

Command 20: Beware of False Prophets

Study Question

Q: The King of Moab hired Balaam to curse the nation of Israel as they came out of Egypt. Instead of cursing them, Balaam blessed them as the Lord instructed. Why then, are false prophets said to "follow the ways of Balaam" in three books of the New Testament? (See 2 Peter 2:15–16, Jude 11, and Revelation 2:14.)

A: In Numbers 22, we read of a time when Balaam received messengers from Balak, King of Moab, who asked him to curse the nation of Israel. Balaam refused to curse Israel because God forbid him to do so. When the King sent a second group of more distinguished messengers promising rich rewards for his cooperation, Balaam again refused but invited them to spend the night while he inquired again of the Lord.

During the night, God told him, "… Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you" (Numbers 22:20). In the morning, instead of waiting to be called as the Lord had told him, Balaam saddled his donkey and rode off with the men. The Lord's anger was kindled against him for this disobedience.

Balaam's disobedience was merely a symptom of his greedy heart. False prophets are said to follow the ways of Balaam when they act out of greed. "Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error" (Jude 1:11). Money is a significant motivator for those who are pretenders of the faith. In fact, a good evidence of sincerity is a

spokesman for the Lord who is willing to give to the needs of others at the expense of great personal sacrifice.

The Word of God describes other characteristics of false prophets that we can learn to recognize. Identifying and rejecting false teaching is crucial, because when lies are allowed to creep into our hearts, they distort our view of God and the truth of His Word.

Guard God's Heritage!

Your sons and daughters do not really "belong" to you. "Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him" (Psalm 127:3). Rather, they have been entrusted to you for a time so that you can train them to be "mighty in the land" (Psalm 112:2).

God instructs fathers to raise their children "training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). An important factor in accomplishing this goal is getting to know each child as a unique individual so that you can respond to his or her needs and effectively motivate him or her in God's ways. This is what the Apostle Paul did with those he taught and discipled.

"For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children" (1 Thessalonians 2:11).

A father will have great difficulty guarding his sons and daughters from false teachers if he does not know what is going on in their hearts. He must seek to understand them and demonstrate his unconditional love and acceptance of them. Fathers who cultivate open, honest communication with their sons and daughters are more likely to be trusted with "sensitive" information that parents need to be aware of in their children's lives. This includes lies they are believing, their fears, secret sins, wrong friendships, temptations they are facing, and hurts and offenses they are harboring.

An effective way to begin getting to know the heart of your child is to plan an outing with him or her and ask a variety of questions. Allow him or her to answer the questions without receiving any negative reaction or disapproval from you. Any information he or she shares with you should be regarded as a gift, so avoid correction, and instead express Gratitude.

Sons and daughters give their hearts to those who listen to them with patience, acceptance, and understanding.

Years ago, Jim Sammons conducted personal "bonding sessions" with his son and daughters by preparing a notebook for each child. The notebook contained the child's picture, the meaning of his or her name, and other personal information. Following this was a list of questions designed to explore the needs and interests he or she had.

As they discussed the questions, Jim would write the child's answers in the notebook. Later, he and his wife Fay would think of ways to help their children with the needs or interests that had been expressed. For example, if one had a fear of abandonment, they would write cards with Bible verses such as "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). Now, Jim and Fay's grown children look back on these bonding sessions as important events that helped them keep their hearts focused on the Lord.

How well do you know the heart of each of your children? Today would be an excellent day to take steps towards knowing them better so that you can effectively protect God's heritage that has been entrusted to you.

Reject the Voices of Strangers!

A 21-year-old girl asked her parents if she could visit another girl in a distant city. The girls had been good friends and were active in Christian work; therefore, the parents agreed. The day before she was supposed to return home, this daughter called her parents with the news that she had begun working with a Christian group and wanted to stay longer. The parents brushed aside

a sense of apprehension and agreed to the extension of her visit. After all, she was an adult and seemed to be a strong Christian.

As the weeks passed, communication from the daughter became less frequent until one day she informed her parents that she would not be returning home. She had found her "true family" and would be serving them. The parents were shocked and heartbroken. They drove out to meet with their daughter. However, her new authorities would only agree to a short meeting that had to be monitored by one of her "older sisters."

God compares believers to vulnerable sheep. They have only one means of defense—fleeing from the voice of a stranger.

How was this girl deceived into joining those who opposed everything she had been taught? The answer is that she began listening to the enemy's voice, which came to her in sheep's clothing. At first, she was uneasy about some of the music and other activities taking place within the group, but she ignored the Holy Spirit's cautions and reasoned that these friends were also Christians, so what they were doing must be fine.

Jesus warns that as "sheep" our only defense is rejecting the voices of strangers: "But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice" (John 10:5). Because this girl did not recognize and reject the false teachings to which she was exposed, she accepted and internalized them. Her new "family" convinced her that her parents' standards had been too strict and legalistic. Next, they persuaded her to join them in some worldly activities, which they assured her were perfectly acceptable.

As her Biblical foundations were challenged and her standards broken down, she and others began to ridicule her parents' beliefs. This produced within her a deadly mixture of blame, guilt, and bitterness. On the one hand, she enjoyed a sense of freedom from parental authority, but on the other hand, she experienced frequent depression, anxiety, and despair. The moral, spiritual, and physical destruction of this girl was a tragedy.

Before children can learn to reject the voice of a stranger, they must learn to recognize the voice of the Savior.

The goal of parents should be to raise their sons and daughters to search the Scriptures for what is true and right and to develop personal convictions based upon God's Word. Then when their beliefs are challenged, they will be able to stand strong on the authority of God's Word, rather than leaning on their own ideas or their parents' beliefs.

You can begin today to strengthen your family's Biblical foundation by making a list of your convictions and the Scriptures that they are based upon.

Warn Other Shepherds!

Every father is the "shepherd" of his family. He not only has the responsibility to guard his own flock from the destruction of false prophets; he also has the responsibility to warn others about the dangers he sees. This is clearly mandated in Scripture.

"If you falter in times of trouble, how small is your strength! Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, "But we knew nothing about this," does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?" (Proverbs 24:10–12).

The Apostle Paul did not hesitate to warn others about false prophets who were ravaging the flock of God.

Paul revealed his priority of warning others by his own testimony: "I am innocent of the blood of all men…. after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you …. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (Acts 20:26–31).

What did Paul tell those whom he warned? "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people" (Romans 16:17–18).

One who warns others is not responsible for the results, but only for giving a clear and accurate warning.

Any family that purposes to live according to God's Word will be under attack. This should confirm to us the importance of relying on the Lord's strength in living for Him and in training sons and daughters to know and love Him.

In your journal this week, record the results of your meetings with your children as well as the steps you are taking to train them to reject the voices of strangers. Also, write about any encounters you have had with false prophets or teachers and how you were able to identify the error of their teaching through the truths of Scripture.

Let's remain alert to the subtle influences of false teaching and "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 7:15-16

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?"

2 Timothy 3:13–14

"while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it."

Matthew 24:24

"For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible."

2 Corinthians 11:13–14

"For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light."

Romans 16:17

"I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them."

2 Peter 2:19

"They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him."

Matthew 15:14

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

See the Harvest!

Money was running out for Jack, a struggling businessman. In fact, his financial problems had become so great that he had decided to leave town for a few weeks so he could "sort things out." One day Jack was walking through some woods when a man came up to him. Assuming that Jack was the owner of the forest, he said, "I will give you $3,000 for that tree behind you." When asked why he would pay so much for one tree, the man said, "I represent a lumber company and this is a virgin forest of mature black walnut trees. They are worth a lot."

Jack took down the man's name and phone number and began trying to locate the owner of the land. When Jack found the owner, he told him about the lumber company that wanted to harvest the trees. The owner said he had no time to fool with trees and lumber companies and suggested that Jack buy the land and make the arrangements to sell the trees himself. The land was bought for a fraction of its true value, and even now Jack continues to make a profit from harvesting the trees.

The original landowner failed to see the value of his potential harvest. All he saw was "a bunch of trees." We make the same mistake when we view crowds as simply "a bunch of people" instead of valuable individuals for whom Christ died. Each one is a unique creation of God, and God wants to "gather" them to Himself. Therefore, He commands:

Command Twenty-One

"... The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:37–38).

It is the souls of people that need to be gathered in the Lord's harvest. As His laborers, our first step is to "open your eyes and look at the fields" (John 4:35). But what are we to see when we look at the fields?

- See people who are ready. Jesus said that the fields are "ripe for harvest." This indicates that the fruit is ready; it simply needs to be gathered. (See John 4:35.)
- See the work of others. There would be no harvest if others had not gone before us to plant and water. We will be reaping the rewards of their labors. (See 1 Corinthians 3:6.)
- See the harvest as belonging to God, not to us. One person plants and another waters, but it is God Who gives the increase. (See 1 Corinthians 3:7.)
- See the physical needs of people. We can show God's love to others by seeking to meet their tangible needs as well as their spiritual needs. (See 1 John 3:17.)
- See that the time of harvest is short. Crops that are not gathered when they are ripe will rot in the fields. This should compel us to do all we can to gather them now! (See John 9:4.)

When we truly see the value of the harvest and the urgency of gathering it in, we will be motivated to obey Christ's command to Pray for Workers. Therefore, let's begin to see the "multitudes" of people in shopping centers, airports, and other places through the eyes of the Lord of the harvest!

Command 21: Pray for Workers | Day 142

Learn the Key to Compassion!

Hundreds of youth and adults watched intently as I gave a "chalk talk" in a Bolivian village. The response to the Gospel was marvelous! As I climbed into the mission truck to leave, many gathered around to wave good-bye. While smiling and waving back, I noticed that they were also waving at the driver, but he did not even look at them. Instead, he started up the engine and roared off through a flock of chickens. Feathers and chickens went in every direction. I was shocked!

Later that day, I asked the mission director, "Do the missionaries here really love the people?" He responded, "I'm afraid that some of them do not. They come here to carry out a specific job, and they do not interact very much with the people."

Our compassion will develop in direct proportion to our involvement in seeing and meeting the needs of others.

When the disciples saw the hungry multitude, they did not want to become involved, so they urged Jesus to send the people away. However, when Jesus saw the needs of the multitude, He "had compassion on them." This compassion compelled Him to meet their needs. (See Matthew 14:14–21, 15:32–38.)

When a priest saw a half-dead victim of a robbery, "he passed by on the other side." When a Levite "saw the man, he passed by on the other side." But when the Samaritan saw him, "he took pity on him" and invested his time and resources to meet the wounded man's needs. (See Luke 10:30–37.)

A willingness to invest ourselves in meeting the needs of others is preliminary to fulfilling Matthew 9:37–38. Jesus gave this command after He "… went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:35–36).

God will do great things through a person whose heart is willing to see needs and show compassion to others.

Most of us desire to do something great with our lives, yet many people do not realize that God's perspective on greatness is different from the world's perspective. Jesus tells us, "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26–28). As further motivation to show compassion by serving others, we should remember that Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

We will never achieve true greatness without compassion. Let's concentrate on developing this vital quality by looking for needs in the lives of those around us and then by investing ourselves to meet those needs.

Command 21: Pray for Workers

Related Character Quality

Compassion vs. Indifference

Compassion is investing whatever is necessary to heal the hurts of others.

Compassion Results From Discerning a Deep Need

- Jesus saw the spiritual needs of the multitudes and had compassion—"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:36–38).
- Jesus saw the physical needs of the multitude and gave healing and food—"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. … And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves … . They all ate and were satisfied" (Matthew 14:14, 19–20).
- Jesus saw the multitude's need for a leader and had compassion—"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things" (Mark 6:34).

How to Develop a Compassionate Heart

- **Focus on our great debt to God.**
  It is all too easy to shut up our bowels of compassion towards those who have offended us, yet our attitude should be totally different when we realize the huge debt we have been forgiven by God.
  The wicked servant who was forgiven a huge debt did not have the same kind of compassion on one who owed him a small debt, because he himself was not humble enough to plead for mercy—he asked only for an extension of time. Thus, he did not appreciate the compassionate mercy shown to him, nor could he show similar mercy to one who also asked him for an extension of time. (See Matthew 18:23–34.)
- **Enlarge your heart with a prayer list.**
  The larger our hearts, the more compassion we will have. David asked the Lord to enlarge

his heart. (See Psalm 119:32.) Paul urged the Corinthian believers to enlarge their hearts toward each other and toward him in the same way that his heart was enlarged toward them. (See 2 Corinthians 6:1–13.)

One of the obvious ways that Paul may have enlarged his heart for compassion was to have a detailed and extensive prayer list. (See Philippians 1:4.) He carried the daily responsibility of all the churches and prayed for many of the believers by name. (See 2 Corinthians 11:28.)

- **Turn personal suffering into compassion for others.**
  All believers are called to experience suffering. "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). One of the purposes for suffering is to learn the compassion of Christ. By understanding how others feel when they go through suffering, we can give them the comfort we receive from Him "who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Corinthians 1:4).
- **Look for ways to do good to all people.**
  Compassion is a practical expression of genuine love, and all believers are commanded to have love toward each other and toward others. Not only is love the credential of being a disciple, but it is also the means by which we fulfill the instruction of Galatians 6:10: "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

Personal Evaluation: How Compassionate Are You?

- Are you "moved to compassion" when you see a group of people in need of Christ?
- Do you pray that God will send forth laborers into His harvest?
- Do you help only those who are likely to return the favor, or do you look for ways to help those who can never repay you?
- When you see a disabled person, do you provide practical help?
- Do you have funds or skills that are available to help those who have a need?
- Who was the last person who asked you for help, and how did you help him?

Recruit Laborers God's Way!

I still recall a church business meeting I attended years ago. The need was presented for a man to fill the position of a deacon, and several recommendations were made. Each one declined until someone recommended a man who was not present. The vote for him to become the new deacon was unanimous. Then someone said, "That's what he gets for not being here!" Thereafter, the joke became, "If you don't want to get elected, make sure you are at the meeting!"

What a drastic contrast to the pattern of selecting laborers that is described in the Book of Acts. The leaders of the church of Antioch met together for a time of prayer and fasting. It was during that time of intimate fellowship with the Lord that the Holy Spirit said to them, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2).

Recruiting is not choosing the people we think are qualified, but praying for God to reveal those whom He has chosen.

Recruiting coworkers for the Lord's work is a serious matter. We may think we know what it takes, but in reality it is difficult to discern if a person will succeed when he encounters the trials and challenges that are part of harvesting for the Lord. Samuel was a Godly prophet and was told by the Lord to "recruit" a king for Israel. God even told Samuel which family His chosen one would come from, but Samuel still did not understand God's method. Upon seeing Jesse's oldest son, Samuel exclaimed, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD" (1 Samuel 16:6).

Samuel's approach to choosing leaders was the same as ours often is today. We have a tendency to base our evaluation of a person's potential for spiritual leadership on observable qualities rather than on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. God instructed Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

In retrospect, Eliab, Samuel's first choice, would have made a horrible leader. He was proud, vindictive, judgmental, and condemning of the one whom God had chosen. These qualities were revealed in the time of battle.

Jesus spent all night praying before choosing His disciples. It is just as important for us to spend time in prayer before choosing workers.

I have made the mistake of choosing individuals who had outward qualifications and seemed ideal for certain positions without spending adequate time in prayer. Often, the result was disillusionment for both of us. Let's recognize and follow the precedent that Jesus set of praying to the Lord to send His chosen laborers into His harvest.

Command 21: Pray for Workers | Day 144

Pray for Disciples!

A young, energetic, prospective missionary received some very encouraging news. One of the most successful missionaries he had ever heard about was going to speak at his church. With the hope of learning how he could be most effective on the mission field, the prospective missionary prepared questions to ask the veteran ambassador.

His first question was: "As you look back on a successful ministry, what brings you the most joy?" The wise missionary did not hesitate to answer. "As I look back, it is not the huge crowds that I spoke to or the large churches that I started that bring me the most joy. It is the young boy I led to Christ along the road who is now a powerful preacher. It is the woman I led to Christ in the village who is now training her children to be strong believers. It is the individuals whom I have been able to disciple that bring me my greatest joy and fulfillment!"

Why is this true?

The strategy that Jesus gave to reach the world was not "go and make converts," it was "go and make disciples."

God compares a new convert to a newborn child. Everyone rejoices at his birth! But the work has only just begun. To bring that baby to full maturity, daily feeding and constant care will be required. That is the work of the ministry as well, and we are to pray for God to raise up laborers to carry out that work.

When the nation of Israel cried out for deliverance from the bondage of Egypt, God sent Moses to do the job, but he was a baby and needed training. (See Exodus 2:1–10.) When Israel needed a judge to replace a corrupt spiritual leader, God sent baby Samuel. (See 1 Samuel 1:20.) When we pray for God to raise up laborers for His harvest, we may be expecting Him to send mature believers, but often He will send us "baby" Christians whom we can disciple and then send out to make other disciples in God's harvest fields.

The lives and ministries of Jesus and Paul show us this pattern. They made disciples and then sent them out to make more disciples. The Apostle Paul wrote, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

The same God Who can send out laborers can send to you potential laborers whom you can disciple.

Years ago, there was a Godly woman who taught Sunday School classes for college students. She realized that she was training the next generation of leaders and discipled them in the truths of Scripture. As each student grew in his relationship with the Lord, he gained a vision for the harvest fields around the world, and several of them founded effective Christian ministries. One of these students was Dr. Bill Bright, who founded Campus Crusade for Christ. Through this outreach, millions of people around the world have received the message of the Gospel. Let's pray for God to send us potential laborers today!

Command 21: Pray for Workers

Study Question

Q: When a priest sinned, he was to offer a bullock for his atonement. This was the same sacrifice that was required when the whole nation of Israel sinned. However, when the King of Israel sinned, he was required to offer only a goat. Why did the offering for a priest have to be so much greater than the offering for a king? (See Leviticus 4:3–23.)

A: The prophet Ezekiel gives us insight into why the sin of a priest was considered far more serious than the sin of a king and why the sacrificial law required a greater sacrifice. "…Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. … Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock … I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them" (Ezekiel 34:2–10).

The King was primarily responsible for the physical welfare of the nation. However, the priests were responsible for overseeing the spiritual life of the people. At that time as well as today, God holds those who are spiritually responsible for others to a higher level of accountability. (See Hebrews 13:17.) Because of this, God considered the greatness of the priests' guilt to be equivalent to the guilt of the whole nation and required priests to offer the same sacrifice that was required to make atonement for the sins of the entire nation.

The chief reason that the priests of Israel were rebuked by God is because they did not demonstrate a shepherd's heart in their oversight of the people, but rather sought to fulfill their own needs and desires. It is important for each of us to develop a shepherd's heart that is attentive and sensitive to the spiritual needs of the "sheep" God has placed in our care. We also need to see, as Jesus did, the multitudes of "sheep" that are without a shepherd and ask God to send forth laborers who will introduce them to the Good Shepherd Who can save them from their sins.

Perfect Your Harvesting Skills!

When Hudson Taylor realized that God was calling him to be a missionary to the interior of China, he not only began to learn the language and the customs of the people, but he also adopted the rigorous physical and spiritual disciplines needed to be effective. He began developing these disciplines before he ever set foot on his harvest field.

Over the years, I have met a number of young men who are sure that God has called them to be a missionary or a preacher. When I ask them how many people they have already led to the Lord and how many they are discipling, they often look at me with surprise, and say, "None."

What are they waiting for? They expect that training at a Bible school or seminary will make them into a missionary or a preacher. While training is vital, no amount of information can make an effective witness and disciple-maker out of one who does not already possess this passion and is not actively seeking to fulfill these roles. Likewise, an airplane ride to another country will not make an effective missionary out of one who has not already engaged in successful ministry at home.

The light that shines the farthest must shine the brightest at home.

On a ministry trip to Bolivia, I had a two-day layover in La Paz. I stayed with a missionary family who asked if I would present a "chalk talk" that evening at their little church. I eagerly agreed and volunteered to go out and invite many of the people I had seen in the streets. The missionary replied, "You don't need to do that. I will make some phone calls." Later I offered a second time, and he said, "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it."

I could tell that he had many other things to attend to, so I asked his son to be my interpreter, and we went out to the streets. Everyone we invited said they would come to the meeting. As I joyfully shared this news with the missionary, he responded by saying, "Bill, I did not want you to be discouraged. These people will agree to come, but they will not show up."

That evening as his little congregation assembled, the people I had invited from the streets also began arriving. I smiled at them from the platform as the missionary turned to me and said, "I have been serving here for 19 years, and I have never had a response like this!"

David was able to boldly face Goliath because the skills he developed while tending his father's sheep had been tested, and he was confident in God's faithfulness to deliver him. (See 1 Samuel 17:37.)

Why did the people come? It was because I used the same method on the streets of Bolivia that I had learned "at home" on the streets of Chicago. I would walk up to a group of young people and say, "I am looking for a group who would like to know what God's answers are to life's three great questions: Where did I come from? Why am I here? and Where am I going?" This approach was usually effective in creating curiosity and caused people to want to hear the message I would then present in a chalk talk.

What can you do in your own hometown to develop and perfect your harvesting skills so that God can use you in greater ways?

Develop a Sense of Urgency!

Some of the most impacting verses I memorized as a teenager were Ezekiel 3:18–19: "When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself."

This same message is repeated in Ezekiel 33:8–9, which gives it double importance!! These Scriptures have instilled in me a sense of urgency to proclaim the Gospel.

Farmers labor many months for a crop, but have only a small window of time to harvest it before it spoils in the field.

I once heard a story about an 11-year-old boy who bundled up on a Sunday afternoon and said to his father, "Okay, Dad, I'm ready."

His father, who was a pastor, said, "Ready for what?"

"To go out like we always do and pass out tracts."

The dad responded, "Son, it is very cold outside, and it is pouring down rain."

The surprised son replied, "But, Dad, aren't people still going to hell even though it is raining?"

The son convinced his father to let him go out alone. After two hours of walking in the rain, he was soaking wet. With one final tract he approached the nearest house and rang the doorbell. He rang it again and again with no response. Finally the door slowly opened and a very sad-looking woman said, "What can I do for you, son?"

With a smile he said, "Ma'am, I just want to tell you that Jesus really loves you, and I want to give you my last Gospel tract that will tell you all about Jesus and His great love."

The following Sunday morning the pastor asked if anyone had a testimony to share. A woman stood up and said, "Last Sunday I no longer had any hope or will to live. So I went to my attic and prepared to hang myself. As I stood on a chair with a rope tied around my neck, I was about to jump, but then I heard the doorbell ringing. I thought I would wait until it stopped, but it kept on ringing. Finally, I loosened the rope and went to answer the door. I could hardly believe my eyes! The most radiant, angelic boy I had ever seen stood there telling me that Jesus loved me. I accepted the tract he offered me, read every word, and became a Christian."

Jesus tells us that there is a bumper crop waiting to be harvested and warns us, "Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (John 4:35).

How many friends and neighbors will look at us on Judgment Day and ask, "If you knew the truth about eternal life, why didn't you tell us about it?" Let's list the people we know God wants us to talk to about the Lord and ask Him to develop a sense of urgency in our lives for doing it!

Labor for the Lord of the Harvest!

When I was 29 years old, I decided that it was time for a great harvest in Chicago among the teenagers with whom I had been involved in youth ministry for several years. I scheduled a special seminar for the end of the summer and began contacting young people, inviting them to register for it. My goal was to have 1,000 in attendance.

During the summer months, I made hundreds of phone calls and spent thousands of dollars promoting the seminar, but when the opening day came, I had a grand total of 38 attendees. Obviously, my efforts were not very effective, because I did not understand the principles relating to Jesus' command to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send forth laborers into His harvest. Only a few years later when I was expecting only a few hundred to attend the seminars I was presenting, God brought hundreds of thousands to hear the message!

The harvest is not ours, but the Lord's; neither are the laborers ours, but the Lord's to call, train, and send forth.

Our responsibility is to recognize a mission field and to pray that God will act on behalf of that need. God's responsibility is to send the right laborers at the right time to those who are ready to hear and respond to the message of His kingdom. Before God sends forth a laborer, He trains and equips him for effective ministry.

Scripture tells us that some "fields" are not ready for harvesting. Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town" (Matthew 10:14). We need to be attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit as He directs us to the fields He has prepared.

It is also important for us to remember that there are three stages of a harvest. The first stage is planting, the second is watering, and the third is the increase. Paul explained that laborers will have different functions: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. … For we are God's fellow workers" (1 Corinthians 3:6–9).

When we fulfill our responsibility and let God do His work, we avoid the burnout that results from self-effort.

The effectiveness of our cooperation with God in bringing in His harvest requires that we remember for Whom we are working and keep our first priority that of loving the Lord. The Church at Ephesus was very busy working for the Lord, but their priorities got out of order and God rebuked them. "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance, … You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love" (Revelation 2:2-4).

In your journal, make a list of the individuals, families, or whole countries that you know need to hear the message of the Gospel. Then, begin to fervently ask God to raise up, equip, and send

laborers into those harvest fields. His answer to your prayers will be cause for much rejoicing both on earth and in heaven!

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 9:37–38

"… The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

John 4:35–36

"Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together."

1 Corinthians 3:9

"For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building."

John 9:4

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

Luke 4:18–19

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Romans 10:14–15

"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Glory in Weaknesses!

I was intrigued by an advertisement I saw when I was a young boy. It appealed to my manly instincts. In the first panel, a scrawny boy was being pushed around by neighborhood bullies while his girlfriend looked on. The second picture showed the boy lifting weights to build his muscles. The final scene showed the muscular young man conquering the bullies with an admiring girlfriend watching. This is how we like to picture ourselves—able to build up our strength so that we can protect others and ourselves. What a contrast this is to the command Jesus gave to His followers!

Command Twenty-Two

"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

What is the likelihood of sheep surviving in the midst of a pack of hungry wolves? Their survival time could no doubt be measured in minutes! Sheep do not have powerful jaws or sharp teeth or claws. They cannot run fast or far. They do not even have a loud roar or howl with which to frighten potential predators. There must be more to this command than meets the eye, because sheep have no inherent strengths that would go very far in saving them from certain destruction.

We can look in the Old Testament and see a parallel between this command and the way God dealt with the nation of Israel. God led His people out of Egypt like a "flock." The devouring armies of Pharaoh pursued them, and they were trapped against the Red Sea. The hearts of God's people melted within them as they realized their helpless and vulnerable position.

However, they used wisdom by crying out to God for help, and He opened the sea before them and closed it upon their enemies. Scripture states that God "brought his people out like a flock; he led them like sheep through the desert. He guided them safely, so they were unafraid; but the sea engulfed their enemies" (Psalm 78:52–53; see also Exodus 14).

What could have been a massive slaughter turned out to be one of the most spectacular dramas in history. God delights to show His great power in impossible situations!

Helpless sheep can overcome ravening wolves by staying close to their shepherd and by crying out in times of attack.

David understood the need for putting confidence in God rather than in his own abilities. "My slanderers pursue me all day long; many are attacking me in their pride … . When I am afraid, I will trust in you. … Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me" (Psalm 56:2–3, 9).

The Apostle Paul developed this same perspective when Jesus told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul responded, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Rather than being discouraged by our personal weaknesses and limitations, let's view them as our greatest strengths, knowing that through them we will have opportunities to experience more of the power of Christ.

Don't Gaze at the Wolves!

One day as I was looking at a famous picture, a friend pointed out an important message it contained. The picture was of Daniel in the lions' den. The lions looked ferocious, yet Daniel was not looking at them. His gaze was upward toward the Lord, Who was his Protector and Shepherd.

In this week's command, wolves are a symbol of cruel people who bite and devour with their words and actions. They could be those to whom we are sent to share the Gospel, or they could even be members of our own families.

Being "cast" into a den of lions or being "sent" into a pack of ravening wolves is a frightening prospect until we remember one important truth: we are not sent out alone! When Jesus sent out His disciples, He promised, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). He has also promised, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

To maintain the right perspective, we must glance at the wolves but gaze on the Lord.

When God sent Jeremiah to speak for Him, He warned Jeremiah not to be overwhelmed by the faces of the "wolves" or by his own inadequacies. Rather, he was to keep his focus on the Lord. "Ah, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 1:6–8).

When Stephen was before the council, they turned into a mob of ravening wolves. As they rushed upon him with gnashing teeth, he turned his gaze toward the Lord. "When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:54–55).

In contrast, the nation of Israel melted with fear when they gazed on the giants of the Promised Land. As a result of their lack of trust in the Lord, they wandered for 40 years in the wilderness. (See Numbers 13–14.) Likewise, Abram, when he gazed on Pharaoh, feared for his life and lied saying that Sarai was his sister instead of his wife. His actions set a negative precedent that his son Isaac later followed. (See Genesis 12:10–20 and 26:6–11.)

God's purpose in sending us among the wolves is not to cause us to be devoured, but to cause us to focus on Him.

When wolves travel in packs, they alternate in attacking their prey. Once their victim is exhausted, the wolves devour it. The same fate will happen to us if we do not fix our gaze on the Lord, as we are instructed in Hebrews 12:2: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." At this moment, are we gazing at our foes or focusing on our Shepherd?

Command 22: Be Shrewd as Snakes

Related Character Quality

Wisdom vs. Foolishness

Wisdom is seeing and responding to life situations from God's frame of reference.

How Do We Get Wisdom?

- **By asking God for it**—"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).
- **By studying God's Law**—"Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (Deuteronomy 4:6).
- **By keeping God's commandments with us**—"Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me" (Psalm 119:98).
- **Through the fear of the Lord**—"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10).
- **By reading the Book of Proverbs**—"The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair" (Proverbs 1:1–3).
- **By Living God's Statutes**—"The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7).
- **By hearing instruction**—"Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it." (Proverbs 8:33). "Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning" (Proverbs 9:9).
- **By listening to rebukes**—"Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning" (Proverbs 9:9).
- **By choosing friends wisely**—"He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm" (Proverbs 13:20).
- **By seeking wise counsel**—"The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice" (Proverbs 12:15)

Personal Evaluation: How Wise Are You?

- Do you rise early in the morning to seek the wisdom of God?
- Have you developed skills so that you can do things with excellence?
- Do you love those who rebuke you?
- Is your heart filled with truth so that you can control your tongue?
- Do you seek the counsel of wise friends?
- Do you look for ways to apply the truths you have learned from God's Word?
- Do you value wisdom more than silver and gold?
- Do you study the testimonies in Scripture for application to your own life?
- Do you delight in the commandments of the Lord?

- Do you live in the reality that God is watching and evaluating everything you say and do?

Command 22: Be Shrewd as Snakes | Day 150

Be Wise Among Wolves!

A political party was searching for just the right candidate to fill a critical position. After much searching, they found just the right person. He had every qualification necessary, including name recognition and a record of achievement that was quite impressive.

Things were going well, and it looked like he had all the votes necessary to win—until the "wolves" came out and exposed statements he had given in a speech years earlier. They were certainly not statements he would make now, and he thought that they had been given to a friendly group in an informal setting, but they had been recorded and were now being used against him.

The strategy of wolves is to leap upon our unwise words and use them against us.

In the Psalms, David records his experiences with "wolves" that were seeking to destroy him. "All day long they twist my words; they are always plotting to harm me. They conspire, they lurk, they watch my steps, eager to take my life" (Psalm 56:5-6). David's painful experiences with wolves were similar to Jesus' experience with wolves during His earthly ministry.

The scribes and Pharisees listened carefully to every word Jesus spoke, trying to find some statement by which to condemn Him. When they could not find fault with His words, they devised trick questions to ask Him, such as "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" If he said "yes," many Jews would turn against Him, because they hated the Roman occupation. However, if He said "no," the government would condemn Him.

He confounded their plans by wisely replying with this question: "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" When they said "Caesar's," He said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21).

"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom" (James 3:13).

James compares the tongue to a rudder of a ship and a flame of fire. Both are small but have tremendous power. We need to choose our words carefully and ask God to give us His wisdom, which is "… pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17). Let's purpose now to use only gracious words, "seasoned with salt," so that we do not provoke the wolves (see Colossians 4:6).

Command 22: Be Shrewd as Snakes | Day 151

Learn the Wisdom of Serpents!

In many ancient cultures, the snake was a symbol of wisdom. Snakes have keen perception and cleverness that are used to avoid confrontation with potential predators and to catch prey. By using its tongue to collect particles of dust from the air, a snake is able to sense danger and hide, or to sense food and proceed. Given a choice between attacking or retreating, a snake will usually make a hasty exit.

Demonstrating the wisdom of serpents means that we should use our spiritual senses to discern potential dangers around us and avoid provoking conflict with "wolves" whenever possible. If a conflict is unavoidable, we should learn how to respond to the situation in a way that minimizes the ability of the wolves to succeed in an attack against us.

"A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it" (Proverbs 22:3).

Foreseeing evil does not require firsthand experience. It is all too tempting to search out evil with our eyes and minds, and in so doing expose ourselves to the corruption of the world and defile our spirits. This is the very same trap that Satan put before Adam and Eve—the desire to know good and evil by experience.

Rather than filling our natural minds with the details of evil and leaning on our own understanding to determine what is right and wrong, we must rely on discernment from God's Spirit to ascertain evil. This enables us to know what approach to take in responding to wolves so that God's ultimate purposes can be accomplished. (See Romans 16:19.)

The ability to perceive and avoid danger requires that we learn God's wisdom and are attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

In the mid-1700s, an angry mob surrounded the house where a controversial preacher was visiting. Pounding on the door, they demanded that he come out immediately. His hosts urged the preacher to seek safety by hiding, but he declined. Suddenly, the door opened and the small man stepped out into the midst of the crowd. His boldness shocked them and for a moment they were silent. During that moment he calmly made a few remarks that turned the mood of the crowd from vehement anger to rapt attention. With carefully chosen words, John Wesley diffused the attack of the "wolves" and gained an opportunity to preach.

To develop the wisdom of serpents, let's purpose to become lifelong students of God's Word so that we can grow in our knowledge of Him and His ways and discern when we should combat the wolves and when we should avoid confrontation.

Command 22: Be Shrewd as Snakes

Study Question

Q: When God told Gideon to destroy his father's altar, Gideon did it at night for fear of the men who worshiped Baal. Did Gideon demonstrate wisdom or a lack of boldness? (See Judges 6:25–32.)

A: Though a General demands obedience from his troops when they are given an order, he also expects them to be aware and alert to possible dangers. A wise soldier is willing to submit his physical body to the direction of his leader, and yet he constantly should use his mind to accomplish the assigned mission.

When Gideon tore down his father's altar, he chose to do it at night "because he was afraid of his family and the men of the town" (Judges 6:27).

He demonstrated wisdom rather than a lack of boldness because he obeyed the Lord's command in the very night he received it and avoided what no doubt would have been a disastrous situation if he had done it during the day. The next morning, the men of the city were shocked to see that the altar had been broken down. Upon discovering that Gideon had done it, they demanded that his father bring him out to be killed.

The intriguing account that follows testifies to the fact that Gideon's discretion and wisdom were used by God to convict an entire nation of their unfaithfulness to Him.

Be Innocent as Doves!

To be innocent as a dove is to be an undefiled messenger of the peace of the Gospel of Christ.

The dove has three distinct physical features spoken of in Scripture. Each one provides insight into the role of being an innocent messenger of God's peace and love.

- **Its eyes.** Solomon writes, "How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves" (Song of Solomon 1:15). Eyes are the window to the soul. As we speak, people intently look into our eyes to see if our words match the message and condition of our soul. (See Matthew 6:22.)
- **Its voice.** The sound made by a dove is pleasant and soothing. It also conveys a tone of sadness. "… I moaned like a mourning dove …" (Isaiah 38:14). A messenger of peace should not provoke others with his words and should be sensitive to the emotional needs of others, weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice. (See Romans 12:15.)

- **Its wings.** The wings of a dove are strong and have endurance. (See Psalm 55:6.) During World War I, Homing pigeons were used to carry important messages across battle lines. A faithful messenger must be committed to enduring whatever hardships are necessary to deliver his message.

The message of our lives speaks louder than the message of our lips.

As people observe our lives, will they find our actions to be consistent with the message we are proclaiming, or will they find reasons to discredit our testimony and reject the Lord's message of love and peace because of inconsistencies in our lives?

Let's take whatever steps are necessary to remove hypocrisy from our lives so that we can be effective ambassadors for the Lord.

Never Doubt in Darkness!

I have asked hundreds of young people a very important question. Amazingly, every one has given me the same answer! My question is, "Do you have a deep desire to do something great?"

Their unanimous response of "Yes!" should not be surprising, because God is a great God, and He has made us in His image. As believers, God has created each of us to accomplish specific good works. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). As we carry out these deeds, we accomplish the purposes for which we were designed. Thus, when God sends us out among the wolves, it is part of His plan.

There is no greater vision than bringing glory to God by the things we do to advance His kingdom.

As we envision the achievement of the great things God wants to accomplish through us and as we remember His promise never to leave us or forsake us, we will develop a sense of excitement as we anticipate God's display of power. Scripture contains many examples of this, which should encourage us when we are tempted to doubt and lose heart concerning the vision God has given us to accomplish.

Nehemiah had a vision for turning the deplorable state of Jerusalem into something great for God's people. Armed with the King's official support, he still had to face the "wolves" that were plundering God's people at will. Their attacks on him and his co-laborers were unrelenting. Their goal was to distract and discourage the workers. Yet, Nehemiah did not allow the threats of the wolves to distract or deter him from his vision of rebuilding the wall.

Never doubt in darkness the vision that God has given you in the light.

It is important to remember that our achievements should not serve our selfish purposes, but rather should promote the kingdom of God. I still remember the impact Jeremiah 45:5 had on me the first time I heard it: "Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not."

When I was a teenager, I yearned to do great things for God. I began to read the biographies of men who had accomplished great things for Him, because I wanted to find out what they had done that had honored God. I saw that they all had a passion for reaching a particular group of people. David Brainerd gave his life to reach the American Indians, George Whitefield and Charles Finney ministered to the colonists of North America, Hudson Taylor had a vision to reach the people of China, and John Wesley declared, "Indeed, I look on the whole world as my parish!"

Without a vision for great achievement, life can lose its meaning and purpose. (See Proverbs 29:18.) Do you have such a vision? Have you experienced a deep desire to do something great in your life? Let's ask God to show us the great works He wants us to accomplish and then press on through whatever challenges arise, enabled by his grace and strength to succeed!

Outsmart the Wolves!

Jesus did not send us out among the wolves to be eaten up by them, but to outsmart them! That is why He tells us to be as Shrewd as Snakes! For example, what approach could be taken to get past the guarded walls of a secular university to rescue the sheep from the wolves in the classrooms? It would certainly be a challenge, but evangelist Ray Comfort found a way to do just that!

He invited an atheist professor to a debate on evolution. He promised him $100 for just giving his side of the argument. Hundreds of students came out to listen to the debate. Ray introduced the professor, allowed him to present his view, gave him his $100, and then proceeded to give a powerful and well-received Gospel message to the audience. This tactic was so effective that he repeated it on other campuses.

Our goal in life should be to get as great a harvest as possible, not just to survive among the wolves.

There is a law in physics which states that for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. Therefore, we can expect opposition when we take steps to gather the Lord's harvest. Our human efforts at harvesting can be both ineffective and frustrating; we must have the power of God to overcome the natural laws that oppose us.

God tells us to look on the harvest, then pray for the harvest, then go to the harvest. He will call us to a field of ministry, then He will train us for it, then He will send us out to it. Many who receive a call rush out to the harvest before they are trained and end up in the mouths of wolves.

Jesus understood His call at the age of 12 when He said, "I had to be in my Father's house," but He did not go out to the fields until He was commissioned by His Father and the Holy Spirit at the age of 30. In between ages 12 and 30, He "grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52).

Ray Comfort understood God's call on his life many years ago, but before major public ministry began he gained experience from the Lord's training ground by responding to the hecklers in open-air preaching. He learned how to creatively present the Gospel to those who were not inclined to listen.

The need for training is emphasized by the fact that "For many are invited, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14).

In your journal this week, identify the field of ministry to which God is calling you. Then list the training that you need in order to give a clear and convincing message of the kingdom of God to them. Finally, identify the wolves in your field that need to be outsmarted and overcome by God's power. This exercise will give new meaning and direction to your life. It will also bring great encouragement and guidance to your wife and children. May God bless you with cunning wisdom and persuasiveness.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 10:16

"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."

Proverbs 15:1

"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

Romans 16:19–20

"Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you."

Isaiah 11:2–3

"The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—
and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears."

Matthew 10:19

"But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say."

Proverbs 16:23

"A wise man's heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction."

1 Peter 3:15

"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

Conquer Fear With Fear!

To this day I am impressed by an experiment I once saw. A mean-looking cat underwent a procedure that produced fear. Then, a little mouse was released, and the large cat recoiled in terror and fright! A mouse poses such a small threat to a cat that it is absurd to think of a cat being frightened by it. However, as Christians we often act in a similar irrational way when we allow ourselves to fear the wrong thing. Thus, we are commanded:

Command Twenty-Three

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

Fear is not merely a human emotion; it is a powerful spiritual force that attacks one's physical, mental, and emotional responses. When we give in to fear of what others think of us, fear of bad things happening to us or to those we love, or fear of evil people, the effects of that fear will permeate our beings and eventually debilitate us. We must guard against this and remember: "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7).

The key to conquering fear of man is to fear God. Do we need to fear God because He is bad? No, we fear Him because He is infinitely good! God is holy, and all of His dealings with man are just and right. (See Psalm 19:9.) When we have a proper reverence for the awesome power and might of God and recognize the fact that He is for us, we will be able to say with the psalmist, "The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (Psalm 118:6).

The more we fear God, the less we will fear evil; however, the more we fear evil, the less we will fear God.

Learning to fear the Lord involves several aspects. First, we should fear Him because He is God and His holiness demands that the consequences of sin be paid. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23; see also Proverbs 16:6).

Secondly, fearing the Lord means we recognize the superiority of His ways (versus our "wisdom") and choose to make Him and His Word the final authority in our lives. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10; see also Isaiah 55:8–9).

Finally, to fear the Lord is to remember that He is continually with us and is aware of every one of our thoughts, words, and actions. In the final analysis, it makes no difference whom we please if we displease the Lord. Solomon said it well: "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13–14).

Are our lives characterized by a healthy fear of the Lord, or are we consumed with fear of man? Let's ask God to help us fear only Him, because "The fear of the LORD leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble" (Proverbs 19:23).

Vanquish Fear of Death!

I enjoy telling the story of a man whose doctor informed him he had only a short time to live. He dreaded the thought of just an "ordinary death" and dreamed of dying for some heroic cause. Then, his chance came!

A robbery took place in his town. The police had the store surrounded, but the robber was holding hostages inside. The man told the police chief that he would like to go in and rescue the hostages. The chief said, "You will be killed!" The man replied, "I am not afraid. You see, I am going to die soon anyway."

With permission, the man walked boldly into the store and headed straight toward the thief. The robber was so shocked by the man's boldness that he assumed others were also in the store and surrendered—releasing his hostages! A few days later, the doctor called the man back and told him, "I misread your test results. You will not be dying soon." The man then lost his boldness as he focused once again on living rather than dying.

The most powerful people on the face of the earth are those who have no fear of death!

Fear of death is normal. To overcome it we must have a cause that is worth living for and dying for. This was the case with early Christian martyrs. Many were tortured and burned at the stake for their faith. However, their boldness in the face of death motivated thousands of others to become Christians. One day, a breathless runner appeared before the local tyrant who was killing Christians by burning them at the stake and declared, "We need to stop burning these Christians. The smoke from these fires is causing thousands to embrace their faith!"

As a teenager, a turning point in my life took place when I read excerpts from Foxe's Book of Martyrs and purposed to be willing to die for my faith. Since then I have been in an exciting race against time, always asking myself, "How much can I get done for the Lord before I meet Him face to face?"

Jesus did not come into the world only to live, but to die so that we could live. He calls us to follow in His steps.

Even in the face of death, the Apostle Paul responded with boldness through the power of the Holy Spirit. He faced angry mobs, endured beatings, and triumphantly went to Jerusalem knowing he would be captured and killed (see Acts 21:11–14). He exclaimed, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). At the same time, Paul was not reckless in pursuing an untimely death and escaped whenever possible. (See 2 Corinthians 11:32–33.)

Are you afraid of physical death? Does this fear affect your ability to live boldly for Christ? Conquering fear of death is so important that God sent Jesus to "and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:15). Let's be reminded today that Jesus has already conquered death and that being absent from the body is to be in the glorious presence of the Lord. (See 2 Corinthians 5:8.) We can live boldly for Christ because we are indestructible until God's work in us is finished!

Command 23: Fear God, Not Man

Related Character Quality

Boldness vs. Fearfulness

Boldness is confidence that what I have to say or do is true and right and just in the sight of God.

There is rich insight in the Biblical definitions of boldness. Three Greek words translated bold each identify a distinct and important aspect of this quality.

- Tharrheo—Boldness in the face of death
- Parrhesiazomai—Boldness to speak the truth
- Tolmao—Boldness to accomplish great things for God

Boldness is the fearless and daring courage to carry out the work God calls us to do. When God commanded Joshua to "Be strong and courageous," he was being told to have boldness—boldness to face death in battle, to speak truth to his own heart and to the nation, and to do great exploits for God.

1. Boldness in the Face of Death

Because of the confidence that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, no believer needs to fear death.

Conquering the fear of death is actually one of the purposes for which Christ died. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14–15).

The Apostle Paul had this type of boldness. He fearlessly faced beatings, persecutions, and shipwrecks. His secret was the assurance that he was indestructible until his work was done; he knew that death would bring him immediately into the eternal presence of the Lord Whom he served.

God promises that He will never leave us or forsake us. Therefore, "we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me" (Hebrews 13:6).

The most powerful people on the face of the earth are those who have no fear of death.

2. Boldness to Speak the Truth

Whereas boldness to conquer the fear of death comes through salvation, boldness to speak the truth (parrhesiazomai boldness) comes through the prayer of other believers. Even the Apostle Paul requested prayer for such boldness: "Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should" (Ephesians 6:19–20).

When the apostles were threatened with harm if they spoke in the name of Jesus, they received boldness through prayer: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness … . After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" (Acts 4:29, 31).

Boldness to speak the truth must begin with a clear conscience toward the Lord and toward others. Nothing stops the freedom of the mouth like the unresolved failures of a life. Before Isaiah was commissioned to speak, he was cleansed of his iniquity. (See Isaiah 6:7–9.)

3. Boldness to Accomplish Great Things

When a believer conquers the fear of death and boldly speaks the truth, he or she is equipped for boldness. God is able to accomplish mighty things through such a believer.

As we engraft the Scriptures into our lives and meditate on them, we can claim their fulfillment in boldness. "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7).

Personal Evaluation: How Bold Are You?

- Is your heart right before the Lord so that He can work mightily through you?
- Have you purposed to die to self and follow Christ? "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

- Have you dedicated your life to fulfill God's calling, and are you determined to make whatever sacrifices God requires?
- Which Christian leaders are you praying for to have boldness to speak the truth?
- Have you asked others to pray that you will have boldness to witness?
- When people ridicule the Lord, do you defend the truth in a loving way?
- Have you written out your testimony so that you will always be prepared to give a ready answer for the hope that lies within you?

Cast Out Fear of Rejection!

The context of this command warns us that there will be those who reject us because of our relationship to Christ and His message. "All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:22). We can rejoice in suffering reproaches for Christ's sake; it is certainly not something we should fear (see 2 Corinthians 12:10 and Acts 5:41).

However, more often than fearing rejection for Christ's sake, we fear personal rejection by others. Proverbs 29:25 says, "Fear of man will prove to be a snare … ." The danger of this trap is the temptation to compromise our Godly convictions or be silent about the truth of God in order to gain acceptance from others. Therefore, we must give our reputations to God and focus on what He thinks about us.

"… Who are you that you fear mortal men … that you forget the LORD your Maker … ?" (Isaiah 51:12–13).

What does God say about us as believers? We are chosen, accepted, redeemed, forgiven, and loved. We are part of His household, seated in heavenly places in Christ, and we are His workmanship—just to name a few! (See Ephesians 1:4, 6, 7; 2:4, 6, 10, 19.) Recognizing God's acceptance of us is foundational to conquering the fear of rejection by others and to gaining self-acceptance as well.

Self-acceptance (believing that God created me with all of my unchangeable characteristics in the way that brings Him the most glory) plays an important role in overcoming the fear of rejection. An interesting aspect of human nature is that what we believe to be true in our hearts we find "evidence" to support.

If we reject the way God made us, we will expect others to find us unacceptable as well. Before long we will be experiencing this "rejection" from others in our day-to-day interactions with them, even when this may not have been their intention at all! This is one reason why it is important to guard our hearts and choose to believe only those things that God says are true. (See Proverbs 4:23.)

Fear of rejection from others has its roots in self-rejection.

One of the most effective ways I know to ward off the fear of rejection is to take the offensive and become a channel of God's love and acceptance to others. (See Acts 20:35.) In order to do this, however, we must first receive God's love for ourselves. As we begin to comprehend the depths of God's unconditional love for us and begin to recognize all of the treasures He has given us in Christ, we can then allow God to transform our feelings of rejection into motivations to encourage others.

Here are some practical ways to demonstrate acceptance of others:

- Greeting people by name with a joyful smile and enthusiasm.
- Honoring others with a special meal.
- Giving genuine praise for positive qualities.
- Offering to do tasks that others would appreciate.
- Listening sincerely with a compassionate and understanding heart.

Are we experiencing fear of rejection because we have not truly accepted ourselves? Let's believe what God says is true about us, receive the love He wants to give us, and look for ways to show His love and acceptance to those around us!

Subdue Fear of Poverty!

Having sufficient food, clothing, and shelter is necessary for our existence. Therefore, it is understandable that poverty would be a common fear. Paul reminds us, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6). We can overcome the fear of poverty by recognizing that God personally tends to the needs of His children. He wants our focus to remain on Him, and He wants our trust in His faithfulness to grow.

"And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

Fear of poverty can be a symptom of lack of generosity, since God promised, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38). (This does not sound like poverty.) Paul also affirms that if we purpose to be a generous giver, "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Generosity is contagious. We see this demonstrated in the early Church. Believers sold their possessions and gave the money to the apostles, who then distributed to those in need. The result was that no one lacked basic provisions. (See Acts 4:34.)

Demonstrating faith by giving generously to the needs of others is a weapon that can conquer the fear of poverty.

A stingy person will fear poverty and the future because he will never have enough money to satisfy all of his wants. His trust is not in the Lord's ability to provide for his daily needs but rather it is in his ability to store up treasures for an uncertain future.

George Mueller observed the hoarding practices of the believers in his day and was grieved by their lack of faith in God. He wanted the world to know that God could be taken at His word and could be trusted to meet physical needs. Therefore, he set out to establish orphanages that were funded solely by the provision of God. Can you imagine caring for more than 10,000 orphans without a fixed source of income and without asking anyone but God for money?

His name went down in church history as a man of great faith. Often he would send significant sums of money to the ministry of Hudson Taylor in China! He easily could have said, "I need this for the orphans," but he knew that he served a God Who had enough money to provide abundantly for both ministries.

Let's allow God to grow our faith by trusting Him to provide for all of our needs and by seeking opportunities to be His channel of provision to the needs of others.

Command 23: Fear God, Not Man

Study Question

Q: Why did David have no fear when he faced Goliath but fled for his life when he faced Absalom?

A: When David confronted Goliath he had no fear, because he realized that Goliath was actually not defying him or even the armies of Israel; Goliath was defying the living God. A man who is not afraid to die holds incredible power. David was confident that God would protect His own reputation by equipping David to conquer Goliath just as He had previously equipped David to conquer a lion and a bear.

In contrast to this, David was fearful when his own son Absalom rose up against him. He fled for his life because he knew that Absalom's wrath was directed toward him personally and that this was part of the judgment of God for David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba.

When a man cursed David, his servants wanted to put an end to it. However, David said, "Leave him alone; let him curse, for the LORD has told him to" (2 Samuel 16:11).

Both situations reveal David's fear of the Lord. David boldly accepted the challenge of facing Goliath because David knew that he was on God's side and that God would fight for him. Later, he recognized that God was using the defiance of his son Absalom to discipline him and that he was powerless to do anything but plead for God's mercy.

Transform Fear of Failure!

Fear of failure threatens to control many fathers. This often happens when a father is more concerned about getting ahead in his job than being the spiritual head of his family. He will spend long hours doing extra things to please his boss but forget to do the important "little" things that will please his wife and children.

Both the fear of rejection and the fear of failure have the same underlying cause: fear of man. This fear causes fathers to focus on man's criteria for success, which leads to a love of money and a host of self-inflicted sorrows. However, this pitfall can easily be avoided, because God has a clear, straightforward path to true success.

If we delight in God's Law and meditate on it day and night, we will prosper and be successful.

One day a Christian couple came to me for counseling. I had recently observed the clear connection between fears and broken relationships, and I decided to see if fear was contributing to their problems. Their current disagreement was over a short-term mission trip. I asked the wife what she feared most about the trip. She quickly responded, "I am afraid that my husband will become so involved with his teaching that he will abandon me." I then asked the husband what he feared, and he said, "I am afraid that I will not be successful in my teaching responsibilities."

Each one was reacting to the other, based on their fears. I asked the husband to describe his idea of success in teaching. He replied that it meant teaching young men how the Christian life works. I explained that God has given us a pattern of how the Christian life works in the relationship of marriage. The husband is to lay down his life for his wife, even as Christ laid down His life for the Church. (See Ephesians 5:25–33.)

I went on to suggest, "If you show your students how you are meeting the needs of your wife, she will lose her fear of abandonment and you will succeed in teaching through your example." He immediately saw the connection and purposed to make his commitment to his wife a priority.

God is able to guarantee total success if we meditate on Scripture and obey it, because our decisions will be based on the wisdom of His Word.

I have met many successful individuals who have told me that their success is a direct result of their meditation and application of God's Word. Recently, I attended the graduation exercises of the Oak Brook College of Law and Government Policy. When they introduced the student who graduated summa cum laude, I thought to myself, "What a predictable reward for a young man who has memorized and meditated on several books of the Bible while studying for his law degree."

Success is important. God wants every man to achieve it. We can do it by transforming the fear of failure into a motivation to memorize and meditate on God's Law day and night. Let's incorporate additional verses into our weekly memorization of the command so that others will be able to see the success in our lives that comes from God as a result of basing all of our decisions on the wisdom of His Word. (See 1 Timothy 4:15.)

Overcome the Fear of Evil!

As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we can confidently refute the fear of evil by recognizing that Satan has already been defeated and that the victor, Christ, lives in us and is greater than he who is in the world (see Hebrews 2:9–15 and 1 John 4:4). While the victory has already been won, Satan has been allowed limited time and power in which he can tempt and torment those on the earth before his final judgment by God (see Revelation 12:12).

How then are we to live on earth in victory over Satan? God instructs us to "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes" (Ephesians 6:11), "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7), and "and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:27). Unfortunately, many Christians are naive to the tactics of Satan and actually "welcome" him into their lives by bringing evil objects into their homes and by participating in "harmless" occult activities.

"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

I have heard many testimonies similar to the one of an architect and his wife who traveled to Haiti for a vacation. While there, a persistent street vendor convinced them to buy one of his voodoo masks. They brought it home and hung it on the wall at the architect's office.

Strange things began to happen. The phone stopped ringing and customers stopped coming by. At first they were pleased, because it meant they could catch up on a backlog of jobs, but they began to grow alarmed when no new business was coming in. Then, the architect developed an unusual eye infection that his doctors could not diagnose or cure. For some reason, they decided to bring the voodoo mask home, and they hung it up there. Almost immediately the peace that they had enjoyed became tension. Arguments erupted, and family members reacted to each other. Things kept getting progressively worse.

Then, they attended a Basic Seminar and learned about the power of evil objects and the need to cleanse their home of them. When they returned home, they burned the mask and were amazed at the results! The architect's eye infection cleared up, new business began to come in, and peace was restored to their family.

"... I do not want you to be participants with demons" (1 Corinthians 10:20).

The powers of evil are real. We must never "play with them." Occult games and Satanic activities may appear to be innocent, but they bring the bondage of fear and control. Therefore, Scripture warns, "The images of their gods you are to burn in the fire. Do not covet the silver and gold on them … Do not bring a detestable thing into your house or you, like it, will be set apart for destruction" (Deuteronomy 7:25–26).

It is vital that we maintain careful watch over our souls and that we reject from our lives anything that is not of God. If we have dabbled with horoscopes, Ouija boards, fortune tellers, or any other form of evil, let's confess it as sin and call upon the Lord for His deliverance from any continuing bondage. Let's do everything we can to overcome the fear of evil and enjoy the victory that Christ has already won for us!

Command 23: Fear God, Not Man | Day 161

Conquer the Fear of Loneliness!

I was stunned when a friend informed me that his 60-year-old mother was packing her bags and moving to England to marry a man whom she had never met, never talked to, and had never even seen. I asked, "Is she rational?" He said, "Absolutely!" I asked, "How did this happen?" He explained that she had met him on the Internet, and although their communication with each other had been only through e-mails, they had formed a deep bond that was extraordinary.

There is no doubt that loneliness is a powerful force in the lives of many people. It can be a positive thing if we respond to it correctly. Often, a feeling of "emptiness" motivates a person to recognize a void in his life and begin seeking for an intimate and personal relationship with God

through salvation. This is fitting, because the ultimate reality of loneliness is eternal separation from God.

Loneliness is the result of not having anyone with whom we can share our innermost thoughts and feelings.

For the believer, fear of loneliness can be conquered by remembering the truth that we are never really alone. God has promised "… Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). When we experience times of loneliness, we should use them as an opportunity to "Come near to God and he will come near to you …" (James 4:8). We have an incredible friend in the Lord Jesus Christ, Who "sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24).

Loneliness becomes a "friend" when it motivates us to seek the fellowship of God as much as we would seek the fellowship of others.

In addition to recognizing God's desire to draw us closer to Himself, we need to see loneliness as His signal to also cultivate meaningful relationships with other people. God wants the members of the body of Christ to be interdependent and to share a oneness with each other (see Romans 12:5). Although Adam had an intimate relationship with the Lord, God still stated, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18).

I know many lonely individuals who are around people all day long. Therefore, the solution for loneliness is not simply being around people, but it is enjoying the heart-to-heart fellowship that is a part of discipleship. When we reach out to others by discipling them for the Lord, we will experience the same fulfillment that the Apostle Paul spoke of when he referred to his disciples as his "joy and crown" (Philippians 4:1).

Let's use loneliness to our advantage by allowing it to drive us closer to God and motivate us to look for those whom He would want us to disciple. For your journal entry this week, ask each member of your family what types of fears they have. Then, discuss with them the practical steps to deal with those fears, and record the results of their actions. As you do this, you will be discipling them and cultivating some of the most meaningful relationships God has given you!

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 10:28

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Proverbs 29:25

"Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe."

1 John 4:18

"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."

Hebrews 2:14–15

"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

Matthew 10:22

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

Romans 8:31

"What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Revelation 2:10

"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Psalm 118:6

"The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

Command 24: Hear God's Voice | Day 162

Hear God's Voice!

Three military men were walking across the huge flight deck of an aircraft carrier. Suddenly, a commanding officer yelled out to them, "Drop!" Two of the men immediately fell on the deck. The third man turned around to see what was happening and was instantly killed by an incoming airplane.

All three men heard the same word; however, only two of them understood what they heard and obeyed the command. Recognizing and immediately obeying the voice of the commanding officer proved to be a matter of life and death for these men.

Similarly, Jesus states, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27–28).

Command Twenty-Four

"He who has ears, let him hear" (Matthew 11:15).

There are two types of ears and two types of hearing: physical and spiritual. With our physical ears, we can hear the message of salvation. As we respond to it by God's grace through faith, we receive eternal life. At that moment, we are born again by the spirit of God, Who then indwells our human spirits. (See Ephesians 2:8–9 and John 3:6.) With God's spirit indwelling us, we now have spiritual "ears" to hear spiritual truth. (See 1 Corinthians 2:14–16.)

I will never forget the first time I heard the Word of God with my new spiritual "ears." I had always been a poor reader in grammar school and found it difficult to comprehend or remember what I read.

However, after receiving Christ as my personal Savior, I had a strong desire to read the Bible. As I read it, it was like a new book to me. I could understand its message, and certain verses "leaped off the pages" with special meaning and application to my life. When I came to a word or phrase that I did not understand, the Holy Spirit gave me spiritual perception to understand its meaning, which I later verified when I learned how to use Bible research tools.

God speaks to us through the inspired revelation of Scripture and through those who accurately explain its meaning to us.

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). God raises up pastors and teachers to "feed the flock of God." For example, the Ethiopian eunuch read from the Book of Isaiah; however, he needed Philip to explain to him what it meant. (See Acts 8:27–35.)

As we faithfully memorize and meditate on these commands of Christ and apply them to our lives, we are exercising our spiritual ears to hear and obey the voice of God.

Command 24: Hear God's Voice | Day 163

Pay Attention!

Her story was familiar. A 17-year-old girl declared that she could not believe in God. I asked her why, and she said that she had too many questions about God that could not be answered. When I asked when she began having these questions she replied, "When I was seven years old!" Her younger sister had died and she could not comprehend why God would let such a terrible thing happen.

Her parents could not explain it. So, at the age of 11, she began looking to the world for the answers to life's questions. Before long she had strayed far from the moral standards that

governed her life in younger years. God has answers to her questions, but He only gives them to those who are humble in spirit. Thus, He states:

"... you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Matthew 11:25).

God requires us to have a humble spirit before He will impart spiritual wisdom to us. Jesus came to preach the gospel to the poor [meek] (see Luke 4:18). Therefore, we are told: "Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise; apply your heart to what I teach, for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have all of them ready on your lips" (Proverbs 22:17–18).

One demonstration of pride is putting our human intellect above God's Word and the Holy Spirit. By doing this we become the judge of God and His Word rather than allowing Scripture to judge us. This 17-year-old girl had obvious reasons to grieve the loss of her sister, but it was her attitude of pride that demanded of God: "Why do You let bad things happen to innocent people?!"

The disciples asked Jesus a similar question when a wall collapsed and killed 18 people in Jerusalem. Jesus explained that they should not be amazed that 18 people died; they should be amazed that the rest of them are still living! (See Luke 13:4–5.) If God gave all of us what we deserved, no one would be alive. (See Romans 3:23, 6:23, and Lamentations 3:22.)

"... All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5).

This 17-year-old girl was being defeated by a false presupposition. She assumed that God owes every person a full, happy, healthy life of at least 70 years and if anything cuts it short we have a right to blame Him. When we bow down our ear and listen to the voice of God we will realize that every hour of every day is a gift for which we should be thankful!

Just as we are to "present [our] bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God" (Romans 12:1) we must also voluntarily place our minds under the authority of God's Word and the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that we "stop thinking," but rather that we choose by faith to believe God and His Word to be correct even when our minds cannot comprehend His truth.

If we are not able to hear the wisdom of God's Word is it because we have not humbled ourselves before Him? Why don't we sincerely pray right now, "Lord, I place my mind under the authority of Your Word and Your Holy Spirit." With this unconditional surrender we will be ready to hear the wisdom of God!

Command 24: Hear God's Voice

Related Character Quality

Attentiveness vs. Distraction

Attentiveness is showing the worth of a person by giving undivided attention to his words and emotions.

Commands to Be Attentive

It is vital to develop attentiveness, because many other character qualities are dependent on it. Without attentiveness, we will not even hear the commands of Scripture or the instructions of parents or authorities.

- "let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance" (Proverbs 1:5).
- "He said, "If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you" (Exodus 15:26).
- "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

Attentiveness to the Voice of God and the Direction of the Holy Spirit

God speaks to us through the Scriptures and the prophets of old: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). "As he said through his holy prophets …" (Luke 1:70).

The Holy Spirit illuminates and directs our attention to verses that have special application in our lives. These important rhemas build faith and bring true success. (See Matthew 4:4, Romans 10:17, and John 15:7.)

If we have been too busy for God's Word, then we have been too busy! Set a time and a place that you can use for private appointments with the Lord in His Word.

Attentiveness to the Instructions of Your Father and Mother

Scripture commands and exhorts us to honor our parents by listening to them. "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching" (Proverbs 1:8). "Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise—"that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth" (Ephesians 6:2–3). "The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures" (Proverbs 30:17).

Attentiveness to parents (or any other authority) begins by understanding that God communicates His will to us through those He places in authority over us. When the children of Israel murmured against Moses, God said, "You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD" (Exodus 16:8).

Attentiveness springs from an obedient spirit—a prior commitment and desire to do what authorities ask us to do unless it violates Scripture. If their request does violate Scripture, we should wisely make an appeal regarding their request in order to maintain a higher commitment to never do evil.

Attentiveness to the Counsel of Wise Advisors

By walking with wise men, we will be wise. (See Proverbs 13:20.) One effective way to walk with the wise is to read the biographies of great men and women of faith. As Charles Jones stated, "You're the same today as you'll be in five years except for the people you meet and the books you read"

We should get wisdom as cheaply as we can. Others have paid a high price for it through lessons learned "the hard way" and will usually share the wisdom they gained from their experience if we ask them to do so. "Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise" (Proverbs 19:20). "for waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers" (Proverbs 24:6).

We must always confirm with Scripture the counsel we receive and make sure that there are no cautions from the Spirit of God that our consciences override.

Personal Evaluation: How Attentive Are You?

- Do you spend time each day reading God's Word?
- Do you ask the Holy Spirit how you can apply the Scriptures to your daily life?
- Do you turn Scripture into personal prayers?
- Do you take time to listen to God speak to you as you pray?
- Would your parents say you have an obedient spirit when they give you instructions?
- Do you confirm instruction with the Word of God?
- When making decisions, do you ask yourself what your parents would say?
- Do you surround yourself with wise and mature counselors?
- Do you regularly read about great Christians?

Obey First; Understand Later!

A young boy walked from his mission home down to a jungle trail. His mother, waving good-bye to him, suddenly yelled, "Stop!" The boy immediately froze. As his mother rushed toward him and pulled him backward, he saw an enormous boa constrictor in an overhanging tree branch. Had he taken one more step, the snake likely would have dropped down on him and eventually crushed him to death. Because the boy obeyed before he fully understood why he should obey, his life was spared.

Just because we do not understand God's reasons for His commands does not give us an excuse to disobey His commands. He told the nation of Israel, "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse— the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known" (Deuteronomy 11:26–28).

Light received from God and acted upon brings more light. However, light neglected or rejected brings darkness and confusion.

God trained the nation of Israel to think in this sequence: hear, obey, and then understand. This contradicts our Western mind-set, which first seeks to understand what it hears and then decides whether or not to obey. Trying to understand all the ways of an infinitely wise God as a prerequisite to obedience will not only hinder us from hearing His voice, but it will also produce frustration in our lives.

In Hebrews 11 we read about heroes of faith. These men and women chose to trust and obey God, even when His instructions did not "make sense." Noah was told to build an ark in preparation for a flood before it had ever rained on the earth. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son after he had been promised that his descendants would be as the sand of the sea in number. When we read of their lives, we learn the results of their actions; however, for them to take those steps required strong faith in God and a commitment to obeying Him regardless of the outcome.

Complete trust and obedience requires a close relationship between the one giving the command and the one receiving it. Jesus emphasized this when He said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). Sheep will not follow a stranger because they do not know the stranger's voice.

God's willingness to speak to us is often greater than our willingness to hear and obey what He tells us.

If we choose to disobey the Lord because we do not understand the reasons behind His instruction, we will never experience the fullness of the Christian life. When I read the command to fast secretly, I did not expect all the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual benefits that would come from obeying it. Nor did Jesus describe these benefits when He gave this command. He simply promised to reward us openly if we would fast secretly.

If we have not already done so, let's acknowledge God's absolute trustworthiness in our lives and purpose to obey Him in faith, even when our minds do not understand His ways.

Command 24: Hear God's Voice | Day 165

Listen to the Reproofs of Life!

A multimillionaire was very proud of his wealth and believed that it was due solely to his own creativity and hard work. His pride increased through the flattery of an attractive secretary who exclaimed, "You are the smartest and most handsome man I have ever met!" Soon, he became physically involved with this woman. At first it was a secret affair, but eventually his wife discovered what was happening, and obvious conflicts erupted in his marriage and family. However, that did not concern him too much because his company was the joy of his life.

One day unexpected events began to take place in his business. Eventually, he was forced into bankruptcy and lost his company and everything he owned. God says that breaking moral

commands will result in destruction and disgrace and will not go unpunished (see Proverbs 6:26–33). His reproof was consistent with this warning.

"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent" (Revelation 3:19).

The reproofs that we receive from God are not meant to destroy us, but to keep us on the narrow way that leads to life. No wise father will ignore his children's faults, because he desires their best and knows that they will not reach their full potential if he does not correct them. Likewise, our loving heavenly Father will chasten us if He sees us straying from the way of life and will use the reproof that will most effectively get our attention and draw us back to Him. When the Lord speaks to us through a reproof, it is a demonstration of His commitment to us as a Father and shows that we are His children (see Hebrews 12:5–6).

If we look closely, we will be able to see evidences of God's loving reproofs throughout our lives. In childhood, it may be the burn we received after disregarding a parent's instruction not to touch a hot stove. As a teenager, reproofs may come as a result of rejecting the counsel of parents and Scripture not to associate with worldly friends (see 1 Corinthians 15:33). Young adults who dishonor their parents and disobey Scripture by marrying an unbeliever will experience the sorrowful consequences of their choices. Even businessmen have told me that they have seen God's reproofs come when they fail to listen to the cautions of their wives regarding business decisions. We can experience reproofs in every area of life.

"For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life" (Proverbs 6:23).

All of life is an incredibly complex and interconnected series of causes and effects. They are all a part of God's ultimate plan of bringing sinners to repentance and causing believers to be conformed to the image of Christ. We can be confident that reproofs serve a beneficial purpose in our lives and that "… in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28).

When we fail to see the bigger picture of God's work in our lives by recognizing cause-and-effect sequences, we will also fail to hear His voice in the reproofs of life. Instead, we will react to our circumstances and become bitter toward God. Let's recall some of our own reproofs and discern the messages that God was seeking to communicate to us through them.

Command 24: Hear God's Voice

Study Question

Q: Why did God call Samuel three times before giving him a message, and why did God use a voice that sounded to Samuel like the voice of Eli? (See 1 Samuel 3:1–18.)

A: "The LORD called Samuel: and he answered, Here I am. And he ran to Eli, and said, Here I am; you called me. And he said, I did not call; go back and lie down … .

"Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

"The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy.

"So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening. … The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:4–10).

Before children know the Lord, God often speaks to them through the instruction of their parents. (See Proverbs 1:8, 4:1, and 6:20.) God uses their human authorities to prepare them to hear and obey His voice when they are older. It was God who spoke to Samuel, but it was Eli who perceived it was God speaking. Samuel's obedient response to Eli prepared him to respond obediently to God.

The first time God called to Samuel, God could have said "Samuel, this is God talking to you" and given him the message. However, it was necessary first for Eli to recognize Who was speaking to Samuel before receiving the message of God's impending judgment. It is not unusual for God to use children to communicate things that their parents need to hear. It is then the parents' challenge to recognize and respond to the voice of God. (See Matthew 21:15–16.)

Command 24: Hear God's Voice | Day 166

Be Attentive to Your Conscience!

One morning as I was getting ready for school, I thought, "It sure would be nice to have some extra money to buy some things I need." Suddenly the phone rang, and I heard the voice of a man ask, "Is there somebody there who would like to earn a little extra money?" I quickly responded, "Yes! Me."

It was as if he had heard my thoughts! Even though I felt a slight hesitation in my spirit, I asked for more information about his "opportunity." He said, "I can't explain it over the phone." This caused the "voice" of my conscience to grow stronger, but so did my curiosity. I reasoned, "How could something that seemed to be God's provision be wrong?" Pushing aside my cautions, I agreed to meet with him.

One of the first indications that our consciences have spoken is our immediate attempt to justify and explain away the cautions they have raised.

When we met, he described the impressive growth of the vending machine industry and how his company had placed vending machines in nearby locations and was looking for people to keep them filled and cleaned. It sounded easy enough and quite profitable. He then showed me how much more money I could make if I would actually buy the machine. After explaining that I didn't have money to buy it and had a conviction against borrowing money, he convinced me to use my Ford convertible as collateral.

With papers signed, I went to see my new vending machine. It was at a dingy gas station miles away from my home. When I asked the owner where it was, he said with disgust, "Over there in the corner," and added, "Will you please get that piece of junk out of here!" I looked with amazement at a dinky metal box on a stand and knew immediately that there was no chance of putting this "vending machine" anywhere except in my garage. There would be plenty of room for it without my car!

God uses our consciences to protect us from the pain and heartache of wrong decisions.

Every person has the Law of God written on his heart, which provides the basis from which his conscience can warn, reprove, and convict him of sin. For believers, the Holy Spirit, Who dwells in their spirits, further cultivates this sensitivity to right and wrong. (See Romans 2:15 and John 16:7–8, 13.) Ignoring the promptings of the conscience brings a sense of guilt. We must be careful not to defile or sear our consciences by rationalizing away cautions.

I have heard many men explain how they lost huge amounts of money by ignoring the promptings of their consciences. As I listen to their stories I see the same pattern that took place in my life when I lost my car. Scripture appeals to us to exercise our senses to discern right and wrong. As we do this, we can grow in maturity and in the ability to understand the deeper truths of God's Word. (See Hebrews 5:12–14.)

Now would be an excellent time to evaluate whether or not your conscience is trying to send you any messages. There may still be time to heed the warnings!

Command 24: Hear God's Voice | Day 167

Know How God Speaks!

A dentist in Philadelphia practiced out of a small building that had only a few parking spaces in front of it. This was an inconvenience to many of his patients, who were forced to find parking

wherever they could along a busy street. One day he learned that the vacant lot next to him was for sale. This lot could easily provide the much-needed parking for his patients.

However, there was one problem. The dentist did not have enough money to purchase the property and would have to take out a loan in order to buy the lot. He discussed the matter, including all of the financial benefits of such an investment, with his father, but his father was firm in his counsel: "Do not borrow for it." Was this the "voice of God" or the outdated thinking of a cautious, elderly man?

Based on the Scriptural principles of honoring your father and mother (see Exodus 20:12 and Proverbs 23:22), the dentist decided not to buy the lot. What happened? The city purchased it and turned it into a first-class parking lot, assuming responsibility for all of its future maintenance needs as well!

We will miss the voice of God if we do not recognize the truth of Scripture in the teaching and counsel of our human authorities.

God's primary mode of communication is His inspired and infallible written Word. The Spirit of God inspired Godly men to write the Scriptures, and the same Holy Spirit guides us in understanding and applying its truth to our lives. (See 2 Peter 1:21 and John 16:13.)

God also raises up pastors and others to teach the Word of God and explain how to apply it to our lives. (See Ephesians 4:11–12.) However, regardless of how wise and Godly these messengers are, we must confirm what they tell us with the Bible itself. Paul commended the Bereans because they checked his teaching against Scripture. "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11).

In addition to pastors, teachers, and parents, God speaks to us through government officials. We are to honor them as ministers of God and obey them as long as their directives are in harmony with God's Word. (See Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–14.) The Book of Proverbs tells us that God speaks to us and directs us through government officials: "The lips of a king speak as an oracle …" (Proverbs 16:10). "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Proverbs 21:1).

I am deeply indebted to the God-ordained messengers in my life through whom I have heard God's voice over the years. Indelible truths have been engrafted into my soul by gifted communicators of God's Word. Who are the people God has used in your life to communicate to you His truth, starting in your childhood up until now? Let's be alert to hear God's voice as He speaks to us through many different individuals in our lives.

Confirm God's Voice!

A young man met an attractive girl and desired to marry her. He began attending her church and getting acquainted with her family. He was aware of her deep commitment to God, so one day he said to her, "I have been praying about you, and God has given me assurance from Scripture that you are to be my wife." The girl was impressed by his apparent spirituality and flattered by his attention, but she wondered, "Was his assurance truly from God, or did he simply find a verse to support his own desires?"

Fortunately, she sought confirmation from her father, who diligently "interviewed" the young man and discovered that he had major character flaws and moral struggles. He realized that this man was not at all ready for marriage, especially to his daughter. Her mother confirmed his wise counsel, and the daughter was spared much heartache.

God's voice will never contradict His written Word.

It is very easy for a person to say, "God told me to do something," when God never said it. So how do we know for sure when it is God speaking to us? Several factors will guide us in making sure that it is God speaking and not our flesh or the deceptive voice of Satan, who often appears as an angel of light. (See 2 Corinthians 11:14.)

The first and most important factor in hearing God's voice is making sure that we have clean hearts and unbroken fellowship with the Lord. If we allow sin to rule in our lives, the Holy Spirit will be grieved, and we will not receive the direction that He wants to give us. We then will be driven by our own sinful desires. (See Psalm 106:14–15.)

When God speaks to us from His Word, He often gives confirmation by a second or third witness. The principle of confirming truth is given in the Mosaic law: "… A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Deuteronomy 19:15). In his letter to the believers in Corinth, the Apostle Paul reaffirmed this principle. (See 2 Corinthians 13:1.)

God pleads, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1).

One day a businessman was offered a higher paying job with a good company, and he was inclined to accept it; however, acceptance of the job would require relocating. How could he know if this was God's will?

One of his first confirmations would be in the counsel of his wife. Together they can go to God's Word and Godly older Christians to seek further confirmations and counsel. (See Proverbs 11:14.)

This week in your journal, record some of the situations in which God specifically spoke to you about important matters and how you were able to confirm that you were hearing God's voice.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 11:15

"He who has ears, let him hear"

John 10:27

"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."

Matthew 4:4

"Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

John 16:13

"But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come."

Psalm 16:7

"I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me."

Romans 10:17

"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

1 Corinthians 2:11

"For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God."

John 14:23–24

"Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me."

Find the Secret to Knowing God!

As we approached the ornate iron gates, I looked down the curved driveway lined with beautiful flowers and expansive manicured lawns to the entrance of a palatial mansion. Inside, many

important people waited to talk with the prominent and influential owner, and others tried in vain to be given a few moments of his time. I had come because I was invited to spend the entire evening with this man and his family. Why was I given this opportunity?

My connection to this prominent person was not direct but was through my friendship with his son. Because the father was pleased with my relationship with his son, he wanted to spend time with me.

This is the same way it is with God. We are able to meet Him—the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Whose dwelling has far more splendor than any earthly mansion—because of our relationship with His Son. Jesus explained, "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). The key to knowing the Father through the Son and learning His ways is given to us in the following command:

Command Twenty-Five

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28–30).

The purpose of taking on the yoke of Christ is to "get in step" with Jesus and learn His character by spending time with Him. It is significant that Jesus describes Himself with the characteristics of meekness and lowliness of heart. The longer we are yoked with Christ, the more opportunity we will have to learn these qualities from Him. If we allow Him to develop these qualities in our lives, we will know more of God, because the Father and Son are one.

Many people have developed a wrong perception of God. They view Him as harsh and unloving because of difficulties He has allowed in their lives. However, the problem lies not with God but rather with a lack of meekness and lowliness of heart in the life of the individual. When we do things "our way," we experience the painful consequences of our actions and then have a tendency to wrongly blame God for them.

"There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (Proverbs 16:25).

It is clear from Christ's teaching that we will be able to know the Father only through the Son. Jesus stated, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Thus, if we want to know God, we must first come to Jesus, accept His invitation to exchange our yoke of sin for His yoke of righteousness, and learn about Who He really is by walking close to Him. Let's purpose now to engraft this command into our hearts and learn Who God really is!

Command 25: Take My Yoke | Day 170

Put on Christ's Yoke!

A yoke is a wooden beam that is placed over the necks of two oxen or other bearers of burdens. Under each end of the beam the wood is curved, and metal or wooden bands slide over the heads of the animals. Once yoked together, the pair must work in harmony, or there will be continual chafing and strain.

To avoid a constant struggle, one member of the team must be dominant and the other submissive. The dominant one leads the way, and the submissive one learns to anticipate the moves of the leader and work in perfect harmony. If two strong-willed oxen are yoked together, there will be constant tension as one ox pulls one way and the other tries to pull in another direction.

Strain and pressures in the Christian life may indicate that we are out of step with Christ.

It is obvious that an ox can be yoked to only one partner and that the two oxen must be of equal size and strength. Otherwise, the weaker member will be under continual tension. The Law of God forbade the yoking of two animals of unequal strength, such as an ox and a donkey. (See Deuteronomy 22:10.)

How then, can a weak and faulty human be yoked with Christ, Who has infinite strength? The exciting answer is that when we take on Christ's yoke we also take on His strength, which allows us to accomplish all the tasks before us, as Paul declares in Philippians 4:13: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

"We must so learn of Christ, as to learn Christ, for He is both Teacher and Lesson, Guide and Way, and All in All." —Matthew Henry

Christ's invitation is to put on His yoke and learn of Him. We must submit ourselves to His training, will, and leadership in all things, and let our whole lives become one with Him. We must learn to abide in Christ. It is when we are truly yoked with Christ that we will be conformed to His image and become like Him. (See Romans 8:29.)

It is equally true that if we are yoked together with unbelievers we will take on their nature and characteristics. Thus, Paul warns, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Pastor Charles Sheldon wanted to help his congregation learn to see the practical implications of a life yoked to Christ. Through stories, he encouraged them to make decisions based on what they believed Jesus would do. These stories resulted in his classic novel, In His Steps, which still challenges believers today with the question, "What would Jesus do?"

The benefits of being yoked with Christ become ours only as we yield to His leadership and learn to walk in harmony with His ways. Today, let's choose to put on Christ's yoke and begin asking ourselves the question, "What would Jesus do in this situation?"

Command 25: Take My Yoke

Related Character Quality

Obedience vs. Willfulness

Obedience is freedom to be creative under the protection of divinely appointed authorities.

The Motive of Obedience

Two words in Deuteronomy 11:1 are foundational to obedience: love and keep. "Love the LORD your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always."

True obedience must be based on love. Therefore, Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). When we truly love the Lord, "his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

One way to obey God's commandments is to place them before our eyes with the intent of obeying them. God's people were told to write out God's commandments and keep them before their eyes so that they would not forget them—even writing them on their doorposts so they would see them as they went out and came in.

The best way to keep God's commandments before our eyes is to follow the instruction of Deuteronomy 11:18: "Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads."

Ministers of God

All legitimate authority comes from God. He is the One Who sets up rulers and takes them down. (See Psalm 75:7.) Therefore, when we disobey a God-given authority, we experience God's judgment.

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves" (Romans 13:1–2).

In Romans 13:4–6, God-given authorities are described as "God's servant" three times. They carry out the will of God through authority entrusted to them.

Defining Jurisdictions for Obedience

When there are conflicting commands between different authorities or when one authority tells us to do that which we know is morally wrong, we must discern if the one who is giving the command is operating within the proper jurisdiction. There are four basic areas of jurisdiction.

1. Family

Parents are given jurisdiction by God to train up their children to reverence Him and do what is right. Sons and daughters are instructed to obey their parents in all areas. (See Ephesians 6:1–2.) However, if parents command their children to do things that are contrary to the laws of God or the laws of man, they are operating outside their jurisdiction.

2. Government

God ordained government to carry out His will in matters of justice. Rulers are to praise those who do well and punish those who do evil. (See Romans 13:3–4.) Because civil authorities derive their power from God, they will be judged if they violate the laws of God. Therefore, citizens are to make wise appeals to contest unwise or unjust laws.

3. Church

The heads of households are to voluntarily submit to the leadership of wise and Godly elders in the church. The elders are not to go beyond their jurisdiction by instructing wives or children to disregard the guidance and wishes of the father, as long as his instruction is consistent with Scripture. (See Galatians 4:1–2.)

4. Business

Employees are to obey employers with wholehearted service. If an employer requires action that violates the Biblical convictions of an employee, the employee should make a wise appeal and, if the appeal is rejected, he should consider resigning. (See Acts 5:29 and Colossians 3:22–23.

Analyze Your Labor Load!

At a conference for youth leaders, I learned about an event that had attracted thousands of teenagers to hear the Gospel. It was called a "funspiration" and combined fun and games with the presentation of the Gospel.

When I returned home, I purposed to have the greatest funspiration on record for my 1,600 classmates. I rented a huge gymnasium, lined up cheerleaders from a nearby Christian college for the games, arranged a premier showing of the new Billy Graham film, scheduled an outstanding comedian, brought in a large Christian youth band, and advertised the event with posters, radio ads, and newspaper ads. I even promised a box of candy to the first 300 who arrived!

On the evening of the event, I had a temperature of 101 degrees, but I would not let that stop me from carrying out my important program. At 7:00 p.m. the gym was all decorated, and a group of us went into a side room for a time of prayer. At 7:30 p.m. I walked out expecting to see the crowd. Instead I saw a cavernous gymnasium with a small group huddled at one end. I thought, "Maybe there is a traffic jam." So, I looked out the front door and saw an empty street. There was no question about the labor that went into this event: it was my labor, under my yoke, with my results.

"God's work is not man working for God; it is God's own work, though often wrought through man's hands."—Hudson Taylor

The command to take on Christ's yoke and learn of Him is basic to the entire Christian life. Until we come under the yoke of Christ's leadership, we will be totally ineffective for Him. Jesus said, "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Willfulness is an evidence of our own pride. It is demanding our own way and making our own decisions. Willfulness leads to conflicts that produce tension and spiritual burdens. As we put on Christ's yoke, we surrender our wills to Him in exchange for His will and His peace.

Taking the yoke of Christ means that thereafter we say, "Not my will, but yours be done." (See Luke 22:42.)

There were many rulers of the Jews, but Jesus conversed in depth with only one (see John 3). There were many sick and diseased people at the pool of Bethesda, but Jesus healed only one (see John 5). Jesus taught the multitudes, but He invested greater time in teaching His disciples. In spite of all the unmet needs, Jesus was able to say to His heavenly Father, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (John 17:4).

We tend to make lists of the things we want to do, and we receive a sense of exhilaration when we can check a completed item off the list. However, let's take on Christ's yoke and make sure our list is the one He gives us for the labor of each day.

Command 25: Take My Yoke | Day 172

Learn the Nature of Jesus!

Of all the character qualities that Jesus could have chosen to describe Himself, why did He select "meekness" and "lowliness of heart"? He chose these qualities because they perfectly describe His nature and ministry.

Meekness is not weakness. Rather, it is submitting our strength to our heavenly Father's control.

A powerful and swift horse demonstrates meekness when it allows its rider to determine its direction, speed, and distance. In like manner, Jesus demonstrated meekness when He determined to do nothing except the will of His heavenly Father. Jesus demonstrated meekness in the following ways:

- He yielded His right to all the riches and treasures of heaven and was born into a poor family in a despised community. His primary ministry was among the poor and needy. In fact, He came to preach the Gospel to the meek. (See 2 Corinthians 8:9 and Isaiah 61:1.)
- He yielded His right to be everywhere (omnipresent) and subjected Himself to the physical limitations of a body. Now He is exalted at the right hand of God and dwells in the hearts of all who receive Him. (See Romans 8:34 and Ephesians 3:17.)
- He yielded His right to the independent exercise of His divine power and was subject to His parents and to the government rulers who put Him to death. (See John 14:31, Luke 2:51, and Isaiah 53.)

Taking on Christ's yoke means that we embrace His perspective about all of life: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:5–7).

To the degree that we humble ourselves we will experience the great rewards of meekness.

Great treasures are reserved for those who learn and demonstrate meekness. We are told, "He crowns the humble with salvation" (Psalm 149:4). Through meekness we can experience direction for daily decisions, because "the meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way" (Psalm 25:9). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek: for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

The blessing of meekness involves an inner tranquility of the spirit, soul, and body. Let's take on Christ's yoke of a meek and quiet spirit as we daily surrender our rights and expectations to Him and learn His nature.

Command 25: Take My Yoke

Study Question

Q: The Law of God prohibits the yoking of two animals of different sizes and strengths, such as an ox and a donkey. God also forbids the yoking of two people with opposing natures, such as a believer and an unbeliever. Why then, would God yoke a weak and faulty human being with a powerful and holy God? (See Deuteronomy 7:2–3, 22:10, and 2 Corinthians 6:14.)

A: The requirement for two beasts of burden to work in harmony under a yoke has caused the phrase "being yoked together" to be used metaphorically in describing an individual's voluntary submission to another, as in the "yoke" of marriage.

The Law of God forbids the yoking of two animals of different sizes and strengths, because to do so would place the smaller, weaker animal in a position of constant pain and pressure. (See Deuteronomy 22:10.)

For this reason, Scripture admonishes believers not to be "yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14). Such a yoking would be unworkable bondage and wearisome servitude, since the nature of the believer is "unequal" to the nature of an unbeliever.

However, as we put on Christ's yoke, we surrender our wills to His will. The resulting attitude is meekness: the yielding of our rights to God, putting our strength under His control. It is significant that Jesus describes Himself as "gentle and humble in heart" Matthew 11:29 and invites us to learn of Him. (See Matthew 11:29.)

If we are yoked to Jesus, we will learn His ways as we yield to His leadership. As we are conformed to the image of Christ through an intimate knowledge of Him and His ways, we will learn by experience, God's "good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2).

Get in Step With Life!

It was a discouraging routine. I would wake up each morning knowing I should immediately get up and spend time in God's Word. However, I was just too tired to crawl out of bed, so I would decide to have my Scripture reading after school and get a little more sleep with the rationalization that I would be more alert for the day if I slept just a little longer.

I would peek at the clock every few minutes to make sure I did not oversleep. It would read like the numbers of Boeing aircraft: 707, 727, 747. Finally, I would jump out of bed, rush around to get ready for the day, and dash off to my high school a few blocks away, so that I would be sitting at my desk before the bell rang at 8:30.

All day long I felt as if I was trying to catch up after my bad start. Obviously I was not yoked to Christ's schedule but to my habit of being late to bed and late to rise. For years I got extra sleep for my body but lived with a tension of defeat in my soul.

Taking on Christ's yoke means embracing His priorities for each day.

We can begin to learn Christ's priorities by asking ourselves, "What was a normal day like in the life of Jesus?" The answer is that He had no "normal days." Every day was a new series of great works that God ordained for Him to carry out. This is consistent with our call as believers. We are saved by grace through faith unto good works, which God predetermined for us before we were ever born. (See Ephesians 2:8–10 and Titus 2:14.)

We know that Jesus respected the night as the time to sleep and the day as the time to work (see John 9:4). However, His fellowship with His heavenly Father and His ministry to others was of greater importance to Him than sleep. Thus, Jesus rose a great while before day and went into a solitary place for prayer (see Mark 1:35). In John 8:2 we read, "At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts" and taught the people. Jesus also chose to set aside sleep in order to counsel with Nicodemus, who came to Him at night (see John 3:1–2). Prior to choosing His disciples, Jesus prayed all night long (see Luke 6:12–13).

Jesus had a clearly defined mission that involved personal visits to all the key cities and villages (see Matthew 9:35). Yet, He knew the importance of adequate rest when He beckoned His disciples to rest a while after a time of ministry (see Mark 6:30–31).

We become bored with life when we view it as a series of dull routines rather than a series of good works.

Putting on Jesus' yoke does not mean that we neglect our daily responsibilities. Instead, it means that in fulfilling them, we look for opportunities to live out the commands Christ gave us and to teach them to others. Not only will we enjoy life, but we will also discover Christ's secret of a victorious life. Jesus said, "I always do what pleases him [the Father]" (John 8:29). Can we say the same?

Command 25: Take My Yoke | Day 174

Develop Unity by Being Yoked!

As believers we are all members of the same Body "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12). Paul reminds believers that because we are yoked together with Christ, we must learn how to "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

Putting on Christ's yoke means our love should be evidenced by our words and actions. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). Jesus commanded His disciples to love one another, because "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

Conflicts with fellow believers may reveal that we are out of step with Christ and are acting on the sinful impulses of our own wills.

The purpose of yoking oxen together is not to restrict their freedom, but rather to increase the potential of what they can accomplish. When two oxen are yoked together, they can pull with greater strength than either one could pull individually. The same principle is true for spiritual labors. Scripture states, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up … . Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:9–12).

In the church of Philippi, believers were not getting along with each other. Not only were their conflicts damaging their fellowship with one another, but their conflicts were also hindering the spread of the Gospel. Therefore, Paul reminded them that they were yoked to Christ: "Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel" (Philippians 4:3).

Lack of harmony between believers encourages the world to reject the truth that Christ came to save them. (See John 17:21.)

The tendency among believers today is to be bound together by some minor doctrinal distinction rather than the bonds of Christ's love and truth. Fellowship among ourselves then becomes a primary goal rather than being a natural by-product of teamwork in the Gospel. The result is that we miss the wonderful potential of walking with Jesus and the lasting fruit that comes from His work in our lives.

We are told to "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2). This tremendous love and unity was demonstrated in the first century, as multitudes of believers were added to the Church daily. They were united in their love for the Lord and their desire to grow spiritually. They made sure that no one lacked daily provision as they sold their possessions and had all things in common. Rich fellowship and oneness of spirit were the results of this unity. (See Acts 2:41–47.) Let's evaluate how we treat our fellow believers and purpose to show Christ's love to one another.

Command 25: Take My Yoke | Day 175

Find Ultimate Rest!

In this command there are actually two levels of rest that are promised. The first level is given to us when we become believers in the Lord Jesus Christ: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). The second level of rest is not something given to us but is found by us when we fulfill the requirements of being yoked with Christ: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me … and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29–30).

Salvation gives rest between our spirits and God's Spirit. Christ's yoke allows us to find rest in our souls.

In this command Jesus contrasts the heavy burdens that we bring to Him at salvation with the light burdens that we carry with Him in service. The burdens are light because we do not carry them in our own strength but by the power of God's grace, even as Paul testified: "I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10).

Being yoked with Christ does not mean the absence of labors, fiery trials, tribulations, or reproaches. Rather, in the midst of them we will hear the words of Jesus: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." We then can respond as Paul did, saying, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Vaughn Shoemaker was an award-winning cartoonist for a Chicago newspaper for many years. I remember one cartoon he drew of a mighty rushing waterfall. Over the fall extended a large branch from a tree, and in the branch was a nest with a mother bird sitting over her newly hatched chicks. Beneath the cartoon was the title "Peace." Over the years this cartoon was reprinted in the paper because it captured the fact that peace is not what is happening around us but what is taking place within us.

Being yoked with Christ brings rest, even in the midst of toil and hardship.

The rest that Christ offers is available to all who take His yoke and learn of Him. Consider some of the many benefits that we receive: We gain a leader we can trust; we no longer have to carry our own load; we receive clear direction for each day's work; we never again walk alone; we always have One to share our load and give us the strength to bear our burdens; we can be confident of success and productivity; and we enjoy the delight of pleasing God, glorifying Him, and gaining eternal rewards.

In your journal this week it would be significant to imitate the style used by Charles Sheldon in his book titled In His Steps, and write summaries of several past and potential situations along with the question "What would Jesus do?" As you and your family discuss these situations, you will gain a greater understanding of what it means to be yoked with Christ.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 11:28-30

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light".

Philippians 2:5–7

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

1 Peter 2:21

"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."

1 John 2:6

"Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did."

Psalm 25:9

"He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way."

1 Peter 3:4

"Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight."

Psalm 55:22

"Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall."

Get the Blessing Not the Curse!

To all who saw her she was just a poor, hardworking woman. Her shoulders and back bent forward from years of manual labor, and her clothes were faded and worn. She spent as little as possible on herself, because in her heart was a cherished dream: one day she would stand beside her only son when he graduated from college. All her sacrifices would then be worthwhile.

The long-awaited day finally arrived. She traveled to the college eager to share in this special event. As she greeted her son, she anticipated expressions of joy and appreciation. Instead her son said, "Mother, I don't know how to say this, but I don't want my friends to know that you are my mother." Shocked, she asked, "Why would you say that, son?" He stammered a moment and responded, "Well, you are not very well dressed, and your appearance is an embarrassment." The mother was crushed and stunned by what her son had said. Through his attitude and actions, he had just violated the following command that Jesus gave:

Command Twenty-Six

"Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death" (Matthew 15:4).

Honor is one of the greatest gifts that we give to others by our words and actions. In practice it is choosing to esteem someone as having high value, worth, and importance to us. In this command Jesus restates the importance of children honoring their parents.

How and why does this command differ from the Fifth Commandment of the Decalogue? "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12). Paul points out that the Fifth Commandment is the first command with a promise of blessing. (See Ephesians 6:1–3.) Jesus' reaffirmation of the command includes a punishment for not following it: "Must be put to death."

The Pharisees had contrived a clever scheme called Corban to avoid their obligation to provide for their parents in old age. They dedicated all their resources to God, yet they continued to use their resources for themselves. When their parents needed financial assistance, they would respond that they had nothing to give because it had all been dedicated to God.

Jesus rebuked them for making the commandment of God of no effect by their tradition. (See Mark 7:10–13.) In His rebuke, He reaffirmed the consequence of cursing father and mother. (See Exodus 21:17.)

According to the Mosaic law, one who cursed a parent received the same penalty as one who committed adultery—death. (See Leviticus 20:9–10.)

There are several Hebrew and Greek words that describe the full range of cursing, from mild disrespect to vicious consignment to hell. The Hebrew word used in the Law is the milder form of cursing and means to lightly esteem your parents. This brings up two important questions: How many times have we actually cursed our father and mother? Can we purpose now to fully obey this command to honor them?

Honor Your Parents' Position!

One day an enthusiastic young man named Chris came to discuss with me the possibility of working full-time with the ministry. As we talked, I asked him what his parents thought of his plans. He replied that his father's desire and counsel was for him to work with him in business for three years before going into full-time Christian work. I urged him to follow his father's counsel, to which Chris agreed. As he chose to honor his father's wishes, he decided to spend not just three years but ten years working with his father.

In the years that followed, Chris met a Godly woman who became his wife, and they began their family. When he was not in "full-time ministry," Chris still looked for ways to minister to others. As he developed his business skills, he began working on a training program to help people break down communication barriers. In time, he began receiving requests for training from families, churches, and businesses. As he presented this material, God continued to expand and bless his outreach. Had he chosen to go into full-time ministry first, he would have missed the important lessons learned while working with his father. Now, thirteen years later, Chris Hogan has a powerful, life-changing, international ministry.

God uses imperfect parents as channels of His protection, provision, correction, and direction for sons and daughters.

We read in Proverbs, "My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them upon your heart forever; fasten them around your neck. When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you" (Proverbs 6:20–22). These verses show the importance of following the instruction we receive from our parents; however, if our parents tell us to do evil or immoral things, we must not obey them.

God has established three primary positions of authority: parents, government officials, and church leaders. Scripture is filled with vivid accounts of how God worked through imperfect leaders in these positions to accomplish His will in the lives of those under their care. God even uses the wrath of leaders to praise him. (See Psalm 76:10.) King Herod was a ruthless tyrant who killed innocent children. Yet, as a result of his rampage, Joseph and Mary fled with Jesus to Egypt, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Matthew 2:15).

"Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old" (Proverbs 23:22).

Some people have concluded that there is an age when a child no longer needs to listen to his or her parents. However, this Scripture implies that listening to a parent's counsel extends from childhood into adulthood. As adults we are responsible to make our own decisions, but we must still seek and listen to the counsel of our parents. In the past, have you reacted to imperfections in your parents and failed to respect and honor the position they have in your life? If so, let's purpose to begin honoring their God-given position.

Command 26: Honor Your Parents

Related Character Quality

Reverence vs. Disrespect

Reverence is awareness of how God is working through the people and events in my life to produce the character of Christ in me.

The Key to Reverence

Sincere reverence for people grows out of a proper fear of the Lord, since He is the One Who created all men and established structures of authority. There are actually three aspects of the fear of the Lord, as indicated by three Hebrew and Greek words. Each aspect involves a progressive understanding and reverence for the ways of God and His dealings with mankind.

First Aspect: Fear of Punishment

All people should have this level of fear.

- Because God sent wild lions among them in Samaria, the king appointed a priest to teach the people to fear (yare') the Lord, but still they did not turn from their idols. (See 2 Kings 17:24–36.)
- Daniel prayed to the great and dreadful (yare') God Who kept His word. (See Daniel 9:2–4.)
- The people of Israel feared (yare') God when they saw the Egyptian army perish in the Red Sea. (See Exodus 14:31.)
- Devout (eulabes) men of every nation reverenced God. (See Acts 2:5.)

Second Aspect: Fear of Causing Shame

This is fear that motivates Godly action.

- Abraham offered Isaac on the altar: "Now I know that you fear God" (Genesis 22:12).
- Joseph told his brothers he feared God and sent them home to his father. (See Genesis 42:18.)
- Pharaoh's servants who feared God sought protection from the hail. (See Exodus 9:20.)
- Men who feared the Lord were to be appointed rulers in Israel. (See Exodus 18:21.)
- Job was "blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8).
- Hezekiah feared the Lord and sought Him. (See Jeremiah 26:19.)
- Because Jonah feared God, he told the sailors to throw him overboard to calm the storm. (See Jonah 1:9, 12.)
- Noah prepared an ark, being moved with fear, and saved his household. (See Hebrews 11:7.)

Third Aspect: Fear of Losing Intimacy With God

This fear is a dread of losing an intimate relationship with God.

- "I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me" (Jeremiah 32:40).
- David said to God, "in reverence will I bow down toward your holy temple" (Psalm 5:7).
- "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD" (Isaiah 11:2–3).
- "… and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe" (Hebrews 12:28).

Personal Evaluation: How Much Reverence Do You Demonstrate?

- Do you have a continual awareness that God is watching all that you think, say, and do?
- Do you bow before the Lord in honor of His holiness?
- Have you bowed the knee to Jesus Christ and proclaimed that He is your Lord?
- As the temple of the Holy Spirit, do you treat your body with respect?
- Would your parents say that you fully and sincerely honor them?
- Do you respect government authorities as ministers of God for your good?
- Do you view your employer as an instrument through whom God is working in your life?
- Do you spend the Lord's Day delighting in Him rather than in your own pursuits?
- Do you look for ways to praise others and to deflect praise when you receive it?

Trace Disrespect to Dishonor!

A frustrated father appealed to me for counsel, saying, "What am I doing wrong? I have taught my children the Bible, but they just won't respect or obey me."

I asked him, "Growing up, were you respectful and obedient to your parents?"

There was silence as he thought a few moments before responding. "I think so. I was not really that rebellious."

I decided to approach the question from a different perspective. "If I were to ask your father and mother, 'Was your son respectful and obedient to you,' what would they say?"

He immediately answered, "They would say, 'No.' "

This father was compensating for his past disrespect by being too strict with his children and provoking them to anger. (See Ephesians 6:4.)

Solomon appealed to his son on the basis of the loving relationship that he had with his parents. (See Proverbs 4:1–4.)

God did not say, "I was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," but "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." (See Exodus 3:6.) God's character is unchanging, and His principles remain the same. Because of this, we can learn many lessons from the lives of these men, especially in the area of honoring parents.

Abraham had a strong respect and honor for his parents, as indicated by the fact that they traveled out of Ur together. (See Genesis 11:31.) Abraham's son Isaac honored Abraham by obedience even unto death and received all the riches of his father. (See Genesis 24:36.) In contrast, Jacob deceived his father, and as a result he had years of hard labor, marital problems, and family conflict. In the same way that Jacob dishonored his father with lies and deception, his sons dishonored him in the matter of Joseph's disappearance. (See Genesis 37:31–33.)

What parents do in moderation, children do in excess.

We are given a striking account of four types of wicked generations in Proverbs 30. Each generation listed is progressively worse. The last one is described as "those whose teeth are swords and whose jaws are set with knives to devour the poor from the earth, the needy from among mankind." This depicts a brutal and ruthless disrespect for people and life. However, it is significant that the first generation in this sequence begins with those "who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers."

This explains what I have witnessed for many years: Parents wonder why they have rebellious children who do not respect God, the law, their parents, others, or even themselves. The problems often can be traced back to parents who did not honor their parents. If this is the case in your family, it would be wise to ask your parents to forgive you and then to encourage your children to learn from your failures, rather than saying "don't do what I did."

Honor Your Father and Mother!

Since honoring our parents is to take a high priority in our lives, it is important that we know how to practically apply this command. Here are ten ways that we can begin showing honor to our parents.

- Enjoy their company. Parents are honored when their sons and daughters delight in being around them and doing things with them. They are saddened when their children view time with them as an obligation rather than a joy.
- Be with them in public. It is an honor to parents when their family is together in public settings, such as sitting together in church. It should be a priority to join them at public events that they view as important.
- Introduce your parents enthusiastically to others. People can tell how much honor and respect we have for our parents by the degree of enthusiasm we show when we introduce them.
- Thank them with gifts of appreciation. In this passage, the Greek word translated as honor, timao, means "to attach a value to something." We honor the government by paying taxes. We honor the Lord by giving tithes and offerings. It is therefore appropriate to honor parents by giving them meaningful and valued gifts.

- Provide facts for decisions. Parents are called upon to make a multitude of decisions. In order for parents to make wise decisions, they must have all the facts, not just a select few. We must be open and honest with our parents and trust God to work through them.
- Praise them before others. Unfortunately, many sons and daughters complain about their parents to others. No matter how faulty parents may be, we should look for qualities and achievements that we can praise before others.
- Deflect praise. When people praise us for significant achievements, it is appropriate to thank them and then to direct praise to our parents for their many investments in our lives.
- Welcome their correction. When parents address real or perceived problems in our lives, we can honor them by humbly receiving their correction. As we recognize that God is working through our parents to sharpen our lives, we are able to respond correctly to them.
- Care for them in old age. When parents are incapable of taking care of themselves, it is our responsibility to honor them by making sure that their needs are met. Jesus' reaffirmation of the command to honor our parents was a rebuke to the Pharisees for neglecting this responsibility.
- Honor their memory. When parents pass away, we should continue to speak respectfully of them. Their wise teachings and good examples should be written down and carried on for generations to come.

Do our words and actions toward our parents reflect an attitude of honor? Let's use this list as a starting point for creative ways to show them honor.

Command 26: Honor Your Parents

Study Question

Q: When Asa became the King of Judah, he removed his grandmother from being the queen and tore down her idol and burned it. Why was this dishonoring act pleasing to God? (See 1 Kings 15:9–13.)

A: This case illustrates the distinction between honoring and obeying. The command is to honor father and mother, but that does not mean that we are to obey them when they tell us to do something that is contrary to the higher Law of God.

Asa removed his grandmother, Maachah, from being queen because her leadership was in opposition to the Word of God and was a carryover from the reign of his evil father, Abijam, who ruled Judah for three years and did evil in the Lord's sight. (See 1 Kings 15:1–3.)

In fact, King Asa was following this command in a larger sphere—he was honoring his forefather David and walking in his ways. God emphasizes this fact in the account of Asa. "Asa did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as his father David had done" (1 Kings 15:11).

Solomon faced a similar situation when his mother became involved in his older brother's scheme to seize the kingdom from him. His older brother claimed that the kingdom was his and that all Israel wanted him to reign. He asked Solomon's mother, Bathsheba, to make a request of Solomon that would have further established his claim to be king.

Solomon rejected his mother's request and brought judgment to his older brother for plotting against him. This action honored his father David, who had sworn by the Lord to make his son Solomon king after him. (See 1 Kings 1–2.)

There is a strong, natural tendency to excuse family members for doing things that displease the Lord and thereby to honor them above the Lord. This is what Eli did with his wicked sons, and God judged both him and his sons with death. God asked Eli, "Why do you honor your sons more than me...? … Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained" (1 Samuel 2:29–30).

Honor God by Honoring Parents!

When Jeremiah brought the elders of a large family into the Temple and offered them wine to drink, they responded with an amazing account of how they had honored the instructions of their forefather for more than 250 years!

They told Jeremiah, "We do not drink wine, because our forefather Jonadab son of Recab gave us this command: 'Neither you nor your descendants must ever drink wine. Also you must never build houses, sow seed or plant vineyards; you must never have any of these things, but must always live in tents … We have obeyed everything our forefather Jonadab son of Recab commanded us" (Jeremiah 35:6–10).

God praised and rewarded the Recabites for honoring the commandment of their earthly father. He used them as an example before Judah of the obedience that should have been rendered to Him as their heavenly Father. "Jonadab son of Recab ordered his sons not to drink wine and this command has been kept. To this day they do not drink wine, because they obey their forefather's command. But I have spoken to you again and again, yet you have not obeyed me" (Jeremiah 35:14).

The honor we give to an earthly father is a reflection of the honor we show to our heavenly Father.

The correlation between honoring earthly fathers and honoring our heavenly Father is clearly seen in Scripture: "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty" (Malachi 1:6).

Because the Recabites honored their father, God honored them with sons who would be true to Him: "Therefore, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Jonadab son of Recab will never fail to have a man to serve me" (Jeremiah 35:19).

We are wise to listen to the counsel our parents give us from their years of life experience.

In the course of two and a half centuries, there is no doubt that the Rechabites encountered tremendous pressure to disobey their father's command. They would have had many plausible reasons to disobey as well, such as the fact that the commands were given to them so long ago, the instruction no longer fit the present culture, the Mosaic law was not as strict as these commands (especially the command to not buy property or live in houses), and no one else in Judah had to obey them. However, because they honored their father and obeyed his commands, the Rechabites escaped capture by invading armies and the resulting slavery in a foreign land that Judah experienced.

Many people today think that they have good reasons to reject the instruction of their parents, but the message of the Rechabites stands as a lasting reminder that God honors those who honor their parents.

Know the Basis of Honor!

King David's call for Mephibosheth to come before him struck fear in Mephibosheth's heart because he was related to Saul, who had tried to kill David. But David did the unexpected and honored Mephibosheth, even having him sit at the King's banquet table. David did this not because of who Mephibosheth was, but because of whom he represented. He was the son of Jonathan, whom David loved as his own soul. (See 2 Samuel 9.)

We honor a person based on our perception of his importance or the importance of those he represents.

Reverence for others grows out of a proper fear of the Lord, since He is the One Who created all men and established structures of authority. Therefore, true honor is actually based on our perception of the power, majesty, and holiness of God.

Reverence for God should cause us to honor every person as a representative of God, because He created them in His own image and has placed them in our lives for our benefit. On this basis, God instructs us to "Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king" (1 Peter 2:17).

Personal greed and pride destroy our ability to truly honor God or those who represent Him. In Mark 12, Jesus explains this truth in a parable about a wealthy master who sent one of his servants to a distant vineyard that he owned. The tenants who were caring for the vineyard beat the servant and drove him away rather than honoring him as the representative of the master and giving him the fruit of the land.

The master continued to send servants to the vineyard, but they experienced the same abusive disrespect. Finally, the master decided to send his beloved son, expecting that the son would surely be met with respect. However, the wicked tenants said among themselves, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours" (Mark 12:7). Because of their failure to honor the authority that the servants and the son represented, the wicked tenants were put to death when the master returned.

We are not born with a natural tendency to honor God or others. We learn honor by learning to fear the Lord.

Giving honor does not depend on the worthiness of the recipient; rather, it is a voluntary decision to unconditionally place value upon a person because of who he is or whom he represents. There is no question that our parents are given to us by God. Not only were they created by God, but they were chosen to be the ones to bring us into the world and entrusted with the responsibility of training us in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Sometimes it is difficult to honor our parents because they make decisions that seem to be illogical. When this happens, we should ask ourselves, "What is God trying to tell us through them?"

Ask yourself, "If I were to view every person as a personal representative of God, how would my attitude and behavior toward them change?

Make Wise Appeals!

A mother glanced out her front window and saw some people walking toward the front door. She did not have time to talk with them right then, so she told her daughter to tell them she was not at home. How could this daughter honor her mother without disobeying God's Word, which instructs us not to lie? (See Colossians 3:9.)

Honoring parents does not mean we are to obey a request to do something that is contrary to the higher law of God.

Daniel and other young men of Judah had been taken as captives to Babylon to receive special training in the service of the King. When Daniel and his three friends were given the King's meat to eat and wine to drink, they knew they could not partake of it, because doing so would be contrary to God's Law. Therefore, Daniel made a wise appeal to his authority and received approval for his request, which solved his moral dilemma and still met the goals of his authority. From this account, we can learn several basic factors involved in making a wise appeal:

- **Develop a Good Rapport Before Making an Appeal:** "Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel" (Daniel 1:9). We must trust God to give us favor in the eyes of those to whom we make appeals and realize that God is the only One Who can change their hearts. We should also make sure we have demonstrated the right attitudes and behavior before a conflict arises. If the daughter mentioned in the story above had been characterized by honoring her parents, it is likely that her mother would have been receptive to an appeal from her.
- **Explain Convictions Without Condemning:** Daniel did not condemn others who ate and drank the King's provisions. He simply explained his convictions. If the daughter had said to her mother, "You are wrong for asking me to lie for you," the mother most likely

would have reacted. However, if the daughter had respectfully explained her commitment to always tell the truth, the mother probably would have respected her daughter's conviction.

- **Understand the Authorities' Goals and Design a Creative Solution:** The main goal of the prince over Daniel was to have healthy young men to put into the King's service, so Daniel proposed a ten-day test with different foods. The mother's goal was to avoid the unwanted guests. The daughter could have asked her mom if it would be alright to just tell the guests that she was currently unavailable and to please come back at another time.
- **Respect the Position of Authority:** Daniel said, "Please test your servants … . and treat your servants in accordance with what you see" (Daniel 1:12–13). The daughter should assure her mother that she has a desire to obey her parents in all things, but she should also acknowledge her greater responsibility to obey God as the highest authority.

Regardless of the situations or circumstances we encounter, we should always show honor to our parents.

In your journal this week, I encourage you to record ways that you have honored your parents or failed to honor them, along with any appeals you have made based on your convictions from God's Word. Share the lessons you have learned with your family and others as examples of how to apply this command to daily life.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 15:4

"For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death".

Colossians 3:20

"Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord."

Ephesians 6:1–3

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother"— which is the first commandment with a promise— "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

Proverbs 6:20–22

"My son, keep your father's commands and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them upon your heart forever; fasten them around your neck. When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you."

1 Peter 5:5

"... In the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Proverbs 10:1

"The proverbs of Solomon: A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son grief to his mother."

Exodus 21:15, 17

"Anyone who attacks his father or his mother must be put to death. … Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death."

Know the Nature of Yeast!

When God puts a "beware sign" on something, we should take the time to find out why. We need to identify precisely what He is talking about and how it relates to our lives. This is especially true of the following command of Christ:

Command Twenty-Seven

"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:6).

Yeast is an agent that produces fermentation and entirely changes the composition of whatever it is in. The Greek word for yeast is zume, which means "ferment." Fermentation is a chemical reaction that causes a substance to be agitated. In the case of yeast, a proper environment is necessary for this agitation to be accelerated and for swelling to occur.

Yeast can also refer to a lump of fermented dough that is added to new bread dough, causing it to rise. A piece of this combined dough can then be kept as the "starter" for the next round of bread baking. In this way, yeast can be used indefinitely.

The symbolism of yeast has significant spiritual implications. In Luke 12:1, Jesus explains what the yeast in this command represents: "… Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." Scripture strongly warns against the pernicious influences of mental and spiritual hypocrisy, because "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Galatians 5:9). Even a small amount of hypocrisy is able to powerfully saturate our hearts and minds.

Sin can start small, but it multiplies little by little until it affects all those around it.

The permeating action of yeast provides a sobering analogy to the rapid and thorough influence that a little hypocrisy can have in a group of Christians. One of the main excuses that unbelievers give for rejecting Christ's gift of salvation is the fact that there are so many hypocrites in the church. When Christians speak against sin in church but are actively involved in sin outside of church, their double standard is evidence that the yeast of the Pharisees has affected them.

The fermentation process of yeast will be arrested if the yeast is put into a cold environment, and it will be stopped entirely if it is put into a hot enough environment. This gives new significance to Revelation 3:15–16: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

If we were to measure our spiritual "temperature," would we be hot, cold, or something in between? If we are living by a double standard, we can be certain that the yeast of hypocrisy is at work in our hearts and that our lukewarmness is nauseating not only to God but also to those who are looking to us as an example of genuine Christianity.

Command 27: Beware of Yeast | Day 184

Learn the Lesson of Yeast!

In 1636, John Harvard founded a school for the purpose of educating the youths of the early colonies, especially the native American Indians. His main objective was to train them to become literate, skilled preachers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

More than six decades later, a group of ministers were alarmed by the growing "liberalism" of Harvard and started their own school, which became Yale University. Initially, students were required to live according to God's Word, but eventually these ideals were abandoned. What caused these Godly institutions to lose sight of their original goals? They failed to avoid the danger of "a little yeast."

Satan's method is to infiltrate a Godly group and corrupt it. God's method is to separate His own from evil and purify them.

There is a good reason why Jesus tells us to "beware" of the yeast of hypocrisy. If we allow people who are in deliberate sin to become or remain part of a group that is set apart for God, or if we adopt policies that promote a message other than that of Christ, those within the group will become complacent toward sin and eventually will grow to accept it in their lives. God instituted

church discipline to deal with members who willfully allowed sin to reign in their lives. (See 1 Corinthians 5:2–13.)

Christ's command to beware of yeast has its Old Testament foundation in the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which was a part of the Passover: "Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:7–8).

Just as God desired Israel to be a model to all other nations, He also desires His Church to be an example to the world.

God instructed the nation of Israel to cut off any man who ate yeasted bread during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. (See Exodus 12:15.) Excommunication seems like a harsh consequence for simply eating a little yeast; however, God wanted His people to learn the seriousness of allowing a little sin in their midst.

We have been given the same instruction: "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people" (Romans 16:17–18).

We must be alert to the great danger of those who profess Christ with their mouths but with their actions reveal that they are interested only in serving themselves. If we fellowship with those who are committed to sinful practices, the yeast of their hypocrisy will permeate our lives. Are we removing all yeast from our lives and guarding against hypocrisy?

Command 27: Beware of Yeast

Related Character Quality

Virtue vs. Weakness

Virtue is the moral excellence and purity of spirit that radiate from my life as I obey God's Word.

The Hebrew word chayil is translated three times as virtuous and more than two hundred times as man of valour, valiant, strength, power, might, strong, army, host, forces, riches, wealth, substance, or other similar words.

Two Greek words are translated virtue: dunamis and arete. Dunamis is translated only three times as virtue but more than 100 times as power, might, miracle, strength, mighty, or mighty work. Virtue is the Godly influence of a life that is in a right relationship with the Lord and is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Power of Virtue

Virtue is like static electricity that builds up in a person's body after walking on carpet in a dry atmosphere. If someone touches that person, there will be an electrical shock. In a similar manner, Christ was filled with the Holy Spirit and then led into the barren wilderness, where He was tested and tempted for 40 days. He returned "in the power [dunamis] of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14), and He began to minister to the multitudes. The people soon realized that the power of God was in Him; therefore, "the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all" (Luke 6:19).

It is the will of God for every believer to experience this same power of virtue and use it to benefit others, who in turn will glorify God.

- "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power" (1 Corinthians 4:20).
- "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (Ephesians 3:20).
- "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3).

How the Power of Virtue Is Lost

When virtue is defiled through lust and immorality, there is a loss of power. Thus, Scripture warns young men, "do not spend your strength on women, your vigor on those who ruin kings" (Proverbs 31:3).

Solomon warned his son, "For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. … Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house, lest you give your best strength to others and your years to one who is cruel, lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich another man's house. At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent" (Proverbs 5:3–11).

How the Power of Virtue Is Gained

Paul explains the process by which virtue is gained. "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body" (2 Corinthians 4:6–10). The more Paul successfully responded to trials and tribulations, the more power he had to give the life of Christ to others.

In this same letter, Paul describes how he discovered the source of this power. "… there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

This sequence of rejoicing in suffering in order to experience the power of virtue is repeated several times in Paul's epistles. He said to the believers in Philippi, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10).

To the believers in Colosse he said, "... That you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light" (Colossians 1:10–11).

Personal Evaluation: How Virtuous Are You?

- Do others ask you for counsel for the problems they are facing in their lives?
- Do others want to follow your example in living out the Christian life?
- Do you have the power to conquer the temptations Satan brings to you?
- Do you thank God for times of suffering and rejoice in them?

Do you acknowledge your weaknesses to the Lord in order to experience His power?

Detect the Yeast of Pharisees!

One of the interesting characteristics of yeast is that its fermentation process produces pockets of air that "puff up" whatever it is in. God uses this phenomenon in describing people who have allowed the yeast of hypocrisy in their lives. When Paul instructed the believers at Corinth to remove the immoral man from their assembly, he also addressed the serious problem of pride that they were exhibiting: "And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?" (1 Corinthians 5:2).

One way the Corinthians demonstrated pride was by forming factions around their favorite teachers and being puffed up against each other because of which teacher each one followed (see 1 Corinthians 4:6). Paul also warned them about the pride of living in the knowledge of liberty

without showing love through deference to weaker brothers when he said, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Being puffed up with pride is a spontaneous result of allowing a little yeast of hypocrisy to exist in our lives.

In bread making, the trapped air produced by yeast causes the dough to rise and become enlarged, but the dough is easily deflated by applying pressure. In essence, this is what Jesus did when He publicly denounced the Pharisees for their many hypocrisies.

- Appearing to be spiritual, but loving sensual pleasure (see Matthew 23:27).
- Praising God with the mouth, but having a heart that is far from God (see Matthew 15:8).
- Teaching man-made theology rather than God's commands (see Matthew 15:9).
- Doing good deeds for the purpose of being seen and praised by people (see Matthew 6:1).
- Praying publicly to impress people (see Matthew 6:5).
- Fasting with the motive of getting personal praise (see Matthew 6:16).
- Focusing on religious traditions rather than God's commands (see Mark 7:9).
- Trying to correct others while having the same problem in ourselves (see Matthew 7:5).
- Telling others what to do but not doing it ourselves (see Matthew 23:4).
- Loving the praise of people more than the approval of God (see Luke 11:43).
- Refusing to enter the kingdom of heaven and preventing others as well (see Matthew 23:13).
- Taking advantage of others financially under the pretense of religion (see Matthew 23:14).
- Expending great effort to make converts of their own system (see Matthew 23:15).
- Emphasizing religious details while neglecting fundamental teachings (see Matthew 23:23).

It would be wise to study each of these verses and examine our own lives in order to detect and purge all yeast of hypocrisy or pride. We may try to justify or excuse little traces of these problems in our lives because they are so small, but let us remember that only a little yeast is needed to "yeast the whole lump."

Command 27: Beware of Yeast | Day 186

Solve the Mystery of Anger!

The phone rang. When I answered it, I listened to the desperate plea of a grieving father. "Would you please help my 17-year-old daughter? She just ran away from home!" Later, I was able to contact the daughter. She was eager to talk with me and willing to answer my questions. When I asked her if there were things she would like to change about her father, she quickly replied "His anger! When things don't go as he wants them to, he becomes very upset and angry."

I questioned the father about his anger, and he readily admitted that it was a problem. He told me, "I have really been trying to deal with my anger and have even attended two of your Anger Resolution Seminars, but nothing seems to work."

Sadly, this father is not alone. The problem of anger is widespread and is destroying marriages, families, and many other vital relationships.

Yeast and wrath have similar characteristics: both create heat and turbulence through constant agitation.

During my conversation with the daughter I asked, "Does your father ever say one thing and then do something different?" She replied, "Yes! He will not allow us to watch television, but he will rent movies and watch them behind closed doors in his den."

This double standard created unnecessary tension in the family as the father became over-critical and reactionary towards his children and as the children reacted to the inconsistency in their father's life.

When the message of our mouths and the message of our lives contradict each other, we are living in hypocrisy.

How does the yeast of hypocrisy lead to anger? King David's adultery with Bathsheba provides some insight. The prophet Nathan came to him and presented a case of injustice in which a rich man who had many sheep stole a poor man's only pet lamb and served it for dinner to a traveling guest. Because of his own unconfessed sin and guilt, David overreacted to the offense Nathan had described and demanded that the thief pay much greater restitution than the Law required. Nathan then powerfully confronted David with his sin by stating, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7).

Often, anger toward others can be a signal that we have unconfessed sin and hypocrisy in our lives. If this is the case, we need to humbly confess our sin to God as David did when he said, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight … . Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:4, 10).

Let's humble ourselves by asking those who are closest to us if there are areas of inconsistency in our lives that we need to confess and make right. By removing these traces of yeast from our lives we can conquer a source of anger that is often overlooked.

Command 27: Beware of Yeast

Study Question

Q: Why did God kill Ananias and Sapphira for simply lying but did not kill the man in the Corinthian church for committing gross immorality? (See Acts 5 and 1 Corinthians 5.)

A: God swiftly judged Ananias and Sapphira with instant death, because they secretly conspired together to lie to the Holy Spirit, not just to Peter. (See Acts 5:3.) Their sin of hypocrisy was a "yeast" that would have spread throughout the church.

On the other hand, the immoral man in the Corinthian church was openly sinning. His punishment was excommunication from the church and being turned over to Satan so that his sinful nature would be destroyed and his spirit saved in the day of the Lord. (See 1 Corinthians 5:1–5.) For this man, church discipline would be sufficient chastisement for him to turn from his sin and repent.

Throughout the Bible, yeast is a symbol of corruption and of perverseness of heart and life that must be rejected. (See Matthew 16:6, 11–12; Mark 8:15; and 1 Corinthians 5:7–8.) The very nature of yeast requires that it be removed entirely since even a small amount of yeast will permeate an entire batch of dough.

In the Old Testament, God gave instructions to the nation of Israel to cut off any man who ate yeasted bread during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. (See Exodus 12:15.) In the New Testament, God instituted church discipline to deal with any member who willfully allowed sin to reign in his life. If unchecked, his yeast of sin would soon permeate the entire church.

The only way to escape the yeast of sin is to not permit any compromise of sin to dwell in our lives. If we excuse a little sin, it will grow in our lives and soon affect our attitudes toward God and others. Eventually, it will thoroughly permeate our thinking and corrupt our hearts and minds.

Purge Yourself of Yeast!

With great show, the scribes and Pharisees proclaimed their love for God outwardly, but inwardly their hearts were far from Him. Jesus said of them, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:7–8).

Part of God's nature is that He is a jealous God (see Exodus 20:5). He wants more than just outward devotion; He wants our affections to be completely towards Him. God's demand for our total loyalty is clearly stated in the first and greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30).

By its nature, hypocrisy divides our affections between the things of God and the things of the world. James tells us: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

The greatest hypocrisy is saying that we love God with our mouths while secretly loving the world in our hearts.

If we have discovered the yeast of hypocrisy in our lives, what can be done to reverse its damaging influence? James 4 gives us several clear instructions:

- Submit yourself to God. We must first choose to place ourselves completely under God's authority and control.
- Resist the devil. We can resist Satan by using the powerful sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.
- Draw nigh to God. God wants our intimate fellowship with Him through prayer.
- Cleanse your hands. We must confess and forsake all known sin in our lives.
- Purify your heart. This comes as we fill our hearts with God's Word and allow His Holy Spirit to freely remove anything in our lives that is not of God.

These steps should be taken in a spirit of humility, because "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

Double-mindedness will be conquered only as the Word of God purifies our hearts.

Several years ago, God re-confronted me with the need to love Him with all of my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I asked Him for the grace to do this, and since then He has allowed me to experience a greater measure of the promise found in 1 Corinthians 2:9: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

If the Holy Spirit has convicted you of hypocrisy, I urge you to follow the instruction in James today. Allow God to remove anything from your life that competes with your affection for Him. The more we allow Him to wash us with the water of His Word, the more we will experience His fullness in our lives, and hypocrisy will be purged.

Know When to Leave Yeast!

A father named Tim had been a member of a particular church since he was a boy. Recently, however, he had become alarmed by increasing hypocrisy within the church and had become grieved by the tolerance of worldly influences, which were quickly spreading throughout the fellowship. He did everything he could to encourage the church leadership to hold fast to the Biblical truth on which it was founded; however, as the church continued to embrace more of the world's ways, he realized that his efforts were in vain and that he needed to leave.

After Tim left, he made a heartbreaking discovery. While he had been trying to help the church, the "yeast" of worldliness had infiltrated the lives of his own son and daughter. They now rejected God's standards and desired to be like their worldly friends.

A little yeast can be removed by church discipline, but if this is neglected and the entire church becomes permeated, it is time to leave.

The ministry of the Apostle Paul provides an example that can be considered when determining whether or not to leave a church. He and his disciples remained at a synagogue until there was reaction to the kingdom message they were teaching: "Paul entered the synagogue and spoke

boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:8–9).

By its desire to "fit in" with the world, Tim's church had violated the message of the kingdom of God, which says: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). Its dual message was hindering the spiritual growth of those who sincerely wanted to follow Christ.

If the yeast in the church increases, our fervent prayer for its leaders must also increase.

Before leaving a church, we should make sure that we have humbly followed the Biblical instruction for confronting sin. Another father I know also became concerned about the sinfulness that he saw in his church's services. He shared his concern privately with the pastor and asked the pastor how he could support him. The pastor later told me that the love and loyalty of this one man was the greatest encouragement for him to make major changes in the church.

This man showed wisdom by following the instruction Paul gave to Timothy, "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father …" (1 Timothy 5:1). We must not forget that the Church belongs to Christ, and we must be faithful to fervently pray for our fellow believers, especially those in positions of authority. (See 1 Timothy 2:1–2.)

Are you alert to the influences that your church and others with whom you fellowship are having on your family? Are you praying for the leadership at your church and doing everything you can to support their Godly goals? Are you personally discipling others in the commands of Christ?

Trace Yeast to High Places!

One of the great mysteries in the history of Israel is their repeated rejection of the mighty God Who chose them, blessed them, delivered them from Egypt, gave them daily food in the wilderness, and brought them into the Promised Land.

When the children of Israel turned their backs on God, as a loving Father He warned them through His prophets and chastened them with famines, plagues, and invading armies. When the pain of their discipline became unbearable, they cried out to the Lord and returned to Him, but soon after He delivered them, they once again ran after other gods instead of delighting in the love and leadership of the one true God.

No doubt when Israel repented of their sin, they had good intentions of following God thereafter, but they failed to obey this "small" instruction: "Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods" (Deuteronomy 12:2). God's explicit instruction to destroy high places was given because He knew that if they remained, it would be only a matter of time before Israel would be drawn away by them into idolatry.

The leading factor in the repeated apostasy of Israel was "the little yeast" of high places that they allowed.

High places represented the power, leadership, and provision of heathen gods, but the Lord wanted the children of Israel to look to Him for these things. Today, many people put their confidence in their jobs, education, possessions, or other things rather than looking to God to meet their needs and give them fulfillment. To this God says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 9:23–24).

It is important to thoroughly remove high places so that we "do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Romans 13:14). When the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin in a

particular area, we need to thoroughly cleanse our lives of it and everything associated with it. If we allow even a tiny part to remain in our lives, it will not be long until we are overcome by its temptation and yield to it.

Wholeheartedly loving the Lord involves "burning bridges" to sin, making no provision for the flesh, and forsaking all alternatives to following the Lord.

Hypocrisy will never be overcome if we allow anything that competes with our love for and dependence upon the Lord to remain in our lives. In your journal this week, it would be wise to list any high places that God is asking you to remove from your life. Also, list any signs of hypocrisy that your family has brought to your attention and record the steps you have taken or will take in order to eliminate these corrupting influences.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 16:6

"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees"

Luke 12:1

"Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."

1 Corinthians 5:6–8

"Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth."

Luke 11:39

"Then the Lord said to him, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness."

Colossians 2:8

"See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."

2 Corinthians 6:17

"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."

Choose to Come After Jesus!

"Am I willing to die for my faith in Christ?" John asked himself … For years he had been speaking out against the false teachings of the Church of Rome and boldly proclaiming that Christ alone was the Head of the Church. The Pope wanted him brought to trial and his writings destroyed; however, in spite of the risk, John remained firm in his commitment to follow Christ and proclaimed the truth of God's Word.

Later, his resolve faced the ultimate test as he was burned at the stake for His faith. However, the fire of his faith burned stronger and longer than the flames that consumed his earthly body, and the truth of God's Word spread throughout the land. The life of John Huss is a marvelous example of a man who demonstrated the following command of Jesus:

Command Twenty-Eight

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

Notice that this command involves a deliberate choice to follow Christ. When God created man, He designed us with a free will. Love that is not given and responded to voluntarily is not genuine love. God demonstrated His everlasting love for us through the sacrifice of His Son for our sins. In this command, Jesus invites us to voluntarily respond to His love by devoting our lives to following Him.

Jesus is not asking us to take up His cross, but instead to take up the cross that He has carefully designed for us. Before we can take up our cross, we must first die to self so that we can be fully submitted to the will of God. Then, we can carry our cross—the hardships given to us by God in the course of duty—and be victorious as we carry out God's will for our lives. It is a glorious paradox to realize that dying to self for Christ's sake and taking up our cross is the means through which we will experience all the fullness of life.

At this important point in our study of the commands of Christ, we are brought to a decision: choosing to embrace a glorious life that is achieved by denying ourselves and following Christ's example of obedience to the will of His Father or choosing to continue to cling to the desires of the flesh and the unfulfilling routine of our own existence. Now is the time to make this critical decision, not as a half-hearted commitment, but as a total surrender to Christ of all that we are and all that we have.

Practice Denial of Self!

It came as a total surprise to the young wife. Months before their first wedding anniversary, her husband presented her with an expensive-looking little box. She opened it and squealed with delight. There it was!—the exquisite diamond necklace that she had longed to have but knew they could not afford.

"How did you manage to buy this?" she asked with great admiration. He explained, "Since we got married, I have been fasting during every lunch hour. With the money I saved I was able to buy the necklace." Was his lunchtime fasting "self-denial" or "denial of self"? Actually, it could have been either one, depending on his underlying motive.

Self-denial is giving up a cherished item for personal gain. Denial of self is a loving expression of total surrender to God.

Abstinence from food or pleasures is admirable; however, it does not guarantee that there is genuine love behind it. Paul pointed out, "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:3).

Self-denial is usually characterized by temporarily setting aside something we enjoy for our own ultimate benefit, but denial of self flows out of surrendering the right to have any personal enjoyment. Whatever enjoyments then come are not what we deserve, but are special gifts from God for which we are grateful.

When we exercise denial of self, others experience life, as Paul explained in the following passage: "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you" (2 Corinthians 4:10–12).

Self-denial is based on self-determined limits of giving. Denial of self is based on love without limits.

Hudson Taylor practiced self-denial while preparing for mission work in China. He would go without meals, sleep on the floor, and generously give away what little money he had. These disciplines helped him develop a greater trust in God and were very useful when he reached the

interior of China. However, after many years of ministry he was often plagued by inner turmoil, anger, and frustration.

One day, everything changed! God used a letter Hudson received from a Godly friend to open his eyes to the importance of abiding in Christ, just as the branch abides in the vine, so that God can give power to bear fruit. The spirit of God illuminated his understanding of this great truth, and it transformed his life and ministry. People saw a different Hudson Taylor as he rediscovered the all-sufficiency of Christ, and his ministry flourished as he rested in the work of Christ.

If our denial of self is to be effective, we must remember that in ourselves we can do nothing, but as we deny ourselves Christ is able to do all things through us. Are we actively experiencing this truth in our everyday lives? If not, we can begin by totally surrendering ourselves to the will and work of Christ in us—the hope of glory!

Command 28: Deny Yourself

Related Character Quality

Determination vs. Faintheartedness

Determination is purposing to accomplish God's goals in God's time, regardless of the opposition.

One Hebrew verb translated determined is amar, which means "to say in one's heart, to think, to command, to promise, to intend." Another Biblical term that helps define determination is the verb purposed. One Hebrew word for purposed is yatsar, meaning "to be predetermined." God used this word when He said, "What I have planned, that will I do" (Isaiah 46:11).

Determination deals with a mind-set prior to a task, while endurance involves the completion of the task. Determination presupposes careful consideration of the cost and requirements of a task and a decision that the task is worth whatever expenses are necessary to achieve it.

Who Demonstrated Determination in Scripture?

- "Solomon gave orders to build a temple for the Name of the LORD and a royal palace for himself" (2 Chronicles 2:1).
- "Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way" (Daniel 1:8).
- David determined to mourn over Abner's death with fasting until the evening. "David took an oath, saying, "May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if I taste bread or anything else before the sun sets" (2 Samuel 3:35).
- The disciples "decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea" (Acts 11:29).
- Paul "resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Why Is Determination Important?

Life consists of choices. If we make the right choices, we experience the blessings of God. If we make the wrong choices, we experience discipline, destruction, or even death. After wise choices are determined, endurance is needed to carry them out. Wise choices will often be challenged by difficulties and temptations.

Moses demonstrated determination when he chose to suffer affliction with the children of Israel rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin that last for only a season. On the other hand, Esau did not determine to protect his birthright and therefore sold it for a bowl of pottage. (See Hebrews 11:25, 12:16–17.)

How Do We Develop Determination?

We develop determination by recognizing the losses or gains resulting from a particular choice. Moses chose to suffer with the children of Israel. He recognized "the disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward" (Hebrews 11:26).

What Hinders Determination?

The fear of man is a strong hindrance to determination, because it does not allow us to decide with the Lord what is the best choice. Instead, we try to guess what other people think is right and what they will think of us if we make a different decision than they would. Fear brings torment (see 1 John 4:18), and this torment brings bondage. "Fear of man will prove to be a snare" (Proverbs 29:25).

A double mind is another hindrance to determination. A double-minded person is like a wave of the sea driven backward and forward with every passing wind. This makes determination impossible. "he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does" (James 1:8).

What Are Some Things We Should Be Determined About?

1. Keeping vows

"When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?" (Ecclesiastes 5:4–6).

2. Seeking the Lord with the whole heart

David was a man after God's own heart. His determination to seek the face of the Lord was a constant motivation during his life. "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God" (Psalm 42:1). God promises a special reward for those who seek Him with the whole heart. "Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart" (Psalm 119:2).

3. Maintaining a clear conscience

Paul charged Timothy to hold onto faith and a clear conscience, "Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith" (1 Timothy 1:19). Regarding himself, Paul said, "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man" (Acts 24:16).

Personal Evaluation: How Determined Are You?

- Do you determine to follow Christ, no matter what the cost?
- Have you made Biblical commitments that will direct your decisions in life?
- Do you commit to reach a goal and overcome any obstacles you encounter along the way?
- Do you have a motivating purpose in life?
- Do you persevere during tasks that are more difficult than what you expected?
- Do you allow problems or failures to keep you from trying again?

Take Up Your Cross Daily!

In our day, the cross is very popular, even among non-Christians. It is worn on necklaces or in other ways as a charm or symbol of salvation. However, in the days of Jesus, even the thought of a cross was immediately repugnant and terrifying. It was the most dreadful and agonizing form of execution used by the Roman Empire. The phrase "take up your cross" referred to the Roman custom of requiring the condemned criminal to carry the cross on which he was to suffer and die.

"Taking up your cross" involves cheerful submission to the trials and afflictions that God allows in the course of following Him.

There are great benefits for those who take up their cross and follow Jesus:

- Victory over temptation to sin: "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin" (1 Peter 4:1).
- Intimate fellowship with Christ: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10).

- Fulfilling God's purpose for your life: "But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:20–21).

Cross-bearing flows out of love for Christ and involves doing whatever is necessary to accomplish God's will.

What does it mean to take up your cross daily?

- It means ceasing to make independent, selfish decisions and beginning to fully follow God's will.
- It means going beyond short-term commitments to total surrender to God.
- It means not focusing on personal pleasures but instead living for God.
- It means patiently enduring ridicule because of a glorious goal to achieve.
- It means evaluating every word and deed based on how they show God's love.
- It means forsaking the distraction of worldly things and activities.

How will you recognize your cross? Usually it comes in the form of God-given responsibilities and includes whatever pain, sacrifice, and effort must be expended to carry out those responsibilities for the sake of Christ. Your cross may consist of the very things that you have been complaining about and asking God to remove. This was true in Paul's case. After three petitions for deliverance from his thorn in the flesh, God revealed to Paul that this was his "cross to bear." Thereafter Paul gloried in his infirmities, and the burden of them was transformed into a blessing and a channel of God's power. (See 2 Corinthians 12:7–10.)

Taking up your cross will require daily actions, but these should be a natural outgrowth of the unconditional surrender to God that you have already made. At any point Jesus could have dropped His cross and gone His own way. What a tragic loss that would have been for the world and for each of us! Let's purpose to take up our cross today and every new day God entrusts to us.

Command 28: Deny Yourself | Day 193

Follow With Your Cross of Glory!

The little band of students from Oxford University returned to their campus after distributing food to hungry prisoners and teaching destitute children. They were met with the jeers and ridicule of fellow students who mocked their disciplined lives. Some cried out in derision, "Methodists! Methodists!" because of the precise rules and methods that they followed.

As these "Methodists" were being publicly reviled, another student noticed them and saw in their lives a depth of commitment to God that he wanted in his own life. As he spent time with them, the group's leader, Charles Wesley, encouraged him to put his faith and trust in Christ for salvation. Later, this student became a world-renowned preacher, drawing tens of thousands of people in colonial America to his open-air meetings. As a result of the ridicule suffered by believers in England, God was glorified in the United States as the preaching of George Whitefield influenced many of that nation's Founding Fathers.

"And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27).

We can expect to encounter trials and tribulations as we take up our cross and follow Jesus, because the servant is not greater than his Lord (see Matthew 10:24). If envious religious leaders and the crowds reviled Jesus, they will also revile us. However, there is much to gain by going through public reproach for our faith. "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Peter 4:14).

The Apostle Paul suffered greatly as he carried out the work God called him to. He was thrown into prison, threatened, flogged, and beaten, but still he wrote, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

Paul goes on to explain that he is able to have this perspective because "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Carrying our cross as we follow Christ should not be done grudgingly as a necessary evil, but we should rejoice in the fact that it is ultimately for our good and will bring glory to God. "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven …" (Luke 6:22–23).

Suffering reproach for the sake of Christ fulfills the highest calling of man, which is to bring glory to God.

Before Jesus died, the cross stood for a public curse; now it stands for a marvelous blessing. Before, it meant defeat; now it means victory. Before, it was a means of painful death; now it is the way to joyful life. Let's follow in the steps of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, "… who for the joy set before him endured the cross …" (Hebrews 12:2).

Command 28: Deny Yourself

Study Question

Q: Why did Jesus rebuke Peter for trying to protect Him and forgive those who actually killed Him? (See John 18:10–11 and Luke 23:34.)

A: When a detachment of soldiers arrived at the Mount of Olives to arrest Jesus, Peter attempted to protect Him by striking the high priest's servant with a sword. Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18:11).

Peter did not yet understand that a believer conquers through his death and not through his life. This powerful truth is the reason Jesus rebuked Peter for trying to protect His physical body and also forgave those who crucified Him. As He was hanging on the cross, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

It is easy to believe that we experience the good things of life by guarding our lives. In reality, we enjoy the good things in life by losing our lives for Christ's sake. This is the message that Jesus continued to teach after giving the command to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him.

Lose Your Life to Save It!

Outside the city gate, four men looked at each other in despair. They were lepers, gaunt with hunger and with no food in sight. Things were even worse behind the city walls, where mothers were so desperate for food that they were actually eating their own children. The men reasoned among themselves, "If we stay here we will certainly die. If we surrender to the enemy they will probably kill us, but there is a slight chance that they will have mercy on us." Realizing that they had nothing to lose, they began walking toward the enemy camp. What they found was beyond their wildest imaginations—thousands of abandoned tents filled with food and treasures! They enjoyed a feast and then ran back to share the good news with the rest of the city. (See 2 Kings 7:3–16.)

This account illustrates the mind-set that we also must have. If we seek to protect our lives by reserving our time, talents, and resources only for those things that will benefit ourselves, we will completely miss out on the wealth of eternal treasures that God has in store for those who live their lives for Him.

Our condition is like that of the helpless lepers. Only when we are willing to lose our lives will we find life.

After giving the command to take up our cross, Jesus said: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?" (Luke 9:24–25).

In this passage, the Greek word for life is psuche, which refers to the seat of our affections, intellect, and volition. It is in the soul that a major battle between God and Satan occurs. Satan wants to control the mind, will, and emotions for his purposes, but God wants to transform the mind, will, and emotions through His power. However, this cannot take place until we surrender our wills to God and choose to follow Him.

Losing your life means surrendering your cherished ambitions and replacing them with the goals God has for His kingdom.

I will never forget meeting a handsome 18-year-old who was the star of his basketball team, president of his student council, and leader of his church youth group. His personality drew people to him like a magnet, and he exhibited unusual leadership abilities. Whatever he did was successful and his plans for the future looked promising.

I met him again when he was 40 years old. He was discouraged, disillusioned, and still trying to figure out what he was supposed to do in life. Nothing he did really satisfied him because he had never died to his own ambitions in order to embrace God's kingdom goals, such as discipling others in the ways of the Lord.

Have you taken the same initiative, diligence, and creativity to advance the cause of Christ that you would take to achieve your own personal goals? When you get to the end of your life, what do you want to look back on that God did through you to advance His kingdom? Let's wisely spend our lives carrying out the will of God and telling as many others as we can about the abundant life that is available in Christ! (See John 10:10.)

Do Not Be Ashamed of Jesus!

A hotel owner learned that a friend was near death, so he visited him and told him about the eternal life that Jesus offers. Soon after, the hotel owner was invited to become a member of the board of directors of his hotel chain. He told the members of the board how honored he was to be offered such a position but that he probably would not qualify for three reasons. First, he was a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, his family was a greater priority to him than his hotel; and third, he based every decision on the principles of Scripture.

The board replied, "We have discussed these issues, and it is because of them that we want you to be a member of the board." This man later became vice president of one of the largest hotel chains in the United States. How did these opportunities come about? The friend to whom he had witnessed was a member of the board; before he died he had strongly recommended that this Christian man take over his position.

"in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:6).

Many have asked me why God has not shown them His will for their lives. One possible answer is that they have not acknowledged Christ in all their ways. This would include the following actions:

- Being a living example of Christ's way of life
- Taking advantage of opportunities to tell others about Jesus
- Thanking God for your meal in a public place, such as a restaurant
- Giving a ready answer when people question your faith
- Boldly praying in the name of Jesus before groups
- Having a testimony prepared to share what God is doing in your life
- Expressing grief when others misuse Jesus' name

Mark 8:38 has always motivated me to put the fear of man in proper perspective. "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

"We fear men so much, because we fear God so little."—William Gurnall

Before we condemn Peter for denying that he ever knew Jesus, judge the fearful Pharisees for being secret believers, or question the motives of Nicodemus for coming to Jesus by night, let's ask ourselves how we have given public evidence that we are not ashamed of Jesus but rather that we are delighted with Him and cannot help but boldly speak about Him.

Glory in the Words of Jesus!

Eight days after Jesus instructed His disciples to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Him, He took Peter, James, and John up into a mountain to pray. As Jesus prayed, He was transfigured before them, and Moses and Elijah appeared with Him. Peter burst out, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah" (Luke 9:33). Suddenly a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him" (Luke 9:35). With this, Moses and Elijah vanished.

It is significant to note the major portions of Scripture that were represented by this gathering: Moses—the Pentateuch, Elijah—the Prophets, John—the Gospels plus Revelation, and Peter and James—the epistles. Peter wanted to put Jesus on equal standing with the Law and the prophets, but God the Father made it clear that Jesus is the One Whom we need to hear.

Jesus is the Living Word. Therefore, to be ashamed of the words of Jesus is to be ashamed of Him.

When I began to memorize the Sermon on the Mount, I experienced a strange feeling of guilt, because I had been taught that the teachings of Jesus were not for our day but for His future "kingdom age." However, God gave me a deep love for the commands of Christ contained in Matthew 5–7, and I delighted in trying to apply them to my daily life.

As I began to share with others the exciting results of applying Christ's teaching to daily living, the Basic Youth Conflicts Seminar resulted. I am convinced that God blessed that seminar to make known to the world the importance and tremendous value of all the teachings of Jesus. Through Christ's words, we can understand the true meaning of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, because all Scripture relates to Jesus!

Jesus is the Bread (Manna) from heaven. Those who eat it will find life, because His words are spirit and they are life. (See John 6:63.)

A medical student who had average intellectual abilities began to memorize and meditate on large portions of Scripture during his years in medical school and throughout his residency. His grades steadily improved until he was in the top 1 percent of the nation's residency students. Today he has a thriving medical practice and has sent hundreds of his patients to the Basic Seminar.

Recently he conducted a study on the number of visits his patients make to his office in a year. The average per patient was 4.8 per year; however, those patients who attended a Basic Seminar reduced their number of visits to 1.2 per year! This doctor and those he treats have discovered that there is nothing to be ashamed of in the words of Jesus!

As you record your spiritual growth in your journal this week, it would be a treasure for your children and grandchildren to learn about times you chose to deny yourself, as well as the ways you have sacrificed your life for Christ's sake and how you were benefited because of it. Also, write about the ways that you have proved you are not ashamed of Jesus Christ or His Word. God will richly reward you for your obedience to this important command!

Daily Scriptures

Luke 9:23-24

"Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it".

John 12:25–26

"The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me."

1 Corinthians 9:27

"No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

Acts 20:24

"However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace."

Galatians 2:20

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Philippians 3:8

"What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ."

Protect The Little Ones!

Dwight was a little-known shoe salesman in Chicago. He lacked the education for public speaking; however, he possessed many qualities that God blessed. One of these qualities was revealed when he returned from a tent meeting and a friend inquired, "How many people were led to Christ?" He answered, "Two and a half." The friend asked, "Do you mean two adults and one child?" "No," Dwight replied, "two children and one adult. The adult has already spent half of his life. The children have their whole lives ahead of them!"

Dwight Moody's love for children motivated him to rent pews at church and fill them with neighborhood boys and girls. His ministry to children further expanded when he began to teach a Sunday school, which eventually grew to be the largest in the nation. Dwight Moody's life provides an excellent example of the following command:

Command Twenty-Nine

"See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 18:10).

This command was given as part of Jesus' answer to a question He received from His disciples. In His response, we can observe several reasons why we should not despise little ones. The disciples had asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matthew 18:1). Most likely they thought He would name someone who was rich or had a lot of public influence. Instead, Jesus called a little child into their midst and challenged their concept of greatness by saying that childlike humility is what makes a person great in the kingdom of heaven.

Despising children often begins with the misconceptions that they are not very valuable, have little or nothing to contribute to our lives, and that we are more important than they are. Jesus testified to the importance of little ones by stating that the angels who are assigned to them have direct access to the face of God in heaven.

The motivation to despise children often develops when our personal freedoms are constrained because of their needs or limitations. If we must make adjustments to our schedules or choices of activities for their good, we tend to become frustrated and resentful, unless we recognize our sacrifices as being done for the Lord Jesus Christ.

"And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me" (Matthew 18:5).

Welcoming a little one would include bringing a child into the world and training him up in the ways of the Lord. Jesus said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

What is our response to little ones? Do we despise them through our actions and attitudes, or do we lovingly accept them, recognizing their great worth and importance to God? Let's take advantage of the incredible opportunity we have to honor Christ by receiving little ones.

Become as Little Children!

Jesus clearly states, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). What is the nature of children that we are to develop?

- **Humility:** "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). A little child recognizes that he is totally dependent upon those caring for him and, therefore, looks outside himself for daily provisions.
- **Healthy Appetite:** "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). A child will develop an appetite for the type of food that is provided. We must make sure that we take in spiritual food that is unadulterated by the world's philosophies, modern religion, or the teachings of men.
- **Teachability:** "Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD" (Psalm 34:11). Children tend to be curious and ask many questions. We can deepen our understanding of Scripture by asking the Lord precise questions as we are studying His Word.
- **Dependency:** "… Dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming" (1 John 2:28). A child in need will cling to his parent. As we daily recognize our needs, we should be motivated to abide in Christ for the fulfillment of them.
- **Fellowship With Their Father:** "… I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father" (1 John 2:13). Little children enjoy the attention of their parents, and they know what pleases and displeases them. To enjoy fellowship with our heavenly Father, we must not allow it to be broken by unconfessed sins.

The more we become like little children, the greater we will be in God's kingdom.

We all want to be great, but our definition of greatness is often different than God's. Which of the qualities that God considers great do you need to develop? Let's ask God for the wisdom and grace that we need to become as little children and gain the help of our families by asking them to rate our progress!

Command 29: Honor Children

Related Character Quality

Tolerance vs. Condemnation

Tolerance is acceptance of others as unique expressions of specific character qualities in varying degrees of maturity.

In a technical sense, tolerance is the amount of variation from a standard that will be accepted. Tolerance presupposes a precise standard of thinking and conduct by which other ideas and behavior can be evaluated as right or wrong.

Such a standard must be based on truth and fact. To form a conclusion or opinion before the facts are known is prejudice, and to tenaciously hold to ideas or behavior that disregards or is contrary to fact is bigotry.

In medical terms, tolerance is the ability of the body to withstand the effects of that which is detrimental to good health (e.g., extreme heat or cold, drugs, unhealthy foods, etc.).

In mechanics, tolerance is determined by the difference between the allowable maximum and minimum sizes of a mechanical part. Tolerance has limitations beyond which consequences occur because a mechanical part is not being used according to its design.

Tolerance for Believers

Scripture makes a sharp distinction between the amount of tolerance believers are to have toward each other and the tolerance they are to have toward those who are unbelievers. Every true believer is a member of the Body of Christ. (See Romans 12:4–5.)

The sacredness of the bonding and interaction that take place between believers is powerfully affirmed in Paul's warning not to have immoral relationships. "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:15–17).

Because of the need for conformity to God's standards and for each member to demonstrate sincere love for each other, God has set up a structure of leadership in His Church to strengthen the Body and also to administer discipline to those members who refuse to live by God's standards.

Because every believer is affected by what one believer does, the Bible gives a series of "one another" commands designed "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12–13).

Tolerance Toward Unbelievers

A believer is to have a greater tolerance for unbelievers than he has for fellow believers. Paul explains this in the same passage in which he warns believers not to have fellowship with other believers who violate God's standards.

"I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. … What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:9–10, 12–13).

A distinction must be made between unbelievers who violate the laws of the land and those who simply express opinions or actions contrary to God's ways. Crimes against society are not to be tolerated, because a community will have as much crime as the neighborhood tolerates.

How to Show Tolerance

Tolerance is looking beyond the wrong ideas and behavior of people and seeing the needs and struggles in their lives. One who is tolerant is more concerned about showing love to people than convincing them of the error of their ways.

To tolerate people means to not argue with them. This is consistent with the instruction of Scripture. "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful" (2 Timothy 2:24). We are also to avoid foolish and unlearned questions, which produce unprofitable debate.

Personal Evaluation: How Tolerant Are You?

- When you see faults in others, does it motivate you to be an example of Godly living before them?
- Do you look for common ground with people of different viewpoints and behavior rather than focusing solely on differing opinions and standards?
- Do you make greater allowances for unbelievers than you do for believers?

- Do you remind yourself that tolerance is based on God's right to rule His world and that He has not given that right to anyone outside His delegated authorities?

Do you serve people regardless of their viewpoints and ask God to change their hearts as needed?

Command 29: Honor Children | Day 199

See the Littlest, Least, and Last!

Our natural tendency is to overlook or be bothered by little things because we don't consider them to be valuable or important. We may even consider children to be a bother, as the disciples did when they rebuked those who brought children to Jesus (see Matthew 19:13–14). Yet, God often uses that which is littlest, least, and last to accomplish mighty things, even as He did with the loaves and a few small fish (see John 6:9–14).

Samuel was commissioned by God to anoint the second King of Israel from the house of Jesse, but God did not tell Samuel which son it would be. Jesse presented seven of his sons to Samuel, but God did not choose any of them. Instead God said, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). The one whom God had chosen was not even included in the original presentation! David was the last son of Jesse and was despised by his oldest brother; however, he was God's choice to be King (see 1 Samuel 16:5–13).

God often chooses those who are the littlest, least, and last so He can show His power in and through them and get the glory for it.

When Saul was first chosen to be King of Israel, he was "little in his own sight" (see 1 Samuel 15:17). However, his heart grew proud and disobedient, and because of this God told him, "… LORD has rejected you as king over Israel" (1 Samuel 15:26).

The Apostle Paul was able to be used mightily by God because of his humble view of himself. He said, "I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle …" (1 Corinthians 15:9). He also wrote of himself that he was "I am less than the least of all God's people" (Ephesians 3:8).

When writing to the church in Corinth, Paul explained that "the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. … God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. … Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:25–31).

Jesus could have come into the world with great power as a grown man, but He chose to enter the world as a helpless little baby.

If we have an exalted opinion of ourselves, we will tend to look down upon little ones whom God loves and wants to honor. (See Romans 12:3.) Therefore, let's reassess our own "size" in the presence of our holy and mighty God and not overlook the great value and potential that God has placed in the littlest, least, and last.

Command 29: Honor Children | Day 200

Bring Little Ones to Jesus!

With great anticipation the young couple looked forward to the birth of their first child and prayed that he would come to know the Lord at a young age. The day their son was born, the new father took the baby in his arms and told him the Gospel story.

One day, when he was about three years old, the little boy was outside playing and disobeyed his mom. As she lovingly corrected him, he told her, "Mommy, my heart hurts." She recognized that it was the Holy Spirit convicting him of his sin, so she took the opportunity to explain how Jesus died to pay for the sins of the whole world and how each one of us needs Him to be our Savior.

Initially, the parents questioned whether or not such a young child could really comprehend salvation and respond to Christ, but as time went on they began to see clear evidences of God's working in his life. More than 20 years have now passed, and this young man continues to have a vibrant, growing relationship with the Lord and is involved in full-time Christian ministry.

Jesus did not forbid children to come to Him when He was on earth, and He won't forbid them now that He is in heaven. (See Mark 10:14–16.)

The best time to begin bringing little ones to Jesus is while they are still in the womb. Studies show that a child can respond to sounds outside the womb by at least the seventh month. This was the case with John the Baptist, who leaped in his mother's womb when he heard the voice of Mary (see Luke 1:44). Studies also indicate that whatever a child hears in the womb, he will more easily understand after he is born.

A wise father will read the Scriptures to a child while he is in his mother's womb. This not only lays a foundation for the child to be able to discern truth with his spirit, but it also trains him to recognize the voice of his father.

After a child is born, his parents have the God-given responsibility of training him in the way he should go. (See Proverbs 22:6.) This training would include teaching him the Scriptures, praying with him and for him, and leading him by example to obey Christ's commands.

Children do not "belong" to parents; they belong to the Lord and are entrusted to parents to be trained in the ways of the Lord.

It is reported that nearly half of all Christians in the United States accepted Christ by age 13. I myself was saved as a child—the first time I heard the Gospel. Children have the humility, faith, and teachability to be born again by the Spirit of God. Let's recognize that it is never too early to begin teaching them about Christ so that they can come to know Him personally.

Feed Little Ones!

After I had received the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Savior as a child, I experienced great excitement and delight as I listened to stories from the Old Testament. The teacher of the Child Evangelism Fellowship® class made the heroes of faith "come alive," and I felt like Moses, Abraham, and others became my good friends.

Many teachers tell Bible stories, but I am grateful to have had the privilege of learning from one who not only explained the events that happened but also related each story to Jesus and His work in my life! This dear lady was one of the first individuals in my life who helped me begin to understand the "meat" of God's Word.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus knew the Old Testament stories, but their hearts burned within them when Jesus related each story to Himself.

Jesus told Peter, "[If you love Me] … Feed my lambs" (John 21:15). Lambs, like newborn babies, need the rich nourishment of their mother's milk. Peter explained this concept when he wrote, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2).

After a child has received the nourishment of milk and has grown sufficiently, he is ready to begin taking in solid food. New believers go through a similar phase of growth with regard to God's Word. "Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:13–14).

How does the Word of God "change" from milk to meat? The Word is the same, but the ability of a believer to understand it is what changes. The more a person reads, studies, and meditates on God's Word, the more discernment he is able to develop and the more he will discover the rich treasures of wisdom and insight that are hidden in Scripture.

As we disciple others by teaching them the commands of Christ, our goal should be to see them reach greater levels of spiritual maturity and discernment. Paul lamented the lack of growth in the lives of some he had taught by saying, "In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food" (Hebrews 5:12).

A teacher may need to limit the extent of a message he gives based on the receptivity of the hearers. Jesus told the disciples that there were things they could not bear (see John 16:12), and Paul told the believers in Corinth that he could give them only milk because of their sinfulness (see 1 Corinthians 3:2–3).

We will be most effective in giving God's Word to others when we have internalized it for ourselves.

Children usually understand far more than we think they do. Even if they are not able to fully comprehend information in their minds, the Holy Spirit can enable even the youngest believer to grasp spiritual truths that will help him grow in his relationship with God.

Do we take advantage of the opportunities we have to teach the Bible to children so that they may grow to understand the meat of God's Word? Let's recognize the incredible chance we have to impact future generations by discipling the children God has placed in our lives.

Command 29: Honor Children | Day 202

Do Not Offend Little Ones!

Years ago, a father was strongly advised to keep liquor away from his children because of his family's history of alcoholism and their apparent weakness toward it. However, he insisted on keeping some bottles of wine in his cellar for special occasions. Unbeknownst to him, his son secretly began drinking wine from those bottles and soon developed an addiction to alcohol, which resulted in a life of misery for himself, his family, and future generations.

"And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck" (Mark 9:42).

In the first-century church, there was heated controversy over the matter of eating meat that had been offered to idols. Some felt that they had liberty in Christ to eat this meat, but those who had been saved out of idol worship were offended by that viewpoint. Paul pointed out that there was nothing intrinsically wrong with the meat, but he also told the believers, "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Corinthians 8:9). He expanded this instruction in Romans 14:21 by saying, "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall."

One of the most devastating ways that a father can offend his children is by provoking them to wrath by his anger.

I regularly receive calls from desperate fathers who plead with me to counsel a "rebellious" son or daughter. The first question I usually ask the father is, "Do you have a problem with anger?" He almost always answers, "Yes, but I am working on it." His intentions may be good; however, he has already caused much damage that must first be repaired. Simply working to resolve an anger problem will not take away the pain and damage of past offenses. A father must realize that he has offended not only his son or daughter but also the Lord Jesus Christ, and he must humble himself and ask forgiveness.

Offenses may be caused in many ways: unfulfilled promises, hurtful words, a spirit of anger, or even secret sins. If we are serious about obeying this command and not leading others into sin by our actions, let's search our hearts and ask God to remind us of any offenses that we have not made right. Then, let's humbly and sincerely ask forgiveness of those whom we have wounded and make any necessary restitution in order to restore the relationships.

Command 29: Honor Children | Day 203

Honor Little Ones!

One day a family asked a special guest to join them for dinner. As they sat around the table visiting, the topic of conversation shifted to art. The guest had a keen interest in art and was an expert evaluator of paintings. When the family told him that they had an old picture that they didn't know what to do with, the guest immediately asked if he could see it.

For several minutes, he carefully studied the details of the painting. Suddenly, he saw something that caused his eyes to grow wide with excitement. "Do you realize what this is?" he exclaimed to the family. "Just a picture," they replied. "No," said the guest, "it is not just a picture. It bears the name of one of the most famous painters in history! It is a priceless treasure!"

Many families view a new baby as "just another child" until they recognize the One Who designed and created that child.

One of the most effective ways to avoid despising little ones is to start honoring them for who they really are. "Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him" (Psalm 127:3). The first way to honor a little one is to thank God for creating him or her in the womb; then, anticipate his or her arrival with rejoicing. This is important because unborn babies are able to discern when their parents do not want them, and their actions later in life can be a response to this feeling of rejection.

Another way to honor a child is by giving him or her a meaningful name. Names hold great importance. Many times God changed a person's name to reflect the vision that He had for the individual's life. For example, God told Abram, "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations" (Genesis 17:5).

The character and achievements that parents want for their children should be expressed in the names they choose.

We all tend to live up to the meanings of our names. I can still recall with vivid detail a scene that occurred decades ago behind a neighborhood shoe store. I was getting ready to fight with the store owner's son, when suddenly I remembered the meaning of my name. William means "protector." I struggled to justify the fight as a protector. Realizing that I would be the offender, I decided to call off the fight.

In your journal for this week, write out the names of each of your children or family members, along with the spiritual meanings of their names. Then, list the ways that you have honored or will honor children as the heritage of the Lord.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 18:10

"See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven".

Matthew 18:3–4

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

Romans 14:10

"You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat."

1 Corinthians 4:7

"For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"

Mark 9:35

"Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

Romans 15:1

"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves."

Matthew 19:14

"Jesus said, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

1 Peter 5:5

"… All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Go to Offenders!

The feud began between a brother and sister but was carried on by their children and had the potential of lasting for generations. The older brother was the executor of their parents' estate and, according to his younger sister, took thousands of dollars from the inheritance for himself before dividing it with her.

This offended sister never went to her brother to talk about it. Instead, she allowed the offense to grow into bitter animosity with her brother. If she would have followed the clear instruction of this command, she quickly would have understood the full story and spared herself and many others much grief.

While her parents were alive, her older brother had loaned them a significant amount of money. In order to pay back the debt, they told him to take it out of the estate before he divided it with his sister. Had she gone to her brother when she first became offended, she would have prevented the misunderstanding from turning into a family feud.

Command Thirty

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15–17).

There are several reasons why it is hard for us to go to an offender. One reason is the fear of being hurt again. The pain of being offended causes us to draw back from the one who hurt us and build walls of protection around ourselves. This "cutting off" of spirit toward another person leads to feelings of hatred, which carries serious penalties. (See 1 John 3:15.)

A second reason is that we assume the offender will not listen to us. However, we are not responsible for the outcome of the situation. Our responsibility in going to an offender is to humbly and accurately present the offense with the goal of reconciliation.

Another reason it is difficult to go to an offender is that we may have had past offenders react to us when we have gone to them with wrong attitudes. This only created a bigger problem and made us wish that we had never gone to them in the first place. In order to prevent this, we must search our own hearts first and make sure our motives and attitudes are consistent with Scripture. It takes careful and thorough spiritual preparation to go to an offender.

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).

This command reveals the heart of God and His desire for there to be harmony among believers. The prayer Jesus prayed for all of us is "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us …" (John 17:21). Let's cooperate with God's desire for

unity by humbly going to our offenders in order to restore and reconcile our relationships as peacemakers.

Go First to Offenders!

There was no apparent reason why this marriage should have failed. Both sets of parents had given their blessing, the couple was sure that God had led them together, and several wonderful children had been added to the family. Nevertheless, one day the wife told her husband that she wanted to get out of the marriage.

When I heard the wife's grievances, I was puzzled. There didn't seem to be any major offenses, such as moral failure or abuse, and I struggled to understand the source of the problem. Soon, it became apparent. Over the years, the wife had been hurt by "little" offenses from her husband. Rather than discussing the problems with him and clearing them up, she had allowed the offenses to build up and had shared them with her mother. Her mother had taken up an offense for her daughter and was determined to "rescue" her from this unhappy marriage.

Failure to go first to an offender results in whispering, and "a gossip separates close friends" (Proverbs 16:28).

In addition to the potential of tempting others to take up our offenses, failure to go first to an offender can also result in judgments being made and actions being taken based on misinformation. God gave strict instructions to the leaders of the nation of Israel that if the leaders heard that one of their cities had gone after another god, they were to diligently investigate the matter. If the report was found to be true, then they were to completely destroy that city. (See Deuteronomy 13:12–17.)

One day a rumor began that some of the tribes of Israel were building an altar to a false god. The alarmed leaders gathered the rest of the nation together for the purpose of destroying these tribes. However, rather than building an altar to a false god, these tribes were actually building a memorial to the God of Israel so that their children would be reminded of the one true God. (See Joshua 22.) The danger of hasty actions is described in the following Scripture:

"do not [go] hastily to court, for what will you do in the end if your neighbor puts you to shame" (Proverbs 25:8).

Telling others about an offense can start verbal "fires" that often get back to the one who committed the offense. However, by this time the story is usually magnified and distorted. Instead of being repentant, the offender becomes angry and bitter that he has been misjudged and feels justified in his actions.

Several years ago, a person wronged me and I was disinclined to go to him in order to clear things up. Instead, I told a friend what had happened. Fortunately, he was a wise friend and said something to me I will never forget. His words brought conviction and changed the outcome of the entire situation. He said, "Bill, remember that when an offense has taken place, the more spiritual of the two will initiate the reconciliation." He reminded me that God was the One Who took the initiative in reconciling sinners to Himself when He sent His Son to die. Let's endeavor to follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ and make every effort we can to reconcile with others by going to our offenders first.

Command 30: Go to Offenders

Related Character Quality

Justice vs. Fairness

Justice is carrying out wise judgments based on the laws and character of God.

A primary Hebrew word for justice is tsedaqah. It conveys the idea of being right in a moral or legal sense. It is significant that this same Hebrew word is also translated in Scripture as righteousness. Righteousness is the perfection of the character of the Lord Jesus Christ. His righteousness is imputed to us when we receive Him as our own Redeemer. Through His death

on the cross, Jesus fulfilled the just demands of the Law by substituting His sinless life for our sinful lives.

Justice is frequently used in conjunction with judgment. One Hebrew word for judgment is mishpat. It means "a verdict (favorable or unfavorable) … sentence or formal decree" in relation to human or divine law. "Maintain justice and do what is right" (Isaiah 56:1). (See also Psalm 119:121 and Proverbs 21:3.)

The Rewards of Justice

- "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day" (Proverbs 4:18).
- "… Teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning" (Proverbs 9:9).
- "… A righteous man escapes trouble" (Proverbs 12:13).
- "… No harm befalls the righteous …" (Proverbs 12:21).
- "… A sinner's wealth is stored up for the righteous" (Proverbs 13:22).
- "For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again …" (Proverbs 24:16).
- "The memory of the righteous will be a blessing …" (Proverbs 10:7).

The Requirements of Doing Justice

Justice is an active expression of the will and nature of God. Justice requires a person to verbally confirm God's truth and carry it out. Therefore, the word do often precedes the word justice. Psalm 82:3 states, "… Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless." "David … doing what was just and right for all his people" (1 Chronicles 18:14). The same point is emphasized in Romans 2:13: "For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous." In Ezekiel 18, God provides a detailed description of a just man.

"Suppose there is a righteous man who does what is just and right, [and] …"

- Does not look to idols.
- Does not defile his neighbor's wife.
- Does not lie with a woman during her period.
- Does not oppress anyone.
- Has not taken advantage of a creditor.
- Gives food to the hungry.
- Provides clothes for the poor.
- Has not gotten rich by high interest.
- Has not engaged in wrongdoing.
- Has carried out wise judgment between parties.
- Has walked in God's statutes and judgments.

"… That man is righteous; he will surely live, declares the Sovereign LORD" (Ezekiel 18:9).

How Justice Competes With Fairness

Most people demand fairness. However, absolute fairness requires that all get the same things at the same time. This is impossible; thus, we must look to God, Who is completely just.

- Justice is based on the universal, unchanging principles of God's Word; fairness, on the variable will of the majority.
- Justice establishes guilt when God's standards are violated. Fairness tries to remove guilt by lowering the standards.
- Justice causes us to confess our failures and plead for mercy; fairness, to justify our failures so we think we need no mercy.

- Justice is based on personal responsibility and yields revival. Fairness is based on personal rights and produces rebellion.
- Justice expresses God's wisdom. Fairness expresses man's reason.
- Justice is impartial and objective; fairness is partial and subjective.
- Justice requires swift prosecution of criminals. Fairness results in slow punishment of criminals.
- Justice limits the punishment of criminals. Fairness produces inconsistent punishment of criminals.

How Good Judgment and Justice Work Together

Proverbs was written "for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair" (Proverbs 1:3). The ability to judge wisely is given to the meek. "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way" (Psalm 25:9).

Judgment is acquired through a sequence identified in Psalm 37:4–6: "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun."

Personal Evaluation: How Just Are You?

- Do you read God's Law? Do you memorize and meditate on it?
- When you deal with a matter requiring justice, do you find Biblical precedents on which to base your decisions?
- Do you ask God for an understanding heart to make wise and just judgments?
- Do you have a meek spirit so God can guide you in justice and judgment?

Do you understand the difference between justice and fairness?

Tell an Offender His Fault!

On Sunday the man looked like a saint, but during the week he acted like a sinner! His life in the workplace consisted of profanity, off-color jokes, borrowing money without repaying it, laziness, and disorder.

Whenever other Christian coworkers tried to witness, they would be asked if they went to the same church and believed the same way as this dreadful example of a Christian. When they admitted that they did, the conversation usually ended. These fellow believers had no choice but to go to this man and tell him his fault.

As members of the Body of Christ, each believer is responsible to look out for the welfare of fellow believers.

The phrase show him his fault in this command is translated from the Greek word elegcho, which means "to reprove with conviction." It implies communicating not only the charge, but the Biblical basis of that charge as well. Our goal should not be to rehearse the offense, but rather to restore the offender to fellowship with us and the Body of Christ.

We should be lovingly firm when we tell an offender his faults, and it is important to start by asking questions to hear his side of the story and to make sure all the facts of the situation are known. (See Proverbs 18:13.) Asking questions will also help us discern his motives and will provide insight into how to appeal to him and work with him to correct the offense. For instance, is he intentionally stealing from his employer through laziness, or is it possible that he has never been taught how to work diligently?

The conversation should occur in a private place when there is sufficient time to talk. After discerning the nature of the situation, one approach that could be taken is to ask, "How do you think your fellow employees view you as a Christian?" This would allow him to begin seeing his life through the eyes of others. Then, the specific faults could be discussed, along with the

Scripture they are violating, the damage they are causing to the name of Christ, and the ways in which they are hindering the response of other employees to the message of salvation. The goal is to help him see his offenses in light of Scripture so that he will repent before God, ask his fellow employees for forgiveness, and be restored.

Before going to an offender, we must make adequate preparations through prayer so that Satan will not be able to hinder conviction and repentance.

God is the only One Who can bring true conviction and repentance to a person's heart. Therefore, the most important step we can take before going to an offender is to boldly go before the throne of grace and fervently appeal to God to work mightily in the situation for His honor and glory. Ask God to cause a spirit of peace and truth to reign in the conversation and to give you His words to say. Also, by our authority in Christ we should bind and rebuke Satan so that he cannot cause any confusion. Let's realize the seriousness of telling an offender his fault, and let's be spiritually prepared before we do it.

Appeal to the Conscience!

It had been about a year since David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for the death of her husband. David's cover-up appeared to have been successful. He was carrying out the business of his kingdom and enjoying the little child that resulted from his adultery. Nathan the prophet was charged by God with the responsibility of telling King David his fault. Nathan's example provides several important principles that we can follow when confronting an offender.

A key to confronting an offender is identifying the precise offense that was committed and then appealing to his conscience.

What was the precise offense of David? He committed adultery and conspired to commit murder, but the deeper sin was that of stealing from God. Life is created by God and no man has a right to destroy it. At a wedding, God joins a man and woman together in the covenant of marriage. By taking Uriah's wife, David dishonored this covenant.

With the precise offense identified, Nathan used a compelling story to appeal to the conscience of David. In that story, he told of a rich man who stole a beloved pet lamb from his poor neighbor and served the lamb as dinner to a traveling guest. David was so infuriated by this act of injustice that he commanded that the thief be killed.

After David pronounced this verdict of guilt, Nathan declared, "You are the man …" (2 Samuel 12:7). Immediately, David's conscience was pricked, and he said, "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Samuel 12:13). His humility and repentance are reflected in the psalms he wrote, such as Psalm 51.

An effective appeal by Nathan resulted in David's prayer: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10).

God has written His Law on our hearts (see Romans 2:14–15). Therefore, we know instinctively what is right and wrong. The purpose of God's Law is to act as a "schoolmaster" to bring us to Christ (see Galatians 3:24). By looking at the Law, we can see the holy standards of God and the great distance we have fallen from His perfection. We can appeal to a person's conscience by helping him see his words, thoughts, attitudes, and actions in the light of God's holy Law.

When parents say to a disobedient child, "Was that a smart thing to do?" they are appealing to his mind. By saying, "Don't you see how your actions are hurting others?" they are appealing to his emotions. If they say, "Promise us that you won't do this again" they are appealing to his will. But, if they say, "Was your action loving, kind, and just?" they are appealing to his conscience.

Because God's Word is the "sword of the Spirit," it is our chief weapon in appealing to a person's conscience. When we base our appeals on the principles of God's Word, the Holy Spirit can use them to bring conviction and repentance.

Command 30: Go to Offenders

Study Question

Q: Since we are commanded to tell only an offender his fault, why did Paul tell Peter his fault in front of the entire group and also tell the whole church about the fault of Demas? (See Galatians 2:14, 2 Timothy 4:10.)

A: When a sin that affects an entire group is committed, the head of the group must be notified, in the same way that the head must be alerted about an infection in part of the body so that proper action can be taken to deal with it and prevent it from spreading throughout the entire body.

This is consistent with the instructions that Paul gave to Timothy about church leaders: "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (1 Timothy 5:19–20).

Public rebuke is what Paul did to Peter concerning the matter of separation: "When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group" (Galatians 2:11–12).

Paul went on to explain how Peter's hypocrisy had led astray other Jewish Christians and even Barnabas. Because Peter's offense had affected an entire group, he needed public rebuke. God used Paul's voice to warn others of falling into the same trap.

There are ample witnesses to verify the need for public rebukes—we can assume that Demas was warned by Paul and other witnesses not to love the world. Thus, Paul wrote, "for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica" (2 Timothy 4:10).

It is critical that we distinguish between different types of offenses in order to determine the most effective rebuke for each situation. In every case, however, it is our responsibility to first examine our own lives according to Matthew 7:5: "… first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

Have a "Courageous Conversation"!

If we are to be successful in resolving a conflict with an offender, it is vital that we have clear, open communication. Sometimes the offense may have been a reaction to wrong attitudes and actions on our part. We must go into the conversation with a greater desire to show mercy and find truth than the desire to be right.

Each of us wants to be understood. When we don't feel we are understood, especially by those who are close to us, it is easy for little offenses to pile up and for communication to break down. We can overcome this tendency by learning to communicate effectively with those who have offended us as well as by providing an atmosphere in which others feel safe to share with us the concerns and hurts that they are experiencing.

One of the greatest communication problems is the assumption that it has taken place.

Chris Hogan has had remarkable success mediating family conflicts by using 10 key questions that help individuals have a "courageous conversation."1 Recently, a successful businessman appealed to Chris for help with his family. He knew that he had deeply wounded the spirits of his three oldest children through his anger and harsh discipline. In response, they had rejected his leadership, and he was quite sure that they no longer desired to have a relationship with him.

Chris agreed to meet with this family. At first, the teenagers slouched in their chairs, folded their arms, and glared at their father. After some discussion, the oldest daughter agreed to have a courageous conversation. She would be asked the 10 key questions, and her father would have to accurately repeat to her what she had said until she was satisfied that he understood her. He could not blame, complain, or offer any explanations during this time. Then, the same questions were asked of the father, with his daughter repeating his answers. The questions were:

- What is your most pressing issue?
- In addition to this, is there something else?
- How is this affecting you?
- What will the future be like if nothing changes?
- What do you see as my responsibility for this issue?
- What do you see as your responsibility for this issue?
- What does the preferable future look like to you?
- What is the most powerful thing we can agree to ask God for?
- Based on the above, what is the one thing we cannot fail to do?
- What practical steps must we take to make this happen?

In the process of the courageous conversation, some deep hurts from the father's childhood came to light. These hurts had affected the way he interacted with his children. The resulting tears gave the daughter hope for reconciliation. As each person was able to present his or her grievances and listen to the other's point of view, they were able to clear up the offenses and misunderstandings, and a marvelous restoration began to take place in this family.

Would those in our families say that we listen to them and understand them? Do they feel safe to approach us when an offense has occurred? Let's make every effort we can to develop "hearing" hearts by learning how to conduct courageous conversations.

Command 30: Go to Offenders | Day 209

Know When to Get Witnesses!

Both men were prominent individuals in their community and members of the same church, but they had not been on speaking terms for several years. One man was a business executive and the other was a builder. The businessman had hired the builder to put a large addition on his home. The builder had completed the work according to the plans that were agreed upon, but the businessman refused to pay him. The builder made several personal appeals to the businessman, but still the situation was not resolved. It was time to bring in a witness.

"But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Matthew 18:16).

The builder had a valid, legal claim against the businessman; however, Scripture warns against taking fellow believers to court. (See 1 Corinthians 6:1–2.) In fact, God warns a believer who has a grievance and goes to court before unbelievers: "… The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers" (1 Corinthians 6:7–8).

How would the builder who had thousands of dollars wrongfully withheld from him be defrauding the businessman by taking the matter before a civil judge? The answer is that a civil court deals only with the financial aspects of the case. There are important spiritual matters that also need to be addressed, and that is the purpose for going to an offender with a Godly witness. While going to court may have allowed the builder to get the money he was owed, it would have failed to address the spiritual welfare of the businessman.

One purpose for witnesses is to make sure the principles of God's Word are properly applied in resolving a dispute.

A "witness" could be a person who saw the offense take place firsthand, or it could be someone who is known and respected by both parties and can work with them to resolve their differences.

I became involved as a witness to help resolve the dispute between the builder and the businessman when both of them wanted to join me in my youth work. Each man had told me his side of the story, so one evening I invited them both to my home to discuss the deeper spiritual

issues that were at stake with their ongoing feud. By the end of our time together, each one had acknowledged the faults on his part and arrived at a compromise that was mutually acceptable.

Years ago, a wise friend helped me see an offender from a new perspective. I viewed the offender as a stubborn and unreasonable man whom I wanted to avoid, but my friend pointed out, "God does nothing by chance. He allowed that man to offend you to get your attention and to force you to focus on spiritual needs in your life and in his life."

We need to be attentive to the spiritual aspects of an offense and learn what God wants to teach us and the offender through it. Let's be committed to doing everything we can to resolve conflicts and recognize when a witness is needed.

Seek Restoration!

The danger of exercising church discipline on a fellow believer is the tendency to close our spirits to him and forget about him. This probably would have happened to the immoral man in the Corinthian church had not Paul intervened with some very clear, firm instructions. The man indeed had committed a horrible sin—a sin that was so despicable that even the heathen did not commit it. (See 1 Corinthians 5.) Action had to be taken to cut off this leaven of hypocrisy from the church fellowship before it corrupted the entire congregation.

Paul ordered that the man be excommunicated and delivered over to Satan for the destruction of his body, but Paul also made a point of staying informed about him because he valued the man's soul and spirit. Therefore, after a year of being shunned by other believers, Paul discerned that the man had fully repented and could become overcome with grief and bitterness if something was not done quickly to restore him to fellowship with the other believers.

Thus, Paul wrote, "The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him" (2 Corinthians 2:6–8).

The proof of our genuine love for a disciplined brother is in our faithfulness to watch for his repentance and restore him.

The ultimate example of earnest appeals, loving discipline, and patient waiting for restoration is seen in God's dealings with the nation of Israel. When Israel offended God by breaking His laws and worshiping other gods, the Lord sent prophets to appeal to them. When these were rejected, He sent more prophets. Finally, God sent His own Son.

The prophets were God's witnesses. When Israel rejected them, He sent more witnesses. When Jesus came, He represented the Church since He is the Head of the Church. When Israel rejected Christ, they were treated as heathens and publicans. However, God is patiently waiting for their repentance and eagerly desires to fully restore them, as well as every sinner, to Himself. (See Romans 11:26.)

The prodigal son demonstrates the consequences of being cut off and the loving restoration that occurs when there is repentance.

Church discipline is effective only when all of the members recognize the necessity of it and agree together to seek the offender's greater good by ceasing to fellowship with him until he is brought to repentance. This discipline is a demonstration of genuine love for the offender, as well as hatred of his sin. Because its purpose is to bring about reform, not ruin in the individual's life, full fellowship with him should be restored once he repents. God's desire is that there would be unity among all the members of the Body of Christ, so that the world will know that the Father sent Jesus to be the Savior of the world. (See John 17:21–23.)

In your journal this week, write out the name and offense of one who has wronged you. Then, list the steps that you will take to go to this offender. Humbly tell him his offense and seek to restore your relationship with him. The results will be a powerful chapter in your life message and will provide an example for many others to follow.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 18:15–17

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector".

Proverbs 25:9–10

"If you argue your case with a neighbor, do not betray another man's confidence, or he who hears it may shame you and you will never lose your bad reputation."

Galatians 6:1

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."

Luke 17:3

"So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him."

Romans 2:4

"Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?"

Hebrews 12:14–15

"Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."

Romans 5:8

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Beware of Greed!

In the Book of 1 Kings, the account is given of a man name Naboth, who owned a vineyard next to the palace of King Ahab. The King desperately wanted the vineyard for himself and offered to buy it from Naboth or trade a better piece of property for it. Naboth, however, recognized that God had entrusted this property to him and his descendants, and it was not something that he could sell or trade. (See 1 Kings 21:3.) In the end, Ahab had Naboth killed so that he could possess the land. This story provides a prime example of covetousness and illustrates the importance of Jesus' command:

Command Thirty-One

"... Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul equated covetousness with idolatry. "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Ephesians 5:5). Paul gives a similar warning in Colossians 3:5: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry."

There is often a fine line between desiring and acquiring something that is needed in a proper way and coveting something that belongs to someone else and which God does not want us to have. For example, God does not want us to have another man's wife, and to lust after her would be coveting. (See Deuteronomy 5:21.)

When we covet something that God has not given to us, we will begin to look for devious means to obtain it. This is true in the account of Achan, which Scripture identifies as a clear case of covetousness. God sent Israel to conquer the city of Jericho and told Joshua that they were not to take any of the spoils. The vessels of silver, gold, brass, and iron were to be put into the Lord's treasury, and everything else was to be destroyed in obedience to the Lord. However, Achan caused the whole nation to be condemned when he fell into covetousness through the lust of his eyes and disobeyed God's instruction. "When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them …" (Joshua 7:21).

Covetousness is longing for that which is forbidden by God or that which God has not intended for us to have.

We must be vigilant and careful to keep our hearts from coveting so that nothing consumes our attention more than God does. By keeping God as the focus of our lives, we can avoid covetousness.

Learn to Be Content!

I recently received a very sad report from a friend whom I had not heard from for many years. He had become a believer at a Basic Seminar and desired to follow the Lord with all of his heart. God blessed him with a wonderful wife and many children. God also blessed him with an excellent job that allowed him to buy a beautiful home and acquire significant assets. He continued to grow in his relationship with the Lord and sought to lead his family in the ways of the Lord. However, he never learned one vital quality—contentment.

If we are not content with what we have, we will not be happy with what we want.

This friend began spending more and more time away from his home and family in order to make more money. Consequently, his wife was left with the sole responsibility of addressing the spiritual needs in their children's lives. When the children were uncooperative, he became impatient and harsh in his discipline.

In order to further increase his assets, he decided to enter into a business partnership with a person he trusted. When this individual mismanaged the company, my friend tried to save it by borrowing money against his home. However, his attempts were unsuccessful, and his losses totaled close to a million dollars. Today, he has no home, no assets, and no job.

The bigger tragedy is what happened in the lives of his children. When they didn't find leadership and acceptance in their father, they began looking for it in other places and are now experiencing the consequences of unwise marriages and associations with the world. When I asked him what he would do differently if he had another chance he said, "I would stay home with my family more, be patient with my children, and be a better manager of my resources."

We are not born with contentment. It must be learned. Adam and Eve failed to be content even in a perfect environment.

Scripture tells us that "godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6). Contentment comes as we realize that God has provided everything we need and as we express our Gratitude to Him. Tragically, because my friend's focus was on getting more instead of enjoying what he had, he damaged his family relationships and lost his beautiful home and other provisions God had given him.

Contentment and Gratitude are inseparable. When we daily recognize all that God has given to us and express our Gratitude to Him, we will have no reason to be discontent and seek after things that we do not need or that God does not want us to have.

Are we demonstrating contentment by expressing Gratitude to God and others? A good way for a father to learn contentment is by letting each member of his family know that he is grateful to God for them and then praising them often for their Godly attitudes and actions. Let's make a concerted effort to conquer covetousness by learning contentment.

Command 31: Beware of Greed

Related Character Quality

Contentment vs. Covetousness

Contentment is realizing that God has already provided everything I need for my present and future happiness.

Contentment comes as we realize that God is all we really need and that He will never leave us. We can be satisfied in Him, knowing that He is the Supplier of all our physical and spiritual needs. "be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

Contentment Begins by Knowing the Purpose of Life

Man was created with an internal void that only God can fill. The Apostle Paul's ultimate aim was to "know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10).

Contentment Requires Distinguishing Between Needs and Wants

There are few things in life that are really necessary. In fact, God identified just two: food and clothing. "But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that" (1 Timothy 6:8). If we are not content with the basics of food and clothing, we will never be content, no matter how many things we obtain.

God has promised to provide for our needs; however, He has not assured us that we will get all our wants. We have a tendency to spend our resources on wants and then worry about our needs. Jesus warned about such concern. "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:31–33).

Discontentment Begins by Desiring Self-Sufficiency

When either partner in a marriage becomes self-sufficient, the love relationship is damaged, because joy and grace come from giving and receiving. The temptation of Adam and Eve was not simply to taste some forbidden fruit, but they were tempted to be self-sufficient and no longer need God. The subtle serpent told them that if they ate the fruit, they would "be as gods" and be able to decide for themselves good and evil. (See Genesis 3:1–6.)

Covetousness Is Idolatry

If we desire what God has not given to us but what He has given to others, we are guilty of coveting. This is a violation of the Tenth Commandment, which says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:17).

When we expect from possessions or people what only God can give, we turn them into idols and become guilty of idolatry. For example, if we expect security from money, we make money an idol, because only God can give security. Likewise, if we expect fulfillment from wealth or expensive possessions, we make them idols. The same is true if we look to food or diets alone for health.

Contentment Is Achieved by Exchanging "Things" for More of Christ

Someone has wisely observed that Jesus is all we need, but we will not know it until He is all we have. Paul understood this truth by exchanging "things" for more of Christ. "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8).

In one sense, life is a continual exchange. We exchange time on the job for money. We then exchange money for food, and we exchange food for strength. A wise person will exchange things of lesser value for things of greater value. It has been said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Personal Evaluation: How Content Are You?

- In what specific ways do you enjoy the presence of the Lord?
- Do you enjoy spending time with your family?
- Have you set your affections on getting things that you think will make your life happier?
- Do you become bitter when your possessions are damaged or stolen?
- When damage comes to your life, possessions, or family, do you have the response of Job? "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21).
- Do you rejoice in the wealth of things that money cannot buy—such as health, freedom, a good name, a clear conscience, and eternal salvation—more than temporal possessions?

Do you believe that God has given you all you need?

Recognize Temporal Things!

An ambitious couple found their "dream house." It was a spacious home on a wooded hillside overlooking a beautiful scenic valley. The house had been vacant for a few years and needed many repairs. The couple bought it and spent several years and thousands of dollars to restore it to its original elegance. When they finally finished, they made a disheartening discovery. For years, termites and carpenter ants had been at work in the wooden structure of the house, and now its supporting beams were unsafe.

An automobile enthusiast waited for years to finally own the car of his dreams—an expensive sports car with sleek lines and a powerful engine. However, in a few years he began to notice little mounds of rust poking through the shining surface of the car. The salt used to melt ice on the roads was contributing to the disintegration of his car.

Nothing on this earth will last forever. In fact, the entire world is in the process of decaying, and in the end will pass away (see 1 John 2:17). Soon after we die, even our bodies will return to the dust from which they were created.

Most of us give too much attention to temporal things and too little attention to the things that will last for eternity.

With all of his wisdom and resources, Solomon built magnificent structures for himself and for the Lord. They were world-renowned for their splendor and strength. Yet, today these structures are no longer standing and are part of the rubble of the Jerusalem landscape. We can learn much from Solomon's analysis of temporal things.

"What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? … The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. … I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. … I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees … . I denied myself nothing my eyes desired … Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun" (See Ecclesiastes 1:3–2:11.)

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

We do need things such as homes and cars while we are living on the earth; however, they should not be our focus. Covetousness in our lives is revealed by the amount of mental preoccupation and emotional attachment that we develop for things that will not last and that ultimately will not bring fulfillment or give us true satisfaction.

We would be wise to evaluate our perspectives and make a list of the things we tend to covet. Will these things have any value or importance a hundred years from now? Instead of coveting the temporal things of this world, let's recognize that only what we do for Christ will last for eternity, and let's choose to set our affections on "things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:2).

Avoid Inheritance Traps!

Friends and neighbors marveled at the love and unity of a certain family, but then everything changed when the father died and left a sizable inheritance. Coalitions were formed, accusations were made, arguments erupted, bitterness developed, and thick walls were erected! Unfortunately, this tragedy is not unique and occurs in many families when greed is involved.

"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:10).

It is significant that the command to beware of greed was given in the context of an inheritance dispute. A man was in turmoil over his brother's handling of the estate, and asked Jesus for help. "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me" (Luke 12:13).

Most likely this was a younger brother, because the firstborn son traditionally was the one to divide the inheritance and the one who had rights to a double portion (see Deuteronomy 21:17). Instead of becoming embroiled in an inheritance dispute, Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" (Luke 12:14). Then Jesus turned to the crowd and pointed out the greed that was involved in this appeal.

If we are tempted to covet an inheritance, we should remind ourselves that we brought nothing into this world and we will take nothing out.

Years ago, a wealthy widow asked me for advice on writing a will that would guarantee that her money would be given to Christian ministries instead of to her married son who was not living for the Lord.

I told her that it was likely her son would challenge such a will by trying to prove that she was mentally incompetent, so she obtained professional evaluations from two qualified doctors. I also reminded her of the Scripture that says a house is a proper inheritance to give to a son (see Proverbs 19:14). So, she gave her son and his family a home and specified further amounts for her grandchildren, because Scripture states, "A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children" (Proverbs 13:22). She also stipulated that if her son contested the will, he would lose everything.

In spite of these precautions, her son hired some clever lawyers who challenged the will and were able to accomplish exactly what the mother had feared. This experience is one of many that affirm to me the wisdom of distributing surplus funds while we are still alive so that we can channel them to be used in ways that honor the Lord.

We need to use wisdom in writing a will and make sure we clearly communicate our wishes to those who will receive an inheritance from us. Also, because children learn much from their parents' example, it is important to demonstrate contentment with the things that we have and reject any emotional attachments to an inheritance. If it is unfairly divided, let's remind ourselves that God supplies far more than an earthly inheritance and that relationships are more important than money.

Command 31: Beware of Greed

Study Question

Q: If riches, honor, and life come by humility and the fear of the Lord, why did the Apostle Paul consider it a privilege to suffer the loss of all things for the sake of Christ? (See Proverbs 22:4, Philippians 3:8.)

A: Many people today believe the faulty premise that they deserve to have and enjoy as many "good things" in life as possible. Thus, they spend their lives trying to accumulate money, possessions, and fame.

When Jesus gave the command to Beware of Greed, He told a parable that demonstrated the futility of laying up treasure on earth without being rich toward God. When a certain rich man acquired so many possessions that he could no longer store all of them, he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry" (Luke 12:18–19). However, God had other plans for this man and said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (Luke 12:21).

The attitude of the rich man in Jesus' parable is opposite to that of the Apostle Paul, who gladly gave up his earthly possessions in order to gain a greater relationship with the Lord. In Philippians 3:8 Paul stated, "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ."

When members of the early church were persecuted and had their earthly possessions taken from them, they were able to respond joyfully because of the greater rewards they knew that they would ultimately receive from God. (See Hebrews 10:34.)

For Christians today, the issue is not how much or how little we have, but rather our faithfulness as stewards of what God has entrusted to us. When God does give us riches, honor, and life, we have the privilege of investing them in God's kingdom. Therefore, whether we have plenty or are experiencing needs, we can rejoice and be content when our focus is on laying up treasure in heaven.

Command 31: Beware of Greed | Day 215

Reject Retirement Myths!

Many people can't wait to retire. With excitement they plan, save, and look forward to the day when they no longer have to work and can just "take it easy." They view retirement as a time for personal enjoyment and relaxation, and a time to do all of the things they always wanted to do. People with these goals most likely have believed some common myths regarding retirement.

Making accommodations for physical limitations or changing occupations may be necessary as we advance in years, but we should never cease our labors for the Lord and His kingdom.

Myth 1: A Normal Life Span is 70-80 Years

Some people "rush" into retirement to make sure that they can enjoy many years of pleasure before they die. They quote Psalm 90:10 as if it were the norm: "The length of our days is seventy years— or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow … ." However, God determines the length of our lives, and we certainly can live more than 80 years, especially if we fear the Lord (see Proverbs 10:27).

Myth 2: We Owe Ourselves Some Years of Leisure

This is the very myth that Jesus condemned when He said, "Beware of Greed." He told of a "certain rich man" who said, "I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones. ...And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry" (see Luke 12:16–20). Instead, we are to be active for God "in season and out of season" (see 2 Timothy 4:2).

Myth 3: We Must Store Up Massive Funds for Retirement

Just as the ant plans ahead and stores food for the winter, it is appropriate to save money for future seasons of life (see Proverbs 6:6–8). However, our trust should never rest in our savings, but always in the Lord. Additionally, the goal of saving for the future should not be to hoard money so that we can retire from laboring and pursue pleasure. Jesus said, "We must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work" (John 9:4). A runner does not quit before the race is over; he finishes the course. When we finish the course on earth, we will go directly to be with the Lord and receive a crown of righteousness (see 2 Timothy 4:7–8).

Myth 4: We Will Have Time to Serve God When We Retire

We should not delay our service to God for a "more convenient" time. The same "cares of this world" that choked out service to God before retirement will continue afterward. All of life should be lived for God, and even our jobs should be viewed as ministries and as means of supporting the advancement of God's kingdom. Waiting until retirement to serve God is like handing Him a bouquet of wilted flowers—our "best years" have already been spent.

Let's reject all of these myths and follow Paul's exhortation, "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Command 31: Beware of Greed | Day 216

Be Rich Toward God!

For 19-year-old Cristina Rodriguez, it began when she learned about the exciting and faith-stretching possibilities of becoming a "sower." A sower is one who keeps as little as possible for his

own needs and invests as much as possible in the lives of others. She surrendered her life to such a ministry, even though she had few earthly possessions.

Soon after making this commitment, she was visiting with some orphans from Mexico. As one of the girls admired her hat, Cristina recognized that this was an opportunity to be a sower and cheerfully gave it to her. A few days later, another girl complimented Cristina on how nice her perfume smelled. This was a $30 gift she had received from a friend, but after reminding herself of her decision to sow into others' lives, she gave away the perfume.

Then something unexpected started to happen. God began to multiply her "seed" money for sowing while at the same time providing for her needs. She received an honorarium for a class she had voluntarily taught. Money she had put in a pocket and forgotten about "reappeared." And a few days later, she received word that she had been selected to receive a $1,000 scholarship! She also has had numerous opportunities to share with others how God has worked in her life since she purposed to be a channel of His resources to others.

When we are rich toward God rather than toward ourselves, He opens the windows of heaven and showers us with seed money and ministry opportunities!

When Ken and his wife Lois heard Cristina's testimony, they were challenged by it and made the same surrender to God. After giving several gifts to others, Ken received an unexpected invitation to speak at a church in another state. After the service, the pastor gave him an honorarium of $6,000! This had never happened to Ken before.

When we experience the thrill of investing in others, we will conquer covetousness and become rich toward God. Jesus promised, "Give, and it will be given to you …" (Luke 6:38). The laws of the harvest teach us that "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (2 Corinthians 9:6).

There are two kinds of people in the world—givers and takers. A giver is one who demonstrates God's love through generosity. A taker is one who seeks to get all he can.

Paul instructed Timothy, "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share" (1 Timothy 6:17–18).

When we focus on giving rather than getting, we conquer covetousness. However, without the desire to be rich in good works toward others, it will be very difficult to overcome covetousness. Therefore, let's surrender the desire to be rich toward ourselves and instead become rich toward God through a lifetime of good works.

Command 31: Beware of Greed | Day 217

Consider the Cost of Coveting!

He was the son of royalty and rightful heir to the throne. One day, he saw a beautiful young woman and began to covet her. He was so ravished with desire that he actually became sick. A cunning friend devised a wicked plan to obtain for him that which he knew he could not rightfully get for himself. Amnon went along with the sinister plot and by force took what did not belong to him. After the momentary pleasure of lust, Amnon's attraction for Tamar turned into hatred for her. His actions caused others to hate him and resulted in his death. (See 2 Samuel 13.)

We will never truly enjoy the things we have coveted because our consciences will convict us of our sin.

Coveting means that we are seeking our own pleasure, power, or possessions, which disqualify us from ministry, because God requires that a leader not be covetous (see 1 Timothy 3:3). Paul said, "I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 2:20–21).

Coveting prohibits us from enjoying the good gifts that God gives to us every day, because the mind, will, and emotions are bound up in those things that we covet. Ahab could not enjoy the

wealth of his kingdom because he was emotionally controlled by his desire to have Naboth's vineyard. On the other hand, Moses rejected the treasures of Egypt, which he could have had, "He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt …" (Hebrews 11:26).

Coveting takes our eyes off of God, Who is the Giver of every good and perfect gift and from Whom all blessings flow, and puts them on that which will "fly off to the sky like an eagle" (Proverbs 23:5).

Coveting causes us to bring much heartache upon ourselves, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:10).

Coveting is worshiping a false god, which will bring the wrath of God upon us. "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming" (Colossians 3:5–6).

All the grief and misery of sin in our world can be traced back to one couple who coveted what God told them they could not have.

The hard lessons that we learn from our mistakes can be valuable lessons for others. In your journal, write out an experience of longing for something that you knew was not God's will for you to have and the results of getting it or not getting it. Let's recognize the seriousness of coveting and learn to overcome it.

Daily Scriptures

Luke 12:15

"… Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions".

Hebrews 13:5

"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

1 Timothy 6:6–8

"But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."

Philippians 4:11–12

"I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

Exodus 20:17

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Psalm 119:36–37

"Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word."

Proverbs 28:16

"A tyrannical ruler lacks judgment, but he who hates ill-gotten gain will enjoy a long life."

Forgive Your Offenders!

Jim could not understand why his sons were reacting to him. Although he was sometimes hard on them if they failed to keep their word, he reasoned that responsibility was an important character quality that they should develop.

Responsibility is an important quality for children to learn, but why was Jim so harsh in teaching it to his sons? The reason could be traced back to a time when Jim was a boy and his father failed to keep an important promise to him. One day Jim's father had informed Jim that he would be going to summer camp. At first, Jim was hesitant to leave, because he was raising pigeons and there would be no one to take care of them while he was gone. However, his father assured Jim that he would take personal responsibility for the care of the pigeons while Jim was gone.

When Jim returned from camp, he rushed out to see his pigeons. To his horror, they were all dead! His father had failed to care for them. The pain of the situation grew even worse when his father flippantly said, "Oh, I forgot, but they were just a bunch of pigeons. You can get some more." Jim developed a deep resentment toward his father, and this resentment was now affecting the way he responded to his sons and others.

The need to fully Forgive Others from the heart is clearly given in this important command:

Command Thirty-Two

"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:21–22).

It is possible that Peter's concern in asking this question was that an offender be properly punished. Jesus knew that such a perspective would never allow Peter to experience the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter needed a bigger perspective—one that would change his heart from self-centeredness to self-examination, from vindictiveness to viewing all of his sins that God had forgiven.

The principles of forgiveness that Jesus taught Peter are vital for us to understand as well. The Book of 1 Peter is like a "handbook for the hurting" and gives practical instruction on how to respond to offenses.

When we do not forgive, we are hindered from being the people God intends for us to be.

If we fail to fully forgive those who have hurt us, we will develop reactionary and defensive spirits that will damage other relationships in our lives. We may not even be aware of our negative attitudes, but those around us will notice them. Some will learn to live with them, concluding that "this is just the way we are." Others will react to our attitudes, which will cause new hurts.

How have we responded to offenses in the past? Have we become angry and bitter, or have we shown forgiveness and love? Let's ask God to teach us the keys to forgiveness and to give us the grace needed to obey this vital command.

Consider the Cost of Not Forgiving!

A woman adamantly declared, "I will never forgive my father!" She had grown up with the acute awareness that her father favored her younger sister, and she kept a mental record of all the things that he had done or failed to do that had deeply hurt her. Now, her life seemed to be a never-ending series of conflicts, disappointments, failures, health problems, bad judgments, and personal frustrations. She blamed them all on her father, which only increased her bitterness.

When she told me about her hatred toward her father, I asked her if she had ever prayed the Lord's Prayer. As she struggled to recall it, I began to quote, "Our Father in heaven …"

She responded, "Oh, yes! Many times!"

"Do you realize what you told God in that prayer?" I asked. She looked at me with a puzzled expression until I explained:

An unforgiving person who prays the Lord's Prayer is asking God to not forgive him: "Forgive us our debts as [in the same way] we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12; see also Matthew 6:15).

After giving the command to Forgive Others, Jesus told a parable that explained the consequences for anyone who does not forgive an offending brother. "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:32–35).

When this woman realized the seriousness of refusing to forgive her offenders, she asked God to forgive her for her bitterness and was then able to fully forgive her father. As the burden of her bitterness was lifted, she experienced a new sense of peace and joy in her heart. Other changes began to take place in her life as well, including the ability to lose excess weight that she had unsuccessfully tried to lose for many years.

Unforgiveness is a trap that cannot be escaped apart from the power of God.

The seriousness of God's warnings about unforgiveness should be a flashing red light in our minds, reminding and motivating us to forgive others. Let's take some time right now to search our hearts for any unforgiving attitudes that we are holding on to and choose to fully forgive those who have offended us.

Command 32: Forgive Others

Related Character Quality

Forgiveness vs. Bitterness

Forgiveness is clearing the record of those who have wronged me and allowing God to love them through me.

Why Forgiveness Is Important

There are serious physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual consequences for one who refuses to forgive an offender.

- **We are not forgiven.** Jesus said, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14–15).
- **We are tormented.** In a parable Jesus gave on forgiveness, a servant who was forgiven of a great debt refused to forgive a fellow servant who owed him a small debt. The master said, "You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:32–35).
- **We are defiled.** When others offend us, God gives us the grace to forgive our offenders. Therefore, we are to "live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many" (Hebrews 12:14–15).
- **We damage our health.** If we refuse to forgive our offenders, we will not be able to properly observe the Lord's table. "That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 11:30; see also Matthew 6:14–15).

Concepts to Understand Forgiveness

- **Pleading for mercy vs. pleading for more time.** The servant who refused to forgive a small debt after being released from a huge debt was not able to give mercy, because he did not ask for it. He asked instead for an extension of time: "Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything" (Matthew 18:26). The wise master put him in

prison to cause him to realize that he could never pay it all back. Only then would he plead for mercy and be able to give it to others. (See Luke 7:41–48.)

- **Clearing the conscience vs. responding with harshness.** When David heard the case of the man who stole his neighbor's pet lamb, he became angry and demanded an extreme punishment. The Law required only four sheep as restitution for the stolen one. However, David was unable to give justice or mercy, because he was guilty of the same offense. (See 2 Samuel 12.) When we harshly judge others, we condemn ourselves, because we do the same things. (See Romans 2:1–3.)
- **Having the goal of love vs. retaliation.** If the suffering God brings to our lives is not recognized as a test from His hand to produce the power of love and God's glory, Satan will turn it into bitterness, which will bring a lack of forgiveness and destruction.
- **Edifying the Body of Christ vs. cutting off believers.** Paul explains that every believer is a member of the Body of Christ and that we are all connected one with another. (See Romans 12:15.) Therefore, if we refuse to forgive a fellow believer, we are actually refusing to forgive ourselves.
- **Having fellowship through suffering vs. weakness.** Paul spoke of resurrection power that was available to every Christian who was willing to go through suffering. "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10). All believers are called to die to self-indulgences so that we can experience more of the power of Christ.

Ways to Develop a Forgiving Spirit

- View an offender as an "instrument" in God's hands.
- Thank God for the benefits He plans from an offense.
- Determine what character qualities God wants to develop in you through the offense.
- Realize that suffering is a normal part of the Christian life.

Personal Evaluation: How Forgiving Are You?

- Are there people whom you have not forgiven?
- Do you see offenses as opportunities in which to rejoice?
- Are you fearful that if you forgive an offender he will not learn from his mistakes?
- Do you believe it is your responsibility to make sure your offenders are punished?
- Do you fear that forgiving an offender will encourage him to offend again?
- Does the thought of certain offenders bring pain and hurt to you?
- Do you compare offenses against you to your greater offense to Christ?
- Have you looked for ways to return good to those who have done you evil?
- Do you picture offenders who are believers as related to you in the Body of Christ?

Find the Key to Forgiveness!

I read the parable of the unjust servant in Matthew 18 many times before I understood the vital truth it revealed about forgiveness. A certain king had a servant who owed him 10,000 talents. When the servant could not pay it, the king commanded that he, his wife and children, and all his possessions be sold. The servant fell on his face before the king and pled, "Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything." The king was moved with compassion and forgave the servant his entire debt.

This servant then went out and found a fellow-servant who owed him a much smaller debt of 100 pence. He grabbed the fellow-servant by the throat and demanded, "Pay back what you owe me!" His fellow-servant fell down at his feet, begging him to have patience and saying he would repay it all, but the unjust servant refused and had the man thrown into prison. (See Matthew 18:21–35.)

Notice that neither servant pleaded for mercy. They both asked for patience, assuming that they could repay the debt if they had more time. The second servant had a small debt, which easily could have been repaid, but the debt of the first servant was so huge that there was no humanly possible way that he could ever pay it back.

It is only as we recognize the utter impossibility of paying our huge debt to God and plead for His mercy that we can show mercy to others.

There are several important insights in this account that can be applied to forgiving our offenders. First of all, both men were fellow-servants to the king. In the same way, all believers are co-laborers with Christ in God's kingdom.

Secondly, the servant was supposed to be making wise investments for the king as a good steward of the king's assets, not using them for his own personal gain. It is likely that the loan made to the fellow-servant came from funds that were entrusted to him by the king. Since the king forgave the entire amount owed to him by the first servant, this also would have included the money that was loaned to the second servant. Thus, he had no right to demand it.

Finally, by throwing his fellow-servant in prison, he was doing further damage to the interests of the king by incapacitating one of the king's other workers. No wonder the king called him a wicked servant and severely punished him for his lack of forgiveness by turning him over to the jailers "until he should pay back all he owed."

We imprison ourselves through unforgiveness and will suffer at the hands of "jailers" until we fully forgive our offenders.

Since God says that He will deal with every person who refuses to forgive in the same way that the king dealt with the wicked servant, we can expect that God will allow "jailers", or things that torment us in our lives, if we fail to forgive. (See Matthew 18:35.) Therefore, the key to forgiving others is to focus on our huge debt of sin that God has forgiven and generously extend that same forgiveness to others.

Recognize Your Tormentors!

Things were not going well for a couple who had been married for ten years. Their children were giving them grief, their financial pressures had no end, they had ongoing health problems, and there was continual tension in their marriage.

I asked them numerous questions trying to identify the source of their problems. As we talked, I discovered that they had not been on speaking terms with their parents for many years because of things that their parents had done to hurt them. While this couple had legitimate grievances, the problems they were experiencing were not a result of what their parents had done; they were a result of their failure to forgive their parents.

God allows tormentors in our lives to get our attention and to motivate us to forgive others so that our fellowship with Him may be restored.

Not every problem we encounter in life is a "tormentor." Scripture is filled with examples of the trials that God allows in the lives of His children to test them, refine them, or bring Himself glory. However, the laws of the harvest are also very real. We can be certain that what we sow we will reap. (See Galatians 6:7.)

Jesus warns that just as the king delivered the unforgiving servant to the jailers, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35). Some of the tormentors we may experience as a result of unforgiveness are:

- **Sickness and disease.** Unforgiveness breeds bitterness and anger, which cause stress that upsets the body's hormonal balance. This can lead to a variety of painful physical maladies. Paul warns that if we fail to thoroughly examine ourselves and clear up past offenses before partaking in communion, we will experience weakness, sickness, and premature death. (See 1 Corinthians 11:30.)

- **Financial distress.** Satan wants to devour us and to steal our assets so that they cannot be used for God's kingdom. (See 1 Peter 5:8.) When we allow unforgiveness to damage relationships, finances are often affected, especially in divorce cases and lawsuits.
- **Spiritual oppression.** Satan has been given the power to harass people with unclean spirits. (See Luke 6:18.) There are many different manifestations of these spirits in those who are unforgiving. One 18-year-old girl was tormented during the night with visions of evil faces. They were so terrifying that she would wake up screaming. The nightmares stopped when she finally forgave her mother of some past offenses.
- **Family conflicts.** When husbands or wives do not fully forgive their spouses, unforgiveness will quickly affect their relationship and multiply their conflicts. The same is true for parents and children. Parents who are unforgiving will tend to have a spirit of hurt and harshness, which their children react to.

Do any of these problems look familiar to you? If so, could it be that God is allowing tormentors in your life to get your attention so that you will see the seriousness of the sin of unforgiveness and repent? Let's identify any past or present unforgiveness in our lives and deal with it quickly.

Command 32: Forgive Others

Study Question

Q: In the parable of the two servants who had debts, the one with an enormous debt was forgiven by the king, but he in turn put a fellow servant into prison for not paying a small debt to him. The king then delivered this wicked servant to the jailers to torment him "until he should pay back all he owed." How could both servants ever get free from bondage? (See Matthew 18:23–34.)

A: In response to Peter's question on how many times he must forgive an offender, Jesus gave a parable that gives rich insight on the whole matter of forgiveness.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed" (Matthew 18:32–34).

If the huge debt of the wicked servant was indeed forgiven, as Matthew 18:32 states, then the only outstanding debt is that of his fellow servant. This would imply that when it is paid, the wicked servant will be released from the jail.

This understanding fits the statement "pay back all he owed." If the "him" refers to the wicked servant who owed the king, that servant can forgive his fellow servant's debt and thereby be released. This action would be authorized by the king, who is punishing him for not having pity and compassion—not for the debt.

If "him" refers to the king, the same action can be taken. After all, the wicked servant likely used part of the money he borrowed from the king to lend to his fellow servant. Therefore, if the wicked servant forgives his fellow servant's trespass, no outstanding debts remain. This action frees him from the tormentors and his fellow servant from debtors' prison. In this way, both servants gain their freedom.

This confirms what Jesus stated regarding forgiveness: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35).

Forgive Others Fully!

A bitter wife began explaining to me all of the hurts that she had received from her husband over many years. She had them memorized and was able to provide many examples of his insensitivity, unkindness, and selfishness! I interrupted her discourse with the question, "Have you forgiven your husband as Jesus commanded us to?" "Oh, yes!" she replied. "I have forgiven him many times, but he keeps hurting me!"

In her mind, any new offense was grounds for digging up all past offenses that she had "forgiven" and adding them to her arsenal. It was obvious that she did not understand the true nature of forgiveness. Jesus made it clear in this command that we must forgive from our hearts. (See Matthew 18:35.)

We may extend forgiveness with our lips, but until it comes from our hearts, it will not be full forgiveness.

Forgiveness is more than just saying the words "I forgive you." It is fully releasing the offender from our judgment against him. If a new offense occurs, it should be treated as a new offense and not added to the "stack" of previous offenses. God's example of full forgiveness is the model we should strive to follow: "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12).

Because the wounds from an offense can often be deep and painful, giving verbal blessings is an extremely beneficial aspect of full forgiveness. Sincere blessings come from the heart, and it is the heart that rules the mind, emotions, and tongue. Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees that the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart. (See Matthew 12:34.)

When I told one hurting wife that she would never be free from her emotional wounds until she was able to verbally bless her husband, she looked at me in disbelief. She did not feel like blessing him; she wanted to punish him!

I explained to her that blessing an offender does not mean you are asking God to give him a happy and carefree life. Instead, it reflects a genuine desire to see good come to his life by asking God to develop in him the character qualities that he needs. If this woman's husband had been mean and selfish, she could ask God to bless him with a spirit of kindness, compassion, and genuine love.

"Forgiveness is not an emotion … . Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart."—Corrie Ten Boom

Perhaps the most hurtful offenses are verbal assaults—especially false accusations from our loved ones and friends. James describes these verbal missiles as poison and as fire that is set ablaze from hell (see James 3:6–12). We cannot allow this verbal "venom" to go untreated. It will damage our fellowship with God and others through the bitterness that will take root in our lives.

If there is someone whom we are having trouble fully forgiving, let's discern what character qualities he is lacking. Then, from our hearts, let's ask God to bless them with the ability to develop these qualities and watch our attitudes toward them change as we invest in their lives.

List Benefits From Offenses!

What do you do if you forgive an offender and verbally ask God to bless him, but you still feel the emotional pain and keep reliving the offense? If we want to experience complete freedom from past hurts, there is a vital step that must be carried out.

If we fail to see the benefits that God intended for allowing an offense to happen, we will find it difficult to rejoice.

We are commanded to rejoice in all things. This includes trials, tribulations, persecutions, false accusations, and all other offenses. (See 1 Peter 4:13 and Matthew 5:12.) A powerful way to do this is to ask yourself why God might have allowed it to happen.

As we begin to investigate the bigger picture and think of the offense in terms of God's ultimate purposes for our good, we will find many reasons to genuinely rejoice. Here are some possible reasons why God might allow someone to offend us:

- **To draw us closer to God.** He wants our moment-by-moment fellowship. If He sees our hearts straying, He will use whatever means are necessary to draw us back to Himself.

David said, "It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees" (Psalm 119:71).

- **To purify our faith.** Just as fire purifies the dross from gold, so fiery trials purify our hearts and lives. "These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:7).
- **To give us more grace and power.** When Paul wanted to be delivered from his "thorn in the flesh," God informed Paul that He had given him enough grace for the situation and that His strength would be perfected in Paul's weakness. (See 2 Corinthians 12:9.)
- **To give us compassion for others.** We can be sure that the trials and offenses that we go through are encountered by many others as well. Therefore, when we experience the heartache of offenses, we will be able to have deep empathy and compassion for others who experience similar hurts.
- **To give us answers to share.** Not only will we be able to give genuine comfort to others, but we will also be able to give them the same spiritual counsel that God gave us through our trials. This is the promise of 2 Corinthians 1:2–7.

We can be confident that there are benefits to offenses, because "... in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28).

After Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, he had ample reasons to become bitter and hateful toward them. However, when he was unexpectedly reunited with them, Joseph acknowledged the sovereignty of God in the events of his life by telling his brothers, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good …" (Genesis 50:19–20).

We can experience similar victory over bitterness and unforgiveness when we learn to look for the ways God is using an offense to benefit our lives. Try this for yourself today and see if you don't find more than enough reasons to rejoice!

Discern Types of Offenders!

Toward the beginning of Paul's ministry, he had to escape from would-be killers by being let down over the city wall. He ended his ministry by rejecting the appeals of those who warned of his death and going to Rome, where he was beheaded.

During his ministry, he responded to a multitude of opponents in various ways. He debated with the religious leaders in the synagogues, reasoned with the philosophers on Mars Hill, challenged his opponents in the church, and praised God for other critics who were at least preaching the Gospel.

In the same way that wars are won by different strategies, so we must use different responses for those who oppose us.

Jesus laid the foundation for recognizing different types of offenders and responding to them in different ways when He said, "… Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Paul presented a parallel idea when he said, "… When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly" (1 Corinthians 4:12–13).

As we obey the command to love our enemies, it is important to recognize three types of enemies and different ways to respond to them, identified by Jesus and Paul.

1. Those who curse and revile us: we bless.

Jesus gave an example of this type of attack when He said, "… If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub [Satan], how much more the members of his household?" (Matthew 10:25). He went on to explain why those who revile need to be blessed with repentance for sin and God's mercies upon them for salvation: "So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that

will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known." (Matthew 10:26). By blessing them we overcome evil with good (see Romans 12:21).

2. Those who hate and persecute us: we endure it and return good for evil.

This reaction of hatred is because of a relationship with the Lord and the work of His kingdom. Jesus stated, "All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:13). Just as Jesus did good to those who hated Him and conquered by love, so we are to follow in His steps. In fact, Jesus did this for each of us. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

3. Those who defame and despitefully use us: we entreat and pray for.

When Paul's character was defamed by false accusations, he responded to the challenge by giving his credentials and defending his Godly actions (see 2 Corinthians 11:22–31). Jesus also responded to those who tried to defame Him by appealing to their consciences with the truth (see John 8:41–47).

In your journal this week, write down the names of individuals whom God has brought to your mind to forgive. Then, as you apply the insights from this command, write out the results, especially how God heals any emotional wounds and replaces them with genuine love for your offenders.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 18:21–22

"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times".

Colossians 3:12–13

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

Ephesians 4:31–32

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Matthew 6:14–15

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

1 Peter 3:8–9

"Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."

James 2:13

"... judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment."

Identify Marriage Prerequisites!

They were very much in love and confident that God was leading them into marriage. There didn't seem to be any reason why this couple wouldn't live "happily ever after." However, after the wedding, problems began. The husband continued to confide in his parents rather than in his wife, and when disagreements arose, he would side with his parents. This produced tension in the husband and wife's relationship as well as in the wife's relationship with her in-laws. The strain

on the marriage was great, because the husband failed to understand the implications of Christ's command:

Command Thirty-Three

"... at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:4–6).

In this command, Jesus clearly reaffirms God's original design for marriage. It is to be a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman and the time when two individuals leave their parents and become one with each other. This new husband failed to recognize the need to emotionally leave his parents and make his relationship with his wife a higher priority.

In another family, a young wife was wondering if she had married the right man. Before they were married, her husband had talked about the Lord, but now he had little time or interest in spiritual things. He had a good job, yet it could not support the expensive "toys" he insisted on buying. They were deep in debt, and life seemed to lack any real purpose.

The turmoil in their marriage was a result of the husband not understanding three essential areas that every man should develop before marriage:

1. A Vibrant Walk With God

Fellowship with the Lord should be the primary focus of our lives. Therefore, it is vital that a man has a genuine relationship with the Lord before he gets married. The qualities that come from a vibrant walk with God are foundational for true success in all areas of life, including marriage, because they are the qualities that every woman inwardly longs for in a husband.

2. Wisdom in Financial Decisions

God has given a man the responsibility of providing for the needs of his family. (See 1 Timothy 5:8.) This requires that he works diligently, develops marketable skills, and is able to make wise purchases. The more skilled he is in these areas before marriage, the less financial tensions he and his wife are likely to experience after marriage.

3. A Powerful Life Message

A "life message" is an ongoing explanation of how God is working through our human weaknesses to show the riches of His grace and the exceeding greatness of His power. If a husband is to be a successful spiritual leader in his home, he needs to be attentive to the ways God is working in his life and able to share these lessons with others.

A man who is faithful to develop these three areas while he is single will establish the foundation for a fulfilling and fruitful marriage in the future. Whether we are married or not, let's evaluate these three areas in our own lives and make the ongoing development of them a priority.

Keep Marriage Vows!

For many years I tried to solve a mystery: Why did a Godly man fail to achieve the level of success that I knew he was capable of? Significant opportunities presented themselves to him, but any resulting financial gains always seemed to be diminished by circumstances. No one could say that he did not try. It was as if a cloud of defeat followed him in whatever he did. Then one day I discovered the reason why.

"When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said" (Numbers 30:2).

Thirty-five years earlier this man had made a vow to God before many witnesses that he would be faithful to his wife, "For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part." However, he had failed to keep this vow and had divorced his wife. Now he

was married to another woman, and during all of this time he and his second wife had kept his first marriage a secret.

The seriousness of a vow is emphasized in the following passage: "When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands?" (Ecclesiastes 5:4–6).

There are significant consequences that come to those who sin by breaking their marriage vows. When the men of Israel divorced their wives and married foreign wives, God made it clear that He would not accept their sacrifices. Why? "Because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made them one? … I hate divorce, says the LORD God of Israel …" (Malachi 2:14–16).

Marriage is not a contract between two people. Rather, it is a covenant between two people and a holy God.

The couple with the secret past learned the truth of Proverbs 28:13: "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." Seeking the Lord's mercy, the husband confessed his sin of breaking his marriage vow. There were continued consequences from the divorce, but God's blessing for his repentant spirit became obvious.

God holds a man to the words of his mouth. "For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:37). If we have failed to keep a vow, let's confess it to God as sin so that we can experience His forgiveness and blessing and return to keeping our vows.

Command 33: Honor Marriage

Related Character Quality

Why Is Loyalty Important?

Every important relationship in life must be built on loyalty. Marriages must be based on this quality, or they will not survive. Leaders look for this quality as a primary qualification for those who serve. Most of all, God requires loyalty of those who follow Him.

Loyalty in Covenants

- A covenant is made with those of like spirit. God said to Abraham, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless" (Genesis 17:1). Scripture calls Abraham the friend of God and the father of faith. (See James 2:23 and Galatians 3:6–9.)
- A covenant requires an initiator, who assumes the greater responsibility in maintaining the covenant. "I will confirm my covenant between me and you" (Genesis 17:2). In marriage, the man initiates the covenant and therefore has the greater responsibility to maintain it.
- A covenant often involves a name change. "No longer will you be called Abram" (Genesis 17:5). A name change also occurs in a marriage as the wife takes on the husband's name and in salvation as we take on Christ's name.
- The purpose of a covenant is to multiply benefits and fruitfulness. "I will make you very fruitful" (Genesis 17:6). In a marriage, these purposes are fulfilled with children and with spiritual children through salvation.
- A covenant has relationships that last beyond the lifetimes of the covenant makers. "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come" (Genesis 17:9). Although marriage does not continue after death, the relationships between the children and relatives do.

The Covenant of Marriage

Marriage is a covenant, not just a legal contract. All the rich symbolisms of a Biblical covenant are contained in marriage. The seriousness of marriage vows is emphasized in the following warning. "When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it" (Ecclesiastes 5:4–5).

The Covenant of Believers

When Jesus established communion among His disciples, He presented it as a covenant. This is clear from the very words He used to describe it: "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26–28).

"Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16). This is consistent with the many commands of Scripture to love one another, because we are all members of the same Body.

Personal Evaluation: How Loyal Are You?

- Do you doubt God's sovereignty during adversity, or do you draw nearer to Him?
- Do you speak well of your authorities even during difficult times, or do you murmur and complain?
- Do you protect your family even when circumstances make it difficult?
- Do you treat other believers as you would want to be treated?
- Are you committed to the success of those whom God has called you to serve?
- Are you willing to lay down your life for your family and friends?
- Are you committed to your covenant of marriage, regardless of the cost?

Reaffirm Your Marriage Commitment!

The two oldest sons had become bitter young men. They were bitter at their father for divorcing their mother, bitter toward their mother for the accusations that their father had made against her, and bitter toward God for allowing the divorce to happen. Their anger and bitterness were now spreading and negatively influencing their younger brothers and sisters as well.

A damaged or broken marriage is a painful ordeal for a husband and wife. Divorce does not separate a married couple; rather, it tears them apart and leaves long-lasting wounds, because in marriage they have become one flesh. As hurtful as a broken marriage will be to the couple, sometimes the deepest emotional wounds are felt by their children.

The effects of divorce on children are not often addressed in the books that justify divorce and remarriage; however, it is an important factor to God, because one of His stated purposes for marriage is to raise Godly sons and daughters. "Has not the LORD made them one? … And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth" (Malachi 2:15).

Christ gave us a sober warning in His command to not offend little ones when He said, "It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin" (Luke 17:2).

Divorce is never a solution; it is only choosing another set of problems.

As much as divorced parents try to avoid offending and damaging their children, it is unavoidable. A child's initial perception of God is based largely on his experiences with his parents. When parents divorce, they are displaying attitudes and actions that are contrary to the nature of God. This can lead their children to have a distorted view of God, which can have serious and devastating repercussions in their lives. Many children from broken homes picture God as someone Who is distant and uninterested in their daily lives, a God Who will leave them during hard times, or as an angry, harsh God Who watches for things that He can punish.

In a divorce, children are often forced to choose sides with one parent or the other. This can be a spiritual tragedy, because children are to honor both their father and their mother so that things will go well with them. (See Deuteronomy 5:16.) Also, when children are forced to live with one parent and visit another, they are placed under dual authorities. Matthew 6:24 says, "No one can

serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other … ."

The greatest gift a father can give to his children is to love their mother.

A teenager recently told me that when he and his siblings learned about a neighbor's divorce they became fearful that their parents would also divorce. When the parents found out about this fear, they assured their children that they were both committed to their marriage and that they would never even consider a divorce. This not only relieved the children's fears but also gave them a joyful sense of security.

Today would be a good time to reaffirm your marriage commitment to your spouse. Then, assure your children of your commitment as a couple and give them the security of knowing that divorce will never be a consideration for your marriage.

Command 33: Honor Marriage | Day 228

Understand Marriage Analogies!

Throughout Scripture God uses analogies to illustrate spiritual truths. Marriage is one of the central analogies used to exemplify several divine relationships and basic points of doctrine. For us to change marriage standards to fit our ideas of what is acceptable would be to alter the truth that God wants to teach through these visual lessons. If Scripture were intended to be adapted to fit culture, it would mean that culture would have more authority than the Bible; and since culture is determined by man's ideas, it would put man above God.

Divorce contradicts the truths that God uses marriage to illustrate.

Married couples have a unique opportunity and responsibility to be living epistles of God's truth by portraying these analogies in their marriages:

1. God's Relationship With Israel

God uses marriage as an illustration to describe His relationship with the nation of Israel. (See Jeremiah 3:14.) Israel became like an unfaithful wife and left Him. However, He is not going to marry another wife, but is continuing to pursue Israel and is waiting for her to return to Him. (See Hosea 2:14–20 and Romans 11:11.) At the same time, He is preparing a bride for His Son.

2. Christ's Relationship With the Church

The Church is the Bride of Christ. (See Revelation 21:9.) Jesus is currently preparing an eternal home for believers and will come again one day to take us to live with Him in heaven. Christ is committed to the Church and will never divorce her, even though there is much unfaithfulness within the Church. (See James 4:1–5.) Instead, Jesus is continually purifying His Bride so that she may be without spot or blemish. (See Ephesians 5:25–27.)

3. God's Redemption of Mankind

The entire plan of redemption parallels a Jewish wedding. God the Father sent His Son into the world to secure a bride and pay the "bride price" with His own blood. Christ then returned to heaven to prepare a place for believers. No one knows the day or the hour that Christ will come again; however, after He does, believers will spend all eternity with Him. (See 1 Thessalonians 4:14–17.)

4. The Believer's Relationship to the Law

A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives and is free to marry another only after her husband dies. Before we were saved, we were bound to the Law. At salvation, we became a part of Christ's spiritual body and, as such, retroactively participated in His death, burial, and resurrection. Therefore, we are released from the Law and free to enter into a new union with Christ. (See Romans 7:1–4.)

The "great mystery" of the one-flesh relationship in marriage is revealed in the relationship between Christ and the Church.

God has taken the most important relationship on this earth and used it to portray vital spiritual truths. Let's purpose to do all we can to be living testimonies of these truths so that the world can see an accurate representation of Christ and His work in the world.

Command 33: Honor Marriage

study question

Q: Since God established marriage as a lifelong union between one man and one woman, why did He provide for divorce in the law of Moses? (See Deuteronomy 24:1–2.)

A: The Mosaic Law lifts up a very high standard for the permanency of marriage and requires severe punishment for anyone who violates this covenant. (See Deuteronomy 22:22, 28–29.) In Deuteronomy 24:1, however, the Law makes a provision for divorcing a wife who has "uncleanness." The Hebrew word translated uncleanness means "nakedness" or "shame." This one passage was leaped upon by the Pharisees, and there was much discussion about what was permissible under this provision.

When Jesus talked of the permanency of marriage, they tempted Him with the retort, Why "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus answered by explaining, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning." (See Matthew 19:7–8.) Not only does the original institution of marriage, as recorded in Genesis 2:24, establish its permanency, but Christ's command clearly states that while tolerated for the time, divorce contradicts the order of nature and of God.

Marriage is a Biblical pattern for Christ's relationship with the Church—Jesus is the Bridegroom and believers are the Bride. Jesus was sent by His heavenly Father to win our hearts by paying the "bride price," which was His death on the cross. His unbreakable bond with believers is portrayed in His design for the permanency of marriage.

Understand the Exception Clause!

The woman looked down and began to weep tears of pain and regret. She had just told me her tragic story. After her husband had passed away, a smooth-talking divorced man had convinced her to marry him. At first she was hesitant, but he managed to persuade her and her pastor that he had a Biblical right to remarry because his wife had left him. As it turned out, his true interest was not in this widow, but in her money. Much unnecessary heartache could have been avoided if they would have heeded Christ's instruction:

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Luke 16:18).

Notice that there is no "exception clause" in this passage. Luke was a Gentile writing primarily to a Gentile audience. His testimony is confirmed by Mark: "… Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11–12). There is no exception clause in this passage either. Paul also confirmed that there is no "back door" out of a one-flesh covenant. (See Romans 7:1–3.)

Only the Gospel of Matthew has the clause "except for marital unfaithfulness." (See Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.) We can gain perspective on the intent of the exception clause by recognizing that this Gospel was originally written to a Jewish audience that followed the custom of betrothal.

Instead of becoming engaged, a couple would be considered legally married at the time they were betrothed. However, they would not come together physically until after the wedding feast at a later date. If during this waiting period the bride-to-be had relations with another man, she would have been guilty of adultery and her betrothed husband could divorce her. This was the presumed situation that Joseph faced regarding Mary. However, an angel revealed to Joseph that Mary had not been unfaithful to him, but was with child of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, he did not divorce her. (See Matthew 1:18–24.)

The word fornication, used in the exception clause, is translated from the Greek word porneia and refers to any relations that take place prior to marriage as well as any adultery that occurs during the time of betrothal. However, a distinction is made between fornication (porneia) and adultery in marriage (moicheia) in Matthew 15:19, Mark 7:21, and Galatians 5:19.

Porneia also refers to illegal marriages in general. The man in the Corinthian church who married his father's wife had an unlawful porneia marriage. John the Baptist condemned the incestuous (porneia) marriage of Herod the Tetrarch to his brother's wife. A homosexual marriage would also be considered an example of porneia. Divorce in cases like these involves a completely different set of factors than the covenant marriage of a man and a woman in a one-flesh relationship.

If we are to honor marriage we should look for reasons to keep it together, not excuses to tear it apart.

It used to be that the exception clause was applied to only a few extreme cases. As a result, divorces were rare and the family unit was respected and guarded. Today however, marriages are under fierce attack and many are being destroyed through a false understanding of the exception clause. Separation for a time may be necessary for the protection of a wife and children; however, let's do all we can to keep marriages together rather than looking for reasons to divorce.

Command 33: Honor Marriage | Day 230

Strengthen the Spirit of Your Marriage!

I wanted to laugh, but it was not a laughing matter. In fact, it was tragic. A husband had gone into great detail telling me all of the things he was doing to make his marriage successful while his wife listened on another phone. As if to seal his presentation he asked his wife, "Honey, haven't we had a happy marriage?" She replied, "I have not had one happy year since we got married!" He was shocked! He had done many things for his wife but had failed to meet her real needs.

When the spirit of a marriage is damaged, it is not long before the marriage itself is destroyed.

I still remember the Pastors' Seminars years ago, where I first taught about strengthening the spirit of a marriage. In the session, I explained to the men that one of a wife's desires is to know that she is meeting vital needs of her husband that no other woman can fulfill. Then, I asked them to write down several such items. At seminar after seminar the response was the same. The men would stare at a blank sheet of paper for several minutes, because everything that first came to their minds could be done by other women: making meals, washing clothes, shopping, raising children, and even having children!

It took some thought to come up with items such as being a true friend who points out unrecognized areas of sin that no one else sees (see Proverbs 27:6), and giving physical pleasure without guilt (see Proverbs 5:18–21). The bonding of a marriage will become much stronger when a husband recognizes the invaluable contributions his wife makes to his life and expresses Gratitude to her for them.

Another key factor in strengthening the spirit of a marriage is listening to the heart of a wife. A husband will usually take his wife's comments as the full expression of her heart. This is not wise, because at any given time she may be expressing only her mind, will, emotions, or spirit. Each part needs to be heard in order to truly understand a wife's heart.

A husband should keep asking questions until he hears the whole matter. Questions such as these may be helpful in drawing out the heart of his wife: What do you think about this? How do you feel about this? What do you think God is trying to say to us through this? What do you think we should do about this? "He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame" (Proverbs 18:13).

When the spirit of a marriage is damaged, verbal communication is often misunderstood and more hurts result.

One of the most important ways to strengthen the spirit of a marriage is to quickly ask for forgiveness when offenses occur. "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Ephesians 4:26). If any offense is allowed to "survive" overnight, it can turn into wrath and bitterness, which will greatly damage the spirit of a marriage.

There are many other ways to strengthen the spirit of a marriage. The important thing is to start doing them! Why not begin by asking your wife how she would rate your marriage currently and asking her for suggestions on how it can be improved. By proactively seeking to strengthen the spirit of your marriage, you will be honoring God and obeying the essence of Christ's command.

What Are Six Purposes for Marriage?

God designed marriage to fulfill six important and vital functions. When we understand them, we will be better able to honor marriage.

1. Companionship

True companionship grows out of a oneness of spirit. This occurs in marriage when both the husband and wife can say, "My spouse is my best friend." "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (Amos 3:3).

2. Enjoyment

The principle behind enjoyment is self-control. "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Hebrews 13:4).

3. Completeness

God designed Eve to complete that which was lacking in Adam's life. "The man said, … She shall be called Woman, for she was taken out of Man" (Genesis 2:23).

4. Fruitfulness

God's first command in Scripture is this: "… Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth …" (Genesis 1:28).

The very nature and character of God is to multiply life, whereas the nature and character of Satan is to multiply death.

5. Protection

A husband is to protect his wife by laying down his life for her. (See Ephesians 5:25.) A wife is to protect the interests of her home. (See Titus 2:4–5.) Parents are to protect their children to raise up Godly offspring.

6. Typify Christ and the Church

Marriage is to be a human object lesson of the divine relationship between Christ and believers. (See Ephesians 5:31–33.)

Transfer Authority in Marriage!

Recently, a wife called me with a desperate plea for help. Her husband was addicted to pornography and it was ruining their marriage. He had given up any hope of overcoming it. What made their situation even more devastating was that he is the pastor of a church! When she sought help for their marriage from others, her husband became angry and told her that she was operating out from under his authority. He threatened to quit the pastorate if she told the church board.

I assured her that she was in no way out from under her husband's authority by seeking help for their problem. In fact, she was exercising the authority that he had given to her when they were married.

In marriage, "The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:4).

When a man gets married, he yields the authority of his body to his wife, even as she does to him. He no longer has the authority to choose what his eyes look at or what any of the members of his body do. This is similar to the policeman who has authority, under the law, to stop a speeding truck, even though he personally does not have the power to do so.

This is one reason why a husband must confess secret moral failures and temptations to his wife, so that together they can gain victory in the Lord. Another reason is that in marriage the two become "one flesh" in a covenant relationship. What one marriage partner does directly affects the other marriage partner. A further motivation for openly sharing secret failures with a wife is the knowledge that Satan operates in darkness. When there are hidden failures, Satan is able to continue his destructive work so that victory is not really possible.

I am happy to report that this husband listened to counsel and shared his situation with the church board. They gave him a six-month leave of absence so that he could go through an intensive program to help him conquer moral addictions. It is our prayer that he will be able to return to his church with a powerful testimony of victory in this area.

Marriage is two individuals agreeing to lay down their lives so the other can live.

While it is obvious that marital unfaithfulness is wrong, it is also important to maintain purity within a marriage. Over the years, many men have tried to justify perverted actions in marriage with this verse: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure …" (Hebrews 13:4). God will judge those who defile marriage.

Marriage was not designed for the purpose of fulfilling abnormal passions and lusts. Thus, this instruction is given: "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband" (1 Corinthians 7:3). Marital duty includes only what is proper and beneficial to both parties.

Now would be an excellent time to reaffirm your commitment to moral purity and to ask your wife to help you overcome temptations. In your journal, write out the ideas you and your wife have come up with to strengthen the spirit of your marriage, and begin practicing them today!

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 19:4–6

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate".

Ephesians 5:31–33

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."

1 Corinthians 7:10–11

"To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife."

Malachi 2:16

"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith."

Achieve Greatness by Serving!

The heart of every individual possesses a desire to do something significant. God created this basic human need within each of us because He made us in His image, and He is a great God Who does great deeds. When the disciples were arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus responded to their desire for greatness by giving this command:

Command Thirty-Four

"... Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Matthew 20:26–27).

The journey of Joseph from being a slave to being chief in Potiphar's house and from being a prisoner to being the second-highest ruler in Egypt shows a pattern of how this command works. Joseph had a servant's heart. As a slave, he did not do just what he was told to do, but he saw that God's purpose for him was to do all that he could to make Potiphar successful. God will always bless a servant spirit, because it reflects the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, God blessed everything Joseph put his hand to. Potiphar saw God's blessing on Joseph and appointed Joseph as overseer of his house. Later Pharaoh, seeing that God was with Joseph, set him over all the land of Egypt. (See Genesis 39–43.)

The greatest test of whether or not one is a true servant is how he responds when he is treated like one.

A 20-year-old man in Oklahoma was sent to work as the assistant manager of a retail store. The manager took one look at him and reacted with the thought, "Why would they send a young kid like this out here?" Trying to break him, the manager sent him down to the storage room, which was in utter chaos. Undaunted, the young man organized the fixtures and supplies in bins. Within a couple of weeks the storage room was transformed. Instead of giving any recognition or approval, the manager's only response was, "Ya know, we're not slave drivers around here. It's okay for you to take a break."

This young man's servant heart and diligent work paved the way for his present work as the founder and CEO of one of the nation's largest privately owned retail chains. David Green's story is an amazing account of God's blessing on a spirit of serving.

Let's realize that this command is not just a suggestion to serve, but a powerful directive to accomplish the success that God wants to give each one of us.

Pass Three Servant Tests!

The president of a very successful company would follow a curious procedure when he was considering hiring a new executive. First, he would take the prospective executive out to eat at a restaurant. When they received the menu, the president would carefully watch to see if the man looked at the food first or the price first. If he focused on the food before checking the price, he failed the test.

During the meal, the president would ask his guest to pour half a glass of water for him. If the water went well beyond the halfway mark, this test was failed for not following instructions. These tests might seem insignificant to us, but not for this CEO. He has learned through much experience the wisdom of God's three tests of a faithful man.

The character of a servant is revealed in little decisions.

The three tests of a faithful servant are given to us in Luke 16:10–13. They are:

1. Being faithful in little things.
2. Being faithful with money.
3. Being faithful in carrying out another man's work.

Those who pass these three tests are likely to have the following qualities, which are essential qualities of a faithful servant:

- **Availability:** Adjusting my schedule in order to accomplish the tasks that are assigned to me. This quality is the result of choosing to serve another rather than ourselves.
- **Initiative:** Seeing what needs to be done and doing it. All achievement begins with initiative. God demonstrated initiative when He created the world and when He provided redemption for us through Christ.
- **Diligence:** Accepting each task as a special assignment from the Lord and using all my resources to accomplish it. A diligent man will never lack for a job, because his boss cannot afford to lose him.
- **Creativity:** Finding a new and more efficient approach to accomplish a project. Every task will encounter obstacles that stop the average worker but become exciting challenges to the creative servant.
- **Wisdom:** Choosing the right course by listening to the counsel of God and others. A creative idea may be a foolish solution. A wise and creative person will act in harmony with the laws of nature and of God.

"Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men" (Proverbs 22:29).

I have known many men who are in constant jeopardy of losing their jobs because they do not excel in these five essential qualities. It would be wise to go to a trusted friend and ask him to rate your demonstration of each quality on a scale of 1–10. Remember that the wounds of a true friend are faithful (see Proverbs 27:6), and thank him for his honesty. Then, let's do all we can to develop these vital qualities so that we can be honorable examples of a servant of Christ.

Command 34: Be a Servant

Related Character Quality

Availability vs. Self-Centeredness

Availability is making my own schedule and priorities secondary to the wishes of those I am serving.

When Jesus called His disciples, He taught them to not be hindered by personal cares and distractions and explained the sacrifices they would make to serve Him: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

Availability Begins by Choosing One Leader

Availability is impossible to demonstrate if we try to serve more than one leader. "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other …" (Matthew 6:24).

Every person must choose to serve the Lord. Otherwise, by default self will be served by seeking after such things as money, popularity, or possessions. Joshua stated, "But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:15).

Availability Is Foundational to Discipleship

Jesus called His disciples to a life of availability. The whole concept of discipleship is rooted in being available for training and serving. In the days of Jesus, a person who wanted to acquire knowledge from a master teacher would set aside his personal agenda and literally follow the teacher. Because of this practice, these people were called "followers."

Today, this very same practice is carried out as students leave their homes and go to places of learning to be taught by experienced teachers.

Availability Is Based on the Joy of Making Others Successful

True happiness is found not in receiving things, but in giving that which will truly benefit the lives of others. Paul praised Timothy for his availability. "I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel" (Philippians 2:20–22).

Jesus is the ultimate example of availability. In obedience to the will of His heavenly Father, Jesus lived among people who had needs and served them from early morning until night. He laid down His life that we might have life, and now He makes intercession for us at the right hand of God. (See Romans 8:34.)

How Can We Avoid Self-Centeredness?

- **By not seeking our own pleasure.** The pleasures of the world dissipate time, energy, and assets. Proverbs says, "do not spend your strength on women, your vigor on those who ruin kings" (Proverbs 31:3). The futility of seeking our own pleasure is accurately described by the word amusement, derived from the root words a, meaning "not," and muser, meaning "to think."
- **By not pursuing great achievements for ourselves.** "Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not" (Jeremiah 45:5). By pursuing personal achievement, we will be distracted from achieving the goals of those whom we serve, and we will tend to use others to serve us and our goals.
- **By becoming good stewards of our resources.** As we learn to be good stewards of the time, energy, and resources we have, we will be able to serve others more readily and effectively. Paul stated, "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8).

Personal Evaluation: How Available Are You for Service?

- Do you choose to serve God rather than money?
- Do you work to make others successful?
- Do you keep your personal responsibilities to a minimum so that you have more time to serve others?
- Do you deny yourself distracting pleasures?
- Do you set aside personal ambitions in order to advance the kingdom of God and His righteousness?

Conquer Temptation With a Servant's Heart!

Why was Joseph able to overcome the very same temptation that defeated Solomon, the wisest man; Samson, the strongest man; and David, who had a heart after God? Each of these four men had God-fearing parents, experienced God's blessing on his life, was tempted while in leadership, and is listed in God's "Hall of Fame." (See Hebrews 11.) Yet, only Joseph conquered moral temptation. Why?

Joseph could have used many reasons to justify moral failure. As a slave, he was expected to submit. The Law had not yet been written, so he had never read, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). He was in a foreign country and subject to a different culture. He did not have the protection of his father or family, and he had been rejected by his older brothers. Plus, he was not the one who initiated the request for an immoral relationship.

The amazing ability of Joseph to overcome moral temptation was in the nature and motivation of having a servant's heart.

David had the heart of a shepherd. As a boy, he took care of his father's sheep and then God entrusted him with the oversight of the "flock of Israel." When David lost sight of the fact that the people he was leading were God's sheep, his motivation in caring for them changed from benefiting their lives to bringing himself pleasure.

Samson had the heart of a strong man. He knew that his strength was given to him by God. He used his extraordinary strength to conquer God's enemies, but he also might have believed that he could use his strength to escape the consequences of his immoral behavior.

Solomon had the heart of a leader. God gave him great wisdom to discern between good and evil. When his heart was turned away from God by many strange women, he began to decide for himself what was right or wrong based upon his own reasoning.

Joseph had the heart of a servant. His motivation was to make those he served successful and to be faithful to God. Therefore, when he was tempted, he responded: "… How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9).

The heart of a true servant will reject anything that will hinder or diminish his profitability, including immorality.

Paul appeals to our sense of profitability when he warns that in a great household there are vessels that are used for honorable purposes and vessels that are used for menial tasks. If we keep ourselves free from the corruption of immorality, we will be "an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work." (See 2 Timothy 2:20–22.)

The ultimate example of a servant is Jesus. Paul exhorts us, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant …" (Philippians 2:5–7; see also Matthew 20:28). Let's ask God to give us the heart of a servant so that we may overcome temptation as we follow Christ.

Be a Servant of All!

When he was born without legs, his parents threw him over a cliff to be eaten by wild animals. Somehow he survived and became a bitter beggar on the streets. A believer gave him some money, but when this Christian tried to read Scripture to him, the beggar exploded in anger, "If there is a God, why did He let all of these bad things happen to me?!" Undeterred, the believer returned daily to read Scripture to him.

One day the beggar exclaimed, "I don't like your reading, but when I hear God's Word my heart burns within me because I know it is true." Soon the beggar accepted Christ as his Savior and became a dynamic witness of the Gospel.

"… If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

No one is too small or too great to receive our love and the light of God's truth. Light does not discriminate and neither should we. Anyone who approaches a source of light gets the benefit of its brightness, and anyone who comes to us should get the blessings of God's love flowing through us. We should always be ready and willing to take the opportunity to do good to all men, especially fellow believers (see Galatians 6:10).

Anyone whom Jesus met or passed by was a candidate to receive the transforming power of His love. Those whom society rejects and despises often become the most radiant witnesses of the love and truth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We see a pattern in Jesus' serving of others. Where appropriate, He served those who were in authority so that they would be better equipped to serve those under their jurisdictions. This pattern was demonstrated by Christ when He performed His first miracle. Jesus did not become the hero of the wedding by giving out the best-tasting wine, but rather He instructed the servants to deliver the wine to the one in charge of the feast so that the bridegroom would get the credit. (See John 2.)

Leaders have a responsibility to do good. (See Romans 13:3–4.) By serving leaders we are able to indirectly serve everyone who is under their care.

The powerful results of doing good to all men" have been seen in the IBLP ministry as we have sought to serve the leaders of neighborhoods, police departments, judicial courts, cities, states, and nations. For example, the work we are doing in Russia began when we asked government

officials how we could serve them. They gave us specific requests and then guided and protected us as we served those under their jurisdictions.

A family from New York City asked the district police superintendent how they could serve him. He suggested that they pray for the officers who were on duty during a specific work shift. They promptly began to do this, and clear evidences of God's protection and intervention began to be seen. Their prayers were so appreciated that other officers began asking them to pray for them on their shifts too. Crime dramatically decreased, and on the night of the year that typically has the most crimes (Halloween) no crimes were reported!

How could you bring glory to God by serving a leader in your neighborhood, city, or church in such a way that he would be encouraged as he does good to those under his jurisdiction?

Command 34: Be a Servant

Study Question

Q: How did Joseph overcome the same temptation that defeated Samson, David, and Solomon?

A: Among the men listed in God's "Hall of Fame" are Samson, David, Solomon and Joseph (see Hebrews 11). Three of these men failed morally and suffered greatly from the consequences of their sin, but Joseph did not succumb to temptation. What made the difference?

Samson had the heart of a strong man and began to rely on his strength to get out of trouble instead of relying on the Lord. David had the heart of a shepherd and, while there are many admirable qualities in a shepherd, he began to focus on his own needs instead of the needs of the flock. Solomon had the heart of a leader, but he became over-confident and began to lean on his own reasoning to decide between right and wrong.

Joseph, however, remained pure even though he was severely tempted and could have used numerous excuses to justify immorality. He suffered rejection by his brothers, was taken away from Godly parents, was sold as a slave, was brought to a heathen country and surrounded by worldly influences, and was relentlessly pursued by a scheming woman.

Nevertheless, Joseph accepted his circumstances as being from the Lord and put his whole heart into serving his master. God's hand of blessing was upon him, and therefore, all that Joseph did prospered. As a result, more and more authority was entrusted to him. Eventually, Egypt and many surrounding nations, including the fledgling nation of Israel, were saved from a devastating famine because Joseph had the heart of a servant. He viewed his responsibilities as a sacred trust from both his master and the God Whom he served.

When his master's wife tempted him to sin with her, Joseph's immediate response was to recognize how this sin would ruin his profitability, which is the key factor of being an effective servant. Therefore, Joseph said to her, "… My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:8).

We will never understand or experience the true nature of greatness until we know what it means to be a servant of the Lord and to have a servant's heart toward others. We should strive to serve in such a way that we will one day hear these words from our heavenly Father: "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (See Matthew 25:21, 23.)

Embrace the Goal of Greatness!

When a political leader told me that his ambition was to hold a high national office, I asked him how he could serve people more effectively in that office than in his present position. That was a new thought to him, because his main goal was simply to increase his personal importance.

In sharp contrast to this political leader is another government leader who deeply loves youth and their families. His position as a juvenile court judge was not just a job to him, but rather it was a means of carrying out his passion in life—to help young people learn to make wise decisions.

Two years after the first political leader talked to me, he was sent to prison for mishandling funds. However, the second leader was appointed as Director of the Department of Child Services in his state.

The command to be a servant does not mean that the desire to be great is wrong; instead it shows us what true greatness is and how to achieve it!

If we are to be great, we must first ask, "What is true greatness?" Greatness is not based on personal achievement that results in fame, fortune, or position. Rather, true greatness is what God does in and through us. (See Ephesians 1:19.) Peter did not have money, but he had the power of God working through him to carry out great works. "… Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6).

We must then ask, "What great works does God want to accomplish in and through us?" First of all, He wants to transform our souls to be conformed to His thoughts, desires, and goals. Jesus said, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36).

When we are in a right relationship with God, the Holy Spirit is able to do mighty works through us. (See John 14:12.) We can become aware of some of the works that God wants to do through us by being attentive to the needs we see in the lives of those around us. Human efforts become great works as they are directed by God and accomplished for His glory, in His timing, through His strength, and with His blessing.

Seeking greatness for ourselves may bring temporary acclaim, but serving God results in lasting gain.

Often, after we try to achieve greatness for the wrong reasons and in the wrong way, we are open to God teaching us His ways. Moses is a perfect example of this. He first tried in his own way to deliver his people from bondage and failed. However, when Moses was willing to fulfill God's plans in obedience to God's ways, God called him and gave him power to do great deeds. (See Exodus 3–4 and 12:41.)

In the past, have you desired to do something great for God? Did you try to achieve it in your own strength? What were the results? Is there still a need to accomplish it? Even when God calls us to do things that seem unimportant or insignificant in the eyes of the world, we must remember that as we do them faithfully for the Lord, they will be great in His sight.

Unlock the Door to Greatness!

It caught my attention when one of the most successful businessmen I knew told me that a certain message by a Dr. Ron Dunn had changed his life, and that he made a habit of listening to it once a month. The title, "How God Keeps Us Usable," sounded equally interesting. This businessman sent me a copy, and as I listened to it I was startled by one of Dr. Dunn's statements:

"The greatest hindrance to our being used by God is that He has used us in the past."

The highway of history is strewn with the wreckage of great ministries that were destroyed by the pride of achievement. Throughout Scripture we see God's swift and severe judgment upon the sin of pride. It was through pride that Satan lost his splendor and place in heaven. (See Isaiah 14:12–15.) Through the prideful desire to "be like God," Adam and Eve lost their marvelous state of perfection in God's garden. Pride caused Herod to accept the adulation of the people, and immediately the Lord smote him so that he died. (See Acts 12:21–23.) Through pride King Nebuchadnezzar declared, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built?" and the same hour he was stricken with curses from God. (See Daniel 4:28–33.)

Scripture states that "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). When God opposes us because of pride, our effectiveness for Him is destroyed. For this reason, Jesus set a little child in the midst of His disciples and stated, "Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4).

The key that opens doors to greatness can also lock them if we become proud of our achievements.

Some of us are aware of "a little pride" in our lives and excuse it as harmless and insignificant. However, when we are proud, God will oppose us until we follow His instructions to "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6).

Some of the practical ways in which we can humble ourselves are to:

- Quickly acknowledge faults and shortcomings, and ask forgiveness of those whom we have hurt or offended. "Confess your sins one to another …" (James 5:16).
- Cheerfully volunteer to do menial tasks at home, at church, or anywhere you see a need. Also, express sincere appreciation to others who carry out these tasks.
- Be willing to associate with people who are usually overlooked or treated with disdain by others. Spend time with them, invite them to a meal, take interest in their lives, and look for ways you can be a blessing to them.
- Look for qualities to praise in the people around you. "… In humility consider others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3).

These are just a few ideas with which to begin. Can you think of others? Let's start implementing them today. As we do, we can be confident that God will use these acts of humility to open doors of greatness! Be patient. It will happen!

A Letter to Garcia

How one man "took hold" of an important task

On February 22, 1899, the publisher of a small-town newspaper was discussing with a friend who the real hero of the Spanish-American War was. He wrote down his thoughts in an hour and put them in a leftover spot in his newspaper. Soon orders came for more copies, and eventually 40 million reprints of that article were distributed around the world. This is a powerful testimony to the worldwide recognition of the importance of diligence.

When war broke out between Spain and the United States, it was necessary to communicate quickly with the leader of the insurgence. Garcia was somewhere in the mountain vastness of Cuba—no one knew where. No mail or telegraph message could reach him. The President must secure his cooperation, and quickly. What to do?!

Someone said to the President, "There's a fellow by the name of Rowan who will find Garcia for you, if anybody can." Rowan was sent for and given a letter to be delivered to Garcia.

How "the fellow by the name of Rowan" took the letter, sealed it up in an oilskin pouch, strapped it over his heart, in four days landed by night off the coast of Cuba from an open boat, disappeared into the jungle, and in three weeks came out on the other side of the island, having traversed a hostile country on foot and delivered his letter to Garcia—are things I have no special desire now to tell in detail.

The point that I wish to make is this: McKinley gave Rowan a letter to be delivered to Garcia; Rowan took the letter and did not ask, "Where is he?" There is a man whose form should be cast in bronze and the statue placed in every college of the land.

It is not book-learning young men need, nor instruction about this and that, but a stiffening of the vertebrae which will cause them to be loyal to a trust, to act promptly, to concentrate their energies: do the thing—"carry a message to Garcia."

General Garcia is dead now, but there are other "Garcias." No man who has endeavored to carry out an enterprise where many hands were needed has not been appalled by the inability or unwillingness of workers to concentrate on a task and do it.

Slipshod assistance, foolish inattention, dowdy indifference, and halfhearted work seem to be the rule. Put this matter to a test: You are sitting now in your office—six clerks are within call.

Summon any one and make this request: "Please look in the encyclopedia and make a brief memorandum for me concerning the life of Correggio."

Will the clerk quietly say, "Yes, sir," and go do the task? He will not.

He will look at you out of a fishy eye and ask one or more of the following questions: Who was he? Which encyclopedia? Was I hired for this? Don't you mean Bismark? What's the matter with Charlie doing it? Is there any hurry? Should I bring the book and let you look it up? Why do you want to know?

After you have answered his questions and explained how to find the information and why you want it, the clerk will no doubt go off and get one of the other clerks to help him try to find "Garcia"—and then come back and tell you there's no such man.

This incapacity for independent action, this moral stupidity, this infirmity of the will, this unwillingness to cheerfully catch hold and lift—these are the things that drive employers to despair.

We have recently been hearing much maudlin sympathy expressed for the "downtrodden denizens of the sweat-shop" and the "homeless wanderers in searching for honest employment" and with it all often go many hard words for the men in power.

Nothing is said about the employer who grows old before his time in a vain attempt to get frowzy ne'er-do-wells to do intelligent work, and his long, patient striving with "help" that does nothing but loaf when his back is turned.

In every store and factory there is a constant weeding-out process going on. The employer is constantly sending away "help" that have shown their incapacity to further the interests of the business.

I know one really brilliant man who has not the ability to manage a business of his own and yet who is absolutely worthless to anyone else, because he carries with him constantly the suspicion that his employer is oppressing or intending to oppress him. He cannot give orders, and he will not receive them.

Should a message be given him to take to Garcia, his answer would probably be, "Take it yourself." Tonight, this man walks the streets looking for work. No one who knows him dares hire him.

Of course I know that he is no less to be pitied than a physical cripple, but in our pitying, let us drop a tear, too, for the men who are striving to carry on a great enterprise, whose working hours are not limited by the whistle, and whose hair is fast turning white through the struggle to hold in line indifference and the heartless ingratitude which, but for their enterprise, would be both hungry and homeless.

My heart goes out to the man who does his work when the boss is away, as well as when he is at home, and the man who, when given a letter for Garcia, quietly takes it without asking any idiotic questions, and delivers it.

The world cries out for such. He is needed, and needed badly—the man who can carry a message to Garcia.

Command 34: Be a Servant | Day 238

Use the Keys to a Person's Heart!

I scanned an area on the south side of Chicago until I saw what I was looking for—a group of about 25 teenagers near the river! It was a high-crime area, so when I approached them, they all stared at me and wondered what I wanted. I told them I wanted to draw a scenic chalk picture for them that would explain answers to life's three big questions: Where did I come from? Why am I here? and Where am I going? They all expressed interest in this.

As I drew the picture and interacted with the group, I tried hard to learn and remember their names. At first, when I asked for a person's name, I was usually told a fictitious one and the group laughed. However, I paid close attention when someone called another person by his real name and began using it as well. Soon the entire group wanted to tell me not only their first names, but

also their nicknames, which were a real challenge to remember! When I returned the following week, many of them surprised me by asking, "What is my name?" If I correctly remembered a name, I would receive a big smile, but when I was incorrect, there was disappointment.

When the heart of a person whom God is calling us to serve is "locked," we must use keys that will open his heart.

There are four simple but effective key ways I've found to show another person that you are genuinely interested in his life and to earn opportunities to serve him.

1. Show a person's importance by learning and using his name. This is one of the keys I learned while working with teenagers. A person's own name is one of the most important words to him in any language.
2. Ask precise questions. Questions should show interest without being "nosey." We can encourage people to talk about things they are interested in, such as asking a businessman: "How did you get started in your present work?"
3. Listen with your heart, not just your mind. When we receive responses to our questions, we should ponder them and find in them the basis for asking additional questions. The religious teachers in the Temple marveled at the wisdom of 12-year-old Jesus because of the questions that He asked and His answers. (See Luke 2:46–47.)
4. Discern needs and attitudes. When God allows us to discern the root problems a person is struggling with, we should then be prepared to provide precise answers to help him. There are four major areas of need that most people will experience at some point in their lives: marriage conflicts, teenage rebellion, financial pressures, and health problems. If we are able to share practical, lasting solutions in these four areas, we will have an ever-widening ministry.

In our journals this week, let's write down the names of the people whom God wants us to serve and then list the ways in which we are serving or will begin to serve them. As we choose to follow Christ's example by placing the needs of others ahead of our own needs, we will fulfill the purposes God has for our lives and achieve true greatness!

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 20:26-28

"Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many".

Matthew 23:12

"For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Philippians 2:5–9

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name."

1 Peter 5:6

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

Matthew 10:42

"And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

Be a House of Prayer!

It had the splendor and magnificence of a world wonder! Thirty thousand strong and skilled men had worked on it for years. (See 1 Kings 5:13.) It was the pride of the nation and God's dwelling place among men. Its structure, intricate sculptures, detailed carvings, and fine gold coverings were precisely ordered by God Himself.

All Israel was required to travel to this Temple at regular times to bring tithes and offerings to the Lord. Isaiah clearly stated God's purpose for this Temple: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:7). Jesus referred to this purpose when He said:

Command Thirty-Five

"... My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers" (Matthew 21:13).

In spite of the awesome splendor of the Temple, it was destroyed because of the people's corruption and immorality. (See Jeremiah 7:13–14.) How, then, can we "dwell in the house of the LORD," and how are we to "seek him in his temple"? (See Psalm 27:4.)

As the Body of Christ, we are a corporate temple of God. Paul states, "For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people" (2 Corinthians 6:16). Furthermore, every believer is also an individual temple. To the individual, Paul writes, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16).

As a living temple of God, a believer's life is to be characterized by prayer.

The same type of worship that was conducted in the Temple can now be carried out in the temples of our bodies.

- In the days of the Temple on Mount Zion, the worshipers were to enter His gates with thanksgiving and enter His courts with praise. (See Psalm 100:4.) Today we are to speak to ourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in our hearts to the Lord. (See Ephesians 5:19.)
- Before entering the holy place, the people offered their sacrifices and washed their hands at the laver by the door. We are to offer the sacrifices of praise and cleanse our hands and purify our hearts as we draw near to God. (See Hebrews 13:15 and James 4:8.)
- Inside the holy place were three items: the candlesticks, which represented the light of God's Word; the showbread, which represented the living Word of God; and the continual incense, which represented the day-and-night prayers of believers.
- The most holy place contained the Ark of the Covenant. Only the high priest was allowed to enter this part of the Temple. Now, as believers, we can come boldly to God's throne of grace because of the blood sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. (See Hebrews 4:16.)

Every believer has the glorious liberty to worship: "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:19–21).

Let's purpose to be a dynamic house of prayer for God!

Cleanse Your Temple!

It took everyone by surprise! Tables being overturned, coins scattered across the ground, animals being driven out with a short rope whip, merchants scooping up their money and running to safety, and religious leaders looking on with stunned amazement! (See John 2:13–15.)

The money changers and merchants who were driven out of the Temple were performing a necessary service for those who came from great distances to worship. However, their greedy and

selfish motives had made the house of God a den of thieves and a place of commerce. (See Matthew 21:13 and John 2:14–16.)

If we fail to cleanse our own lives, we will be corrected by the Lord. (See Hebrews 12:6.)

Jesus had the authority to cleanse the Temple, because it belonged to Him. He also has the authority to cleanse our bodies, because they, too, belong to Him. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

How do we cleanse the temple of our bodies? It is accomplished through the teaching and convicting work of the Holy Spirit and the living, eternal Word of God, which function together to expose the true thoughts and motives of our hearts and to give us the grace to correct our lives accordingly. (See John 15:3 and 16:8.)

We may wonder why it is often so hard to cleanse our lives. The primary answer is that we do not love God with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. (See John 14:15.) A further reason is that many of the things that we do are acceptable to the world yet repugnant to God. James points this out: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

Things that must be cleansed in our lives are acceptable to the world, but they are detestable to God.

When a father tells his son to clean his room, his son may come back a short while later and declare, "It's all clean!" However, when the father inspects the room, he may discover that what his son understands "clean" to be is vastly different from his understanding of what "clean" means. The same is often true in our spiritual lives.

We can begin to cleanse our temples by removing from our lives things such as wrong possessions, friendships, attitudes, and activities that grieve the Holy Spirit and quench His power in our lives. In doing this, we obey the Scripture that says, "… Do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Romans 13:14). As the Bride of Christ, this purification will continue in our lives by the water of the Word as the Holy Spirit reveals new areas that need cleansing. (See Ephesians 5:25–27.)

Are there things in your life that you know are displeasing to the Lord? How do you intend to remove them? Let's bathe our minds with the Word of God so that we can be a powerful "house of prayer."

Command 35: Be a House of Prayer

Related Character Quality

Persuasiveness vs. Contentiousness

Persuasiveness is guiding vital truths around another's mental roadblocks.

Why Persuasiveness Is Important

God's primary calling for every believer is to be a witness of His truth. Persuasiveness is communicating truth to a person's spirit through sound reasoning and convincing him to follow the ways of God. Persuasiveness will increase our effectiveness in helping people turn from sin to follow Christ.

The eternal torments of hell should be a powerful motivation for us to develop the skills of persuasiveness so that we can turn unbelievers from such a place. This was the motivation of Paul: "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men" (2 Corinthians 5:11).

When we talk to people, they tend to have two questions in their minds: (1) Why is this important for me to hear? (2) How can I apply it to my life? As we seek to communicate Biblical truth to others, we should make sure we answer these two questions.

The Secrets of Persuasiveness

1. **The authority of a clear conscience**
   When a person does not have a clear conscience, he will not be able to speak convincingly about the work and ways of a holy God. Paul identified a good conscience as an essential element in the battle for truth: "… Holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith" (1 Timothy 1:19).

2. **The authority of Scripture**
   Persuasiveness is based on the authority behind it, and there can be no greater authority than the Word of God. Rightly using Scripture was the key to the persuasiveness of Paul, Apollos, and others. Apollos "vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:28). In order to have this authority, we must learn how to skillfully use the Word of God, and be a people that "correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

3. **The authority of personal testimony**
   Paul often used his own testimony to convince his hearers of the power and truth of God. He even used his testimony in talking to King Agrippa and almost persuaded him to become a believer. (See Acts 26:13–28.) The saints spoken of in Revelation 12:11 overcame Satan "by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony."

4. **The authority of appealing to the conscience**
   An effective method of persuasion was explained by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:2: We "have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." In order to appeal to the conscience of a person, it is important to get his permission to ask personal questions about past failures.

5. **The effectiveness of using gracious words**
   Gracious words are often one of the most effective ways to persuade others to do what is right. "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (Colossians 4:6).
   Even when others argue with us, we are not to be contentious. "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will." (2 Timothy 2:24–26).

Personal Evaluation: How Persuasive Are You?

- Do you persuade Christian friends to join you in doing good works for others who are in need?
- Do you have a written testimony concerning various areas of the Christian life so that others would be persuaded to follow your example?
- Do you persuade others to believe on Jesus Christ?
- Do you persuade others to dedicate their lives to God?
- Do you correct those who use Scripture to justify wrong activities that they are misusing God's Word?

Strengthen Your Inner Man!

Inside each believer there is an "old man" who feeds off of the lusts of the flesh and a "new man" who is empowered by the Spirit of God. These entities are at war with each other. In order for the new man to triumph, we must put off "… your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22–24; see also Romans 8:3–17).

A trainer of racing animals was asked, "Which one is going to win?" The trainer replied, "The one that is better fed."

Paul explains, "The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:8). Everyone who is born by the Spirit of God needs to be strengthened "… with power through his Spirit in your inner being" (Ephesians 3:16; see also 3:17-19). This strengthening allows us to experientially know the love of Christ and to be filled with the fullness of God. God's love is perfected in us as we meditate on the Word of God and it becomes an active part of our lives. (See 1 John 2:5.)

It may not always be evident to those around us whether we are sowing to the flesh or to the Spirit, but God knows because He looks at the heart. (See 1 Samuel 16:7.) David recognized the high priority God places on our inner man when he said, "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts … . Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:6, 10).

Conquering the old man and strengthening the new man must be done through the power of God.

When we are born again by the Spirit of God, we will continue to experience ongoing conflict between our old and new natures. However, the Holy Spirit and the Word of God make it possible for the old nature to be conquered and the new nature to be victorious. As we memorize and meditate on God's Word, our hearts will be cleansed of sin and our thought patterns will be conformed to the mind of Christ.

Let's stop feeding our old man sinful thoughts and be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we will be able to know by personal experience, His "good, pleasing and perfect will" for us. (See Romans 12:2.) If you have not dedicated your body to God as a living sacrifice for His glory, I urge you to do so today!

Enjoy the Essence of Prayer!

He was sitting in his tent door when he spotted three men walking by. Despite the fact that it was during the heat of the day, he ran to meet these "strangers" and urged them to let him prepare a meal for them. This significant event in the life of Abraham holds the key to what prayer really is:

The essence of prayer is entertaining God.

Scripture tells us: "The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre … Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by." (Genesis 18:1–3).

The Lord, along with two heavenly messengers, accepted Abraham's invitation to entertain them as his guests. Abraham's hospitality parallels many worship functions that would later be carried out in the Tabernacle and in the Temple.

Abraham readily welcomed the presence of the Lord and the other guests and entertained them with a specially prepared meal. Often, we try to make God fit our schedules, when instead we should be ready to receive Him whenever He wants to meet with us. God has invited each one of us to entertain Him, as stated in Revelation 3:20:

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."

How can we entertain the Lord and delight in His presence?

- By blessing the Lord and His name: "I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips" (Psalm 34:1). "Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name" (Psalm 103:1).
- By singing songs to the Lord: "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19).
- By praising His deeds: "… Tell of all his wonderful acts" (Psalm 105:2).
- By expressing thanks to Him: "Sacrifice thank offerings to God …" (Psalm 50:14). "I will sacrifice a thank offering to you …" (Psalm 116:17).
- By exalting Jesus: "… Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise" (Revelation 5:12).
- By being silent before Him: "Be still, and know that I am God …" (Psalm 46:10). "… when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent" (Psalm 4:4).

One of my father's most cherished memories was the night that one of my little brothers peeked out from the door of his bedroom, then quietly walked over and stood next to my father as he sat reading. My brother never said a word, and after a while he walked back to his room and went to sleep. However, the thought that his son enjoyed just being in his presence brought much delight to my father. Do we bring similar joy to our heavenly Father by enjoying His presence?

Command 35: Be a House of Prayer

Study Question

Q: The house of God that Jesus cleansed for prayer is now destroyed. How, then, can we make it a house of prayer for all people? (See Mark 11:17.)

A: At the end of the first century, the Temple was destroyed according to the prediction of Jesus to His disciples. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down" (Matthew 24:2).

Now that the Temple no longer exists, God, through His Holy Spirit, dwells within the life of every believer. Therefore, every believer is a temple of God and is to become a house of prayer.

The holiness of this house of prayer was emphasized by Paul when he wrote: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16–17).

One of the important functions that took place previously in the Temple was the burning of incense day and night. This is related to the prayers of the saints according to Psalm 141:2, which says, "May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice."

This, then, is to be one of the regular functions of every believer and is consistent with the Biblical instruction to "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). In order to be an effective house of prayer, God asks believers to dedicate their bodies to God as living sacrifices. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Romans 12:1).

Make Your Prayers Effective!

For more than 60 years Darlene had suffered from intense, chronic pain. Doctors were baffled, and pain medications provided only temporary relief. At the age of 26, she attempted to end her life because she was so weary of the daily pain; however, God intervened and spared her life. After this, Darlene prayed that she would be healed, but she continued to experience pain until the day she understood an important aspect of prayer.

Often our prayers are lacking in the faith, fervency, or diligent seeking that pleases God and compels Him to act powerfully on our behalf. (See Hebrews 11:6.)

For many years, I felt that my prayer life was inadequate, especially when I would read the biographies of great Christians who spent hours in prayer. Then several years ago, I followed the disciples' example and asked "Lord teach me to pray."

My thoughts were directed toward the life of Elijah who had influence with God. James tells us that "Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops" (James 5:17–18). As I read this passage, the word earnestly stood out to me with significance. Elijah's prayer was marked by intensity, fervency, and a seriousness that caused God to respond. In fact, fervency of prayer was emphasized by James in his introduction to this account of Elijah. "…The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16).

Many times our prayers are lacking in the kind of fervency that God requires for effective results. However, when we sincerely cry out to God we acknowledge that He has the power and resources that are required for whatever need we have or whatever trouble we are in. Crying out to God is effective because it manifests several heart attitudes that God honors:

- **Genuine humility:** "This is too big for me; I need Your help."
- **Unconditional surrender:** "I will confess all secret sins and do Your will."
- **A plea for mercy:** "I am not worthy to receive the power of Your grace."
- **Personal helplessness:** "I am weak and unable to help myself."
- **Faith in God:** "You are the only One Who has the power and resources to help me!"
- **Desperation:** "I need help right now, or I am without hope!"

"He who prays without fervency does not pray at all."—Charles Spurgeon

When Darlene recognized the importance of fervency in prayer, she asked a group of believers to join her in crying out to God for her healing. God saw fit to respond to the expectant faith of this group and she was healed!

Crying out to God is not a formula to get what we want; it is an outflow of a love relationship with the Lord. Can you think of a time when you were just "saying words" with no intensity or earnest longing? Let's ask the Lord to teach us to pray in faith with fervency.

Pray for All People!

Many years ago I heard a story about an American soldier in World War II who was on a jungle trail when he suddenly found himself surrounded by the enemy. They motioned for him to put his hands in the air and march toward their camp. This soldier was a committed Christian and wanted to introduce these men to Jesus, so he started singing a hymn.

They suddenly stopped him and asked, "Are you a Christian?"

He said, "Yes, I am."

"So are we," they replied.

When the American asked how they had become Christians, they explained that it was through the work of a certain missionary. The soldier exclaimed, "My church supports that missionary! For many years I have prayed for him and his work."

There was an immediate bonding between these men, and instead of taking the American soldier as a prisoner of war, the other soldiers decided to return him to the American camp. Can you imagine the astonishment when a single soldier came out of the jungle with a whole group of "enemy soldiers!" He was decorated for bravery, but the real credit was due to his obedience to pray for all people.

"I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone … . This is good, and pleases God our Savior" (1 Timothy 2:1, 3).

Why does God want us to pray for all people? It is because He created each person and loves each one so much that He sent Christ to die for them. In fact, He patiently delays His return because He is "… not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9; see also 1 Timothy 2:4). We must recognize that reaching all people for Christ is a spiritual battle and we must pray for them. Also, we need to pray for those who are in positions of authority so that they will allow God's Word to be preached and the Gospel to be boldly proclaimed in our own neighborhoods as well as around the world. (See Ephesians 6:18–19.)

One of the powerful impressions that I experienced in my early Christian life was made by a dynamic missionary who visited our struggling little church. At the time, we were trying to raise funds for a new church building, but very little was being collected and there were no obvious sources from which funds could be expected.

The missionary gave the congregation what seemed to be an impossible challenge: Enlarge your prayer ministry to all the nations of the world and give a dollar to your mission fund for every dollar that you give to the building fund. Our church accepted this challenge and soon funds began flowing in from unexpected sources. In a short time the building was paid for and a strong prayer ministry was established.

God will enlarge the scope of our ministry to the degree that we have enlarged the scope of our prayers.

Do we care as God does for all the people of the earth? Do our prayers reflect His love for them, or are we focused merely on our own needs? Through prayer, let's be co-laborers with Christ in His work around the world and boldly claim the promise of Psalm 2:8: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession."

The Pattern of Early Church Worship

by Justin Martyr

The following is an excerpt from the First Apology and provides a glimpse of early church worship.

Chapter LXV—Administration of the Sacraments

But we, after we have thus washed him who has been convinced and has assented to our teaching, bring him to the place where those who are called brethren are assembled, in order that we may offer hearty prayers in common for ourselves and for the baptized person, and for all others in every place, that we may be counted worthy, now that we have learned the truth, by our works also to be found good citizens and keepers of the commandments, so that we may be saved with an everlasting salvation. Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss. There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and he taking them, gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at His hands. And when he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their assent by saying Amen. This word Amen answers in the Hebrew language to ge/noito [so be it]. And when the president has given thanks, and all the people have expressed their assent, those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent they carry away a portion.

Chapter LXVI—Of the Eucharist

And this food is called among us [the Eucharist], of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, "This do ye in remembrance of Me, this is My body; and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, He said, This is My blood" and gave it to them alone. Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same thing to be done. For, that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated, you either know or can learn.

Chapter LXVII—Weekly Worship of the Christians

And we afterwards continually remind each other of these things. And the wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost. And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead. For He was crucified on the day before that of Saturn (Saturday); and on the day after that of Saturn, which is the day of the Sun, having appeared to His apostles and disciples, He taught them these things, which we have submitted to you also for your consideration.

Prepare for Powerful Prayer!

There was excitement in the air as the congregation stood to pray. They were not just performing some worship routine but were getting ready to fervently pray to God about some "impossible" situations. They understood their authority in Christ and had witnessed supernatural results from their crying out to God in the past. This time of powerful prayer did not "just happen." It was the result of wise Biblical preparation.

Powerful prayer springs from pure hearts and strong faith that comes by the teaching of God's Word.

The church that is described above begins its service with the teaching of God's Word, because faith and cleansing come by the Word of God. (See Romans 10:17 and John 15:3, 17:17.) After the message, several individuals share testimonies that confirm the truth that has just been taught. This follows the Biblical principle that "… Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (2 Corinthians 13:1).

Following the time of cleansing and faith-building through the Word and testimonies, the congregation comes forward to receive the bread and the cup for communion. Before partaking, each family gathers together to make sure that all conflicts between one other as well as those with people outside the family have been resolved. This rich time of fellowship is followed by singing, which is what Jesus and the disciples did following the Last Supper. (See Matthew 26:30.)

It is after these preparations of the heart and life that the powerful results of fervent prayer are experienced. With great joy and authority the congregation cries out in unison as the pastor leads them phrase by phrase: "O God, Abba Father, we bring before You the needs of __. Bring deliverance according to Your Word and we will glorify You. For it is Your kingdom, and Your power, and Your glory forever and ever, Amen."

We prepare for powerful prayer by being cleansed from the filthiness of the flesh by the water of God's Word.

We see a similar pattern followed by the early Church after the Day of Pentecost. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). When these believers fervently prayed, "… the place where they were meeting was shaken …" (Acts 4:31).

Believers in the second century followed this same format in their church services. They prepared their hearts to worship God by cleansing their lives of sin through the washing of the Word and confession prior to communion. Then, they were able to pray in faith.

Today, whenever believers meet together as a group, they can follow the example of the early Church by starting with a message from the Word of God, which brings cleansing, and then praying in faith, expecting to see mighty results.

In our journals this week, let's list the things in our lives that we know are displeasing to the Lord and the steps we are taking to remove them. Let's ask God to thoroughly cleanse us of sin so that our hearts are prepared to seek Him in fervent prayer.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 21:13

"It is written," he said to them, "'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers" .

Isaiah 56:7

"these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

1 Corinthians 3:16–17

"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple."

Acts 2:42

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

1 Peter 4:17

"For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?"

Ephesians 6:18

"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

Colossians 4:2–4

"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should."

Distinguish Faith From Presumption!

Faith is a gift to be exercised. It is the basis of accomplishing great and mighty things for God's kingdom. In the Scriptures, we read of the heroes of faith who subdued kingdoms, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, and accomplished many other marvelous achievements for God's glory. (See Hebrews 11.)

Faith involves hearing the Word of God with our spiritual ears and acting upon it. Faith is not a "blind leap in the dark." It is a confident assurance of God's will based on His promises, which are so certain that waiting on them is not discouraging, and acting upon them is natural. Jesus told His disciples to "… have faith in God" (Mark 11:22), and then He commanded:

Command Thirty-Six

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" (Mark 11:24).

There is a critical distinction between faith and presumption that we need to understand. Faith is discerning God's will in a given matter and acting upon it, not putting ourselves into a jam and then expecting God to "bail us out."

Satan is skilled in appearing as an angel of light to deceive believers into thinking that they are acting in faith when actually they are acting presumptuously. This is particularly true in the area of finances. Men will get a vision for God's work, spend money that they don't have to accomplish it, and then expect God to provide the funds afterwards by "faith."

Years ago, a well-known television evangelist told me: "I teach people that the more debt they have the more faith they are demonstrating." It wasn't long before his church incurred a debt of 50 million dollars. We talked again after the collapse of his "empire" became a public scandal, and he assured me that he would never again borrow money for the Lord's work!

Hudson Taylor was a man of great faith. God provided millions of dollars for his mission work, which still continues today—more than 100 years after he went to be with the Lord. He said, "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply. He is too wise a God to frustrate His purposes for lack of funds, and He can just as easily supply them ahead of time as afterwards, and He much prefers doing so." Many times God will use the provision of funds or the lack of funds to reveal His will to us.

Faith says: "God show us Your will and confirm it with funds." Presumption says: "Bless our plans and provide funds later."

Another example of presumption is three women who declared that since God could do anything they were going to demonstrate His protection by locking arms and walking through a raging river. On the appointed day, a great crowd gathered, along with the media. The women walked into the river and were swept downstream to their deaths, causing great ridicule to come to the Gospel.

The actions of these women are in stark contrast to the actions of the heroes of faith, who acted out of obedience to God's instructions rather than foolishly tempting God. Let's make sure that all of our actions are based on faith, because "… everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23).

Have Faith That Works!

I was sitting on the upper level of Soldier's Field Stadium in Chicago marveling at the vast throng of 68,000 people who had come to hear the Gospel. It was after the Second World War, and there was great spiritual hunger throughout the United States.

During the preliminary events, I watched thick, dark storm clouds roll toward the huge open-air stadium. Just as Dr. Charles Fuller was about to begin his message, large raindrops began to fall. People stood up to leave; however, Dr. Fuller got up and made a startling declaration: "Ladies and gentlemen, please be seated. In just a minute the rain will stop." Then he prayed asking God to stop the rain.

It was amazing! What looked like a powerful thunderstorm suddenly dissipated. When the message was finished, thousands of people streamed down the walkways and onto the open field to receive Christ as their Savior. I never forgot the faith of that speaker or the possibility of having the same kind of faith in my own life.

Even a little faith brings great results. (See Matthew 17:20.) Faith sees beyond the problems to the bigger perspective seen by God.

I was not the only one impacted that evening. Years later I was talking with a world-traveling evangelist who was also there that day. He told me how he had held a huge open-air crusade in Japan when storm clouds gathered and rain began to fall. He remembered the events that had taken place at the Chicago rally and decided to make the same statement to the crowd that had come to hear him. However, he watched in dismay as a growing torrent of rain forced the crowd to disband. Both of these men said the same thing but had different results. Why?

The evangelist who got rained out based his statements on the experience of another man rather than on the leading of the Holy Spirit and the authority of God's Word. Jesus performed many miraculous works, but each one was based on the will of His heavenly Father. Because Jesus was in constant communication with His Father, He knew what to pray for.

Faith is not copying a formula that was successful for others; it is acting in harmony with God's Word and God's Spirit.

I listened sympathetically as a husband and wife poured out their problem to me. They were desperate to have a child, and nothing they tried had worked. As they spoke, the Holy Spirit brought to my mind several Scripture passages, such as "Sons are a heritage from the LORD …" (Psalm 127:3) and "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them …" (Matthew 19:14). With these Scriptures came a strong assurance from God that He wanted to give this couple a child.

With this confidence from the Lord, I prayed on their behalf and then said to them, "I am sure that God is going to give you a child. When He does, I would like you to send me a picture." Within a year they reported that God had answered our prayer of faith and the wife had given birth to a child.

How often have we made a bold request to God in faith that is based on His Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit? Let's ask God to increase our spiritual discernment and to fill our hearts with faith in Him.

Command 36: Ask in Faith

Related Character Quality

Patience vs. Restlessness

Patience is accepting a difficult situation from God without giving Him a deadline to remove it.

Why Patience Is Necessary

1. **To produce a good harvest—**"But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop" (Luke 8:15).
2. **To seek after glory and honor—**"To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life" (Romans 2:7).
3. **To be approved for ministry—**"Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses" (2 Corinthians 6:4).
4. **To prepare for Christ's return—**"May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance" (2 Thessalonians 3:5). "You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near" (James 5:8).
5. **To be a qualified leader—**"And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful" (2 Timothy 2:24).
6. **To run a good race—**"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1).

How Patience Is Developed

Patience comes when we properly respond to trials and tribulations. Paul wrote: "... We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3–4).

In order to "rejoice" in tribulations, we must thank God for them and rejoice in the benefits that He designed them to produce in our lives. The end result of glorying in tribulations is that we experience the power of God's love through the power of His Holy Spirit. "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:5).

Paul affirmed this in his letter to the Corinthian believers when he wrote about his thorn in the flesh: "But he [the Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

The development of patience through tribulations was also confirmed by James: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2–4).

Tribulation Is Necessary for Patience

Scripture identifies Job as an example of patience. "As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (James 5:11).

The trials Job endured were terrible disasters. (See Job 1:13–22.) Yet his response reveals the purification and perfection that patience in trials can produce in a believer's life.

After learning that all his herds and flocks had been stolen or killed, all but three of his herdsmen had been killed, and his seven sons and three daughters had died, Job "got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: "Naked I came from my

mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:20–21). After Job endured these trials, God blessed him more than before and gave him twice as many flocks and herds as he had lost. (See Job 42:12.)

The Rewards of Patience

1. **Seeing God answer our cries**—"I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry" (Psalm 40:1).
2. **Having hope in the Lord**—"… Through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).
3. **Being renewed with strength**—"Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD" (Psalm 27:14).
4. **Inheriting God's promises**—"We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. … And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised" (Hebrews 6:12, 15).
5. **Becoming a mature believer**—"Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:4).

Personal Evaluation: How Patient Are You?

- Do you realize that the final results of life's situations are in God's hands?
- Do you use waiting on others as an opportunity to learn to wait on God?
- Do you wait for God to answer your prayers in His timing?
- Do you fulfill your responsibilities while waiting on the Lord or others?
- Do you look to the face of God while waiting for provisions from His hand?
- Do you patiently instruct those for whom you are responsible?
- Do you rejoice in trials instead of becoming bitter?

Understand a Source of Great Faith!

When Jesus marvels at the faith of a person, we should sit up and take notice, and when He exclaims that a person's faith is greater than any faith He has found in all Israel, we should really stop to find out what kind of faith He is talking about!

Faith recognizes God's ability to accomplish His will through human authorities.

Let's look carefully at the passage that explains the faith that caused Jesus to marvel: "There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well" (Luke 7:2–10; see also Matthew 8:5–13).

The centurion believed that Jesus was the Son of God and that he had power to heal. He also understood the principle of authority. He lived and worked within a chain of command. He was under higher authorities, and he was in authority over other men. He was accustomed to getting things done by receiving and giving orders.

The centurion recognized that Jesus operated within a structure of authority just as he did.

The word also is a key part of this passage: "I am a man under authority." The centurion believed that Jesus was the Son of God, and recognized through the fact that Jesus was coming to his house that God had directed Jesus to heal his servant. Because of this, he knew that Jesus could give the order and it would be done. Therefore, he said, "Say the word, and my servant will be healed."

God's pattern of working through structures of authority is well established throughout Scripture. He works with children through their parents (see Ephesians 6:1), citizens through His ministers in government (see Romans 13:1–6), believers through church leaders (see 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13), and employees through their employers (see Colossians 3:22–23). Within these structures of authority and responsibility, God gives direction, provision, and protection.

Human authorities can also misuse their position and become abusive, unwise, and irresponsible. It is in these difficult cases that we need to ask God for wisdom to make wise appeals, trust God to direct their hearts, and ultimately refuse to do evil regardless of who tells us to do it.

How big is your God? Do you believe that God is using the authorities in your life to accomplish His will? While human authorities may fail and disappoint us, let's continue to place our full confidence in the Lord, Who has authority over all (see Ephesians 1:19–23 and Colossians 1:16–20).

Command 36: Ask in Faith | Day 249

Walk With the Heroes of Faith!

I remember only one thing from an entire college course on great biographies. However, this one statement has given me a valuable perspective for more than 50 years: "It takes a great person to write about the life of a great person."

This statement is true, because those who have accomplished great things in their own lives know what to look for in the lives of others who have significant achievements. Therefore, when God writes about the lives of those whom He considers to be great heroes of faith, we should pay close attention to what He says about them.

We can learn wisdom from those who are wise, and we can learn how to have faith from men and women of faith.

God's "hall of fame" in Hebrews 11 specifically names 16 heroes of faith. These men and women span history from Creation to the reign of King David.

The list begins with Abel, who "… offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did." Even though Abel was killed by his brother Cain, his faith still speaks to us today.

Enoch is listed next. He had the testimony "as one who pleased God." Then there is Noah, who, "in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith."

The next five heroes of faith are from the same family: Abraham, who by faith traveled to a land that God led him to; Sarah, who by faith believed that God would give her a child in spite of her old age; Isaac, who by faith blessed his children; Jacob, who by faith blessed his grandchildren; and Joseph, who by faith commanded that his bones be taken to Canaan.

The ninth in the list is Moses, who by faith chose to"… be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt." Rahab is number ten, followed by four judges of Israel: Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah. David and Samuel are the final two heroes of faith mentioned by name on the list.

All of these faith heroes had one thing in common: they believed in a living God Who would reward all who sought Him.

I will never forget the bright summer day that God showed me this truth. I was walking home from my fifth-grade class at school quoting Hebrews 11:6. I didn't understand the repetition of the words "that he exists." "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

Command 36: Ask in Faith

Study Question

Q: If a Christian prays about a certain need and asks other Christians to pray with him, and if he believes that he will receive what he requests, but nothing happens after several years, what should he do? (See Mark 11:24.)

A: Multitudes of prayers are answered immediately. A man of great faith, George Mueller, listed in his journal 50,000 specific answers to prayer. Of those answered prayers, 5,000 were answered the very same day in which they were prayed.

However, God does not provide an instant answer to prayer every time, nor does He always fulfill His promises immediately. Patience comes when we are convinced of God's will and are able to hope in that which He has promised. Romans 8:25 says, "But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

When God promised Abraham that He would give him a son, this promise was not fulfilled until Abraham was 100 years old and his wife was well past child-bearing age. Paul wrote the following words about Abraham: "Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (Romans 4:20–21).

God heard the cries of the nation of Israel in bondage and said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering" (Exodus 3:7). He was preparing Moses to be their deliverer; however, another 40 years passed before the Israelites were led out of Egypt.

These examples and others throughout Scripture remind us that God's timing is perfect, and in the "fullness of the time" He brings to pass the answers to our fervent prayers. Even when we do not see immediate results, we should continue to be faithful in prayer and not give up. (See Luke 18:1.)

Increase Your Faith!

Not only were the plates empty but so were all the cupboards in the orphanage. However, this did not faze the director, George Mueller. He proceeded to lead the 300 children and staff members in a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the food that He would provide for them that day. When they finished praying, there was a loud knock at the door. It was a baker with a load of bread that God had prompted him to bake for the orphans early that morning. George thanked him for this gift and closed the door. Moments later there was another knock. This time it was a man who delivered milk. His truck had broken down right in front of the orphanage. He needed to empty his truck before he could make the necessary repairs to it and wondered if the orphans could use the milk.

The name George Mueller has become synonymous with faith. He recorded thousands of answers to prayer in connection with his orphan work in England, which eventually cared for more than 10,000 children. However, more than meeting the physical needs of orphans, his goal was to challenge the faith of Christians. He desired to prove through his work that it was not a vain thing to trust God for provisions and that God could be taken at His word.

Faith and grace work together. Faith allows us to understand what God wants to accomplish, and grace empowers us to do it.

I remember a time early in my Christian life when I had a strong desire to trust God more fully and wondered how I could grow in faith. It was at that time that God directed me through various Scriptures to give my entire bank account to His work. Through this experience God

taught me that I could trust Him to provide whatever I needed; I did not need to trust my bank account.

This connection between giving and growing in faith is emphasized by James: "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:15–17).

Both faith and grace are expressed in God-directed action. Paul emphasized this in 2 Corinthians 8:1–2, when he explained how the grace of God that was bestowed on the churches in Macedonia resulted in their generosity. Then he explained to the Corinthian believers that it is God's grace that empowers us to give: "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Giving to the needs of others should be done generously from the heart, "not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Are you depending on God to provide for your needs according to His promises, and are you a channel of His provision to others who are in need? Or, have you put your trust in your possessions, looking to them for the security that God wants you to depend on Him for? Let's place our faith in God alone and exercise generosity so that our faith may increase.

Command 36: Ask in Faith | Day 251

Conquer by the "Word of Faith"!

For 11 years Christianna had suffered with various levels of pain. Every remedy she tried proved futile. Finally, the doctors concluded that she had an incurable disease and would likely experience an early death.

For years we prayed for this vibrant young lady. Her testimony of loving God has challenged tens of thousands of parents and students in the ATI home education program. Her initiative in ministering to mothers and daughters has benefited thousands.

While I was writing this e-mail, Christianna, who is now married, called me with a thrilling report of victory. Her disease had been identified by a specialist and confirmed by other doctors as the worst case of Lyme disease that they had ever seen. Some natural supplements were recommended to Christianna, and they cleared up her disease!

As she told me of these remarkable events, Christianna emphasized that it was not simply the physical remedy that brought the cure. It was God building up her faith to believe that she could be healed. She chose to believe the words of Scripture even when they defied the reality of her pain. She took each verse that God gave her for her healing and meditated on them throughout the day, believing it in her heart that they were true and confessing the same with her mouth.

A "word of faith" is a passage of Scripture that we are to confess with our mouths and believe in our hearts.

Jesus emphasized the power of confessing truth with our mouths and believing it in our hearts when He said, "Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him" (Mark 11:22–23).

Paul spoke of this "word of faith" in salvation when He declared, "… The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:8–9).

Death and life are in the power of the tongue. Life comes by speaking the truth of God's Word with our mouths and in our hearts.

The faith we have in God and in the promises of His Word will have an influence on the extent of the work He can do in and through our lives. This was revealed when it was said of Jesus, "He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith" (Matthew 13:58). On the other hand, Jesus promised that if we abide in Him and His words abide in us, we can make requests in faith based on His Word and they will be granted by our heavenly Father (see John 15:7).

When the Lord gives us a verse or passage of Scripture that addresses a specific problem or temptation we are facing, we can become conquerors by believing these truths in our hearts and confessing them with our mouths, expecting God to make them realities in our lives. The results will bring glory to God!

Take Up Your Shield of Faith!

High on the fortressed city wall were lines of archers with their dreaded weapons. Marching toward the wall was a Roman army with orders to conquer this stronghold. As they approached the wall, the archers who were defending the city prepared to unleash their fury: sharp arrows that were coated with a combustible substance and set afire. These flaming missiles not only would pierce their victims but would continue to burn, causing excruciating pain and death.

The well-trained soldiers responded with a maneuver that made these treacherous arrows completely ineffective. They lifted their shields above their heads and interlocked them, forming a protective covering that stopped every fiery dart!

We cannot prevent Satan's fiery darts from being shot at us, but we can make them ineffective by using the shield of faith.

The shield of faith is an essential part of every believer's armor. Paul emphasized this when he wrote: "In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one" (Ephesians 6:16). What is the shield of faith? It is composed of portions of Scripture that the Holy Spirit applies to our lives to address specific needs. "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17)

Jesus demonstrated this principle when Satan tempted Him in the wilderness. (See Matthew 4:1–11). He immediately identified the twisted truth that Satan was using to attack Him and used Scripture as His defense. As Jesus quoted the Word of God to Satan, saying, "It is written …," these truths not only were His defense but also became His weapon of assault, because the Word of God is the sword of the Spirit (see Ephesians 6:17).

The size of our shield of faith and the degree of our effectiveness in using the sword of the Spirit are determined by the amount of God's Word we have engrafted into our lives.

We can enlarge our shield of faith and our skill in using the sword of the Spirit by listing the temptations that Satan hurls at us and the Scripture we can use to refute them.2 For example:

- **Temptation to lie:** "Do not lie to each other …" (Colossians 3:9). Satan "… is a liar, and the father of lies" (John 8:44).
- **Temptation to lust:** "… Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). "So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished" (Proverbs 6:29).
- **Temptation to be discouraged:** "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).

Before writing in our journals this week, let's evaluate whether or not we have faith that expects God to act, and then record specific answers to prayer that we have had. We can also record examples of temptations that have been conquered and how the Holy Spirit has made the truths of God's Word a reality in our lives. As you continue to study, memorize, and meditate on the

Word of God, may your faith in the One Who is infinitely greater than your biggest need increase.

Daily Scriptures

Mark 11:24

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours".

1 John 5:14

"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us."

Hebrews 11:6

"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

James 1:6–7

"But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord."

Mark 11:23

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

Romans 10:17

"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

Romans 5:2

"Through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."

See Potential in the Poor and Disabled!

The baby screamed with pain as hot poultices were placed over her eyes. The so-called doctor told the baby's parents that this treatment would cure her eye infection, but instead it caused permanent blindness! The little girl might have been a "burden" to her family if it hadn't been for her Godly grandmother, who saw great potential in her.

Her grandmother taught her to see the world through the eyes of her Creator, and after years of patient instruction, an extraordinary talent for music began to be seen in the little girl's life. The next time you sing Rescue the Perishing, Blessed Assurance, or one of nearly 9,000 other hymns written by Fanny Crosby, rejoice that a believer obeyed the principle meaning of Christ's command:

Command Thirty-Seven

"... When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12–14).

Each of the four types of guests to whom we are to show hospitality represents a condition that requires outside help. A poor person needs assistance to buy basic necessities; a maimed person

needs help to carry out the normal functions of life; those who are lame need help to walk; and the blind need guidance to avoid danger.

Physical limitations are easy to recognize; however, what most people do not realize is that when one ability is deficient God compensates for it by increasing the potential of another ability. Paul explains how this phenomenon relates to the Body of Christ: "But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. … The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor … . But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other" (1 Corinthians 12:18–25).

God's exchange of things with lesser outward attractiveness for things with greater inward importance should motivate us to fulfill this command. For example, the poor have a great capacity for becoming rich in faith. (See James 2:5.) With this faith they can accomplish great things for God's kingdom through prayer.

"… Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" (Exodus 4:11).

Imagine the honor of serving a meal to Jesus. This takes place when we obey this command. "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me … . I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:35–36, 40). May all of our actions reflect the love of our heavenly Father, Who does "not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34).

Discern Three Types of Poverty!

Years ago, my pastor asked if this ministry could assist a needy family in the church. The family was living in such deplorable conditions that something had to be done. Their rented house was overrun with filth and clutter. The Health Department had ordered them to move out. The children often had lice, and the mother was totally overwhelmed!

We provided a house for the family, and the pastor assigned some women in the church to help the parents train their children and to keep the house neat and clean. Progress was slow at best. Then we discovered a shocking fact—the father's salary was greater than my salary and the pastor's salary combined! The father was not poor; he was just a poor manager of his resources! After this experience I wondered, "Who are the poor?"

Giving to those in need requires love and discernment.

Several types of poverty are identified in the Bible:

1. Poverty by Birth

Many people in the world are born into families who are not able to meet their own basic needs, while others are born into wealthy families. God states, "Rich and poor have this in common: The LORD is the Maker of them all" (Proverbs 22:2). Because the poor depend upon outside assistance for basic necessities, they often more readily acknowledge their need for God. "This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles" (Psalm 34:6).

2. Poverty by Chastening

God often uses financial difficulties to chasten those who have violated His moral laws. "For the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread …" (Proverbs 6:26). Wealth can also be lost through greed. "A stingy man is eager to get rich and is unaware that poverty awaits him" (Proverbs 28:22). In addition to this type of chastening, there are also consequences that result when God's basic principles of finance, such as learning to live within your means, are violated. "In the house

of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has" (Proverbs 21:20).

3. Poverty by Choice

Genuine love is expressed by giving. Jesus demonstrates this, for "that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). Because some people choose to live frugally in order to have more to give, they may appear to be poor. However, those who choose to give sacrificially to meet the needs of others will be greatly rewarded by God. He has promised, "Give, and it will be given to you" (Luke 6:38).

"He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done" (Proverbs 19:17).

When we see people in our community who have obvious financial needs, it is important to discern which type of poverty they are experiencing. Those who are born into poverty should be assisted and honored, those who have violated Scriptural principles should be counseled, and those who give to the needs of others should be supported.

Command 37: Bring In the Poor

Related Character Quality

Hospitality vs. Unfriendliness

Hospitality is cheerfully sharing food, shelter, and spiritual refreshment with those God brings into my life.

What Is Hospitality?

Jesus taught the principle of hospitality by saying, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:12–14).

Hospitality should be a natural response of those who practice the teachings of Jesus, because hospitality demonstrates the love and light of God. Love and light do not choose their recipients; they are available to all who need them.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:43–48).

The same message is given in James. "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:15–16).

Guidelines for Hospitality

Even though believers are to have a spirit of hospitality and demonstrate hospitality to all who need it, there are specific restrictions about the type of people who are to be brought into a believer's home.

1. A believer is not to eat a meal with another believer who persists in immoral behavior. "But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat" (1 Corinthians 5:11.)
2. One who promotes false doctrine is not to be brought into the home. "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him" (2 John 1:10).

3. A believer is not to have fellowship with an openly immoral or angry person. "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret" (Ephesians 5:11–12). "Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered" (Proverbs 22:24).

The Key to Developing Hospitality

The ultimate reward of showing hospitality is knowing that whenever we provide food, clothing, or shelter for one of the least in God's kingdom, we are doing it for Christ.

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. … I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:35–40).

Personal Evaluation: How Hospitable Are You?

- Have you purposed to develop a spirit of hospitality and to use your home to demonstrate it?
- Have you removed from your home clutter that would be a distraction to visitors?
- Have you taught each member of your family to practice proper etiquette whether or not there are visitors in the home?
- When you invite others into your home, is your goal to make them comfortable, or is it to impress them with your home?
- During conversation, do you focus on the interests of your guests or on the things you and your family have done?
- Do you have a peaceful atmosphere in your home, with appropriate music and a spirit of harmony among family members?

Equip the Poor for Ministry!

As I opened the newspaper, I noticed a feature article about the national leader next to whom I was sitting on the airplane. He was our host as we traveled through his country, meeting leaders and making plans to teach God's way of life to the entire nation of Romania. This leader was highly honored and respected wherever we went.

This great leader told me his life story. He grew up in a large family that lived on a small farm. His parents were barely able to provide for their family's needs of food and clothing. At school, classmates mocked him for his poverty and for his faith in the Lord. He graduated with high honors, but there were no job opportunities available to him because he was not a Communist. He prayed, "Lord, would You bless my life so that I can demonstrate that You honor those who follow You?"

"… Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" (James 2:5).

A poor person cannot depend on his own resources, because he has none. He must completely depend on someone else to meet his most basic needs. God requires this same kind of dependence on Him in order for a person to enter into His kingdom. Jesus observed, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25).

The poor and disabled are often considered weak and are despised by men, but Paul affirms their great potential. "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Corinthians 1:26–29).

Because of our natural tendency to show partiality to the rich, James condemns any believer who despises the poor: "But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? … But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers" (James 2:6, 9).

We must recognize the potential that every person has to accomplish great works through faith.

By honoring the poor and disabled with a special meal and motivating them to fulfill the plans God has for them, we will be encouraging them to use God's power that is available through Christ.

The next time we see a poor or disabled person, let's ask ourselves, "How do I view this individual? Do I judge him as less important because of his lack of money or because of his physical disabilities, or do I see him as very important because of his potential for great faith?" Let's see the poor through their Maker's eyes and honor them.

Command 37: Bring In the Poor | Day 256

Discover Banquet Evangelism!

We had been discussing the matter for several hours. "What is the most effective way to reach a city for Christ?" We evaluated many traditional methods but felt they were lacking in the dynamic that reaches the hearts of people. Finally, we agreed to continue our discussion in the morning.

At the time, I had been in the middle of writing a series of books on the commands of Christ, and the command I was working on that week was "Bring In the Poor." As I meditated on the command that night, I realized that "banquet evangelism" might be our answer! When we got back together, we all agreed to try it.

The very next week, one of the young men who had been part of our discussions received a call from a police officer in Flint, Michigan. The officer explained that each year they try to honor about 100 people in the city who do volunteer work for their department. Usually they meet at a gym and bring in a fast-food meal. He asked if this year they could hold their dinner at our facility in Flint. What a God-arranged opportunity!

We agreed to host the dinner and decided to turn it into a special banquet. The police department was thrilled and very grateful. The event turned out to be more than just a "thank-you meal." The elegance of the banquet and the love with which it was served caused all who attended to rejoice, and we were asked many questions about our ministry and its message.

Effective ministry involves good works that glorify God and cause people to ask us to explain our faith in Christ.

Another man who had participated in the discussions about how to reach a city for Christ contacted the president of the neighborhood association near our Indianapolis Training Center. He offered to host a banquet for as many neighbors as the president would like to invite. She was delighted with the idea, and more than 100 neighbors attended. They all enjoyed it so much that they wanted to repeat it and bring more neighbors. We had been serving in the city of Indianapolis for more than a dozen years, but through those banquets, we had more opportunities to share Christ's love and truth with our immediate neighbors than we had in all of the previous years combined!

God wants us to understand that it is more blessed to give than to receive. (See Acts 20:35.) Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. We can learn humility and God's priorities when we serve others with a heart of mercy and the motive of bringing Him glory.

Could God possibly want you to participate in "banquet evangelism"? What steps could you take to host a banquet in your community? Are there other Christian families whom you could ask to help you? Let's take the initiative to make it happen! It might be the beginning of the most effective ministry you have ever experienced!

Command 37: Bring In the Poor

Study Question

Q: Every community has poor people who are capable of getting a job but refuse to work. Scripture commands that if any will not work, neither should he eat. Should people who refuse to work be invited to a feast? (See 2 Thessalonians 3:10.)

A: There are several categories of poor people identified in Scripture, including those who are poor because they refuse to work. Paul instructed that if a fellow believer is in this category, he should not be given food.

"For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10–12).

However, there are people who, for reasons beyond their control, are placed in a condition of poverty. It is this group to whom God refers in the command to invite the poor as guests to our feasts. (See Luke 14:13–14.)

The purpose of a feast would be to demonstrate the love of Christ to those who are in special need and to honor them. However, in the process of providing food, opportunities should be taken to learn about other needs that our guests may have. "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern" (Proverbs 29:7).

The poor need more than a meal—they need friends who accept them. We are the representatives of the One Who wants to be their best friend—the Lord Jesus Christ. Our response to the poor will give them hope and confidence that God loves them and will care for their needs.

Seek Out Your Dinner Guests!

While eating dinner at the home of a Pharisee, Jesus gave a parable about a man who was hosting a great feast. When everything was ready, the host sent his servants out to invite the guests. However, all those who were invited gave reasons why they could not come to the banquet. One person had just purchased some land and had to go see it; another person had purchased a new team of oxen that he had to try out; another person had just gotten married and needed to be home with his wife.

When the host heard these excuses, he became extremely upset and instructed his servants to go quickly into the streets and lanes and invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind. Even after this was done there was still room at the banquet table. Wanting his house to be full of guests, the host told his servants to go back out again to the highways and hedges and compel the poor and disabled to come to his feast. (See Luke 14:16–24.)

God's offer of salvation has been extended to each of us even though we are spiritually poor and "disabled," because He wants His home in heaven to be filled.

This parable illustrates God's heart toward the world. He has given us instructions to go out and tell as many people as we can about His invitation of salvation so that His house may be full. We can begin by viewing our neighborhoods and cities as our mission fields and by seeking out the poor and disabled and inviting them to our homes for special meals. As we converse and they sense our genuine love and concern for them, they will probably be more open to hearing the Gospel and accepting God's invitation of salvation.

Jesus's command to bring in the poor and disabled emphasizes the importance of having right motives. We are to give to others expecting nothing in return. "… When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid" (Luke 14:12).

Significant investments of time and money often will be required to minister to specific needs of the poor and disabled. This may include offering to provide transportation or other types of

assistance in order to make them feel welcomed as our guests. However, we must not think of ministry in terms of the earthly return on our investments but rather as eternal investments with lasting rewards.

"He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done" (Proverbs 19:17).

When we have an eternal perspective, we can see opportunities to minister to those who cannot repay us as opportunities to invest directly into eternity. Not only will we have the privilege of serving the Lord through serving others, but we will also have the privilege of sharing the Gospel with our guests and discipling them in the commands of Christ. Let's develop this eternal perspective and make a special effort to seek out those who are poor and disabled.

Command 37: Bring In the Poor | Day 258

Demonstrate Hospitality!

Many struggled to hold back the tears as they recalled the life of a great and Godly man. It was the memorial service for Severt Andrewson, an artist who for more than 20 years had painted beautiful pictures for Character Sketches and other IBLP publications. However, those who were closest to Severt did not remember him for his exceptional art talent but rather for his hospitality. One person shared this tribute: "Severt and his wife Ruth turned their home into a place where I could always come for counsel and encouragement!"

Hospitality is making room in our hearts and in our homes for guests and treating them like part of the family.

We can learn a valuable lesson about what hospitality is and what it is not in the account of Jesus visiting the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, recorded in Luke 10:38–42. Scripture states, "Martha received him [Jesus] into her house." Her younger sister Mary, however, received Him with her heart, because she "sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said." Martha's focus was on the busyness of her work. She "distracted by all the preparations that had to be made."

One signal that a host is encumbered with the distractions of serving is when a greater focus is placed on impressing and entertaining the guests than simply on enjoying their fellowship. While food and the atmosphere are important, the primary focus of hospitality should be the guests themselves.

A practical way to focus on your guests is to listen to what they have to share. Mary chose this "better part" of hospitality by sitting at Jesus's feet. Martha was distracted by her responsibilities and wanted to take Mary away from spending time with Jesus so that Mary could help with the details that she felt were most important. Jesus kindly said, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

We should also be alert to things that would not make our guests feel welcomed and honored and remove these distractions. Possibilities include a barking, drooling dog that must be yelled at and wrestled to a back room before the guest can safely enter; a blaring television that diminishes the potential for meaningful conversation; or unnecessary clutter that must be shuffled around for the guest to even be seated.

Hospitality is using that which God has given us to demonstrate His love for others.

Making a guest feel welcomed does not always require a lot of money. I still remember the warmth I felt as I pulled into the driveway of a family I was going to visit and saw homemade signs welcoming me as their guest. Special signs are just one of many creative ways we can demonstrate that a person is important to us. Let's become skilled in the art of making guests feel like part of the family by opening not only our homes but also our hearts to them.

Command 37: Bring In the Poor | Day 259

Be "Given to Hospitality"!

Her crisis was real—her husband had passed away, and she was left with a debt that she could not repay. Now the unmerciful creditor was demanding payment, or he would take away her two sons and make them his slaves.

In her desperation, she sought help from the prophet Elisha. When Elisha asked the widow what she had in her house, she replied that she had nothing except a little oil. The prophet told the widow to have her sons borrow as many empty containers from the neighbors as they could. Then, she was to take her oil and fill them. As she poured the oil into the containers, the oil continued to flow until the last one was filled. After this, Elisha commanded her to go, sell the oil, and pay her debt. (See 2 Kings 4:1–7.)

Similarly, as believers we have a debt of love that we owe to one another. (See Romans 13:8.) We do not have the means within ourselves to pay this debt, but we have been given the Holy Spirit, Who enables us to show love to others in various ways, including hospitality. Without this love from God, our good works are for nothing. "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud" (1 Corinthians 13:3–4).

The importance that God places on hospitality is seen in His requirements for anyone who would desire to be a leader in the church. Scripture states that a leader must be "hospitable" (1 Timothy 3:2) and "one who loves what is good" (Titus 1:8).

The command to "bring in the poor" is given in the present tense, which denotes continuous and repeated action.

It is wonderful to host a dinner for the poor and needy, but let's not stop with one or two dinners. We are told to be zealous of good works and also to be rich in good works. (See Titus 2:14 and 1 Timothy 6:18.) Yes, it will require effort and some expense; however, we are instructed to show hospitality to one another without complaining. (See 1 Peter 4:9.)

For your journal entry this week, why not outline a plan for showing hospitality by listing the steps you could take to invite the poor and disabled to your home? Here are some suggestions:

- Ask God for the wisdom you need to show true hospitality. (See James 1:5.)
- De-clutter your house. Remember, you are not inviting the rich, who often judge by their standards, but the poor, who do not have as much as you have.
- Prayerfully select the ones whom you will invite, starting with one or two.
- Create a peaceful, welcoming atmosphere in your home with melodious music.
- Prepare a delicious and nutritious meal.
- Develop meaningful questions for conversation during and after the meal. Use them as an opportunity to learn as much as you can about your guests.
- Demonstrate genuine love among yourselves and toward your guests.
- Share what God has been teaching you through your meditation on Christ's commands.

The results of carrying out this vital command will produce eternal rewards for you to enjoy and will be a Godly heritage for your children.

Daily Scriptures

Luke 14:12-14

"Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous".

James 2:5

"Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?"

Proverbs 28:27

"He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses."

Proverbs 22:9

"A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor."

Psalm 82:3–4

"Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."

1 Corinthians 13:3

"If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."

Proverbs 19:17

"He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done."

Matthew 25:40

"… 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Give to Caesar!

No question could have captured greater attention. It was cunningly planned by religious leaders who desperately wanted to trap Jesus with His own words. After plotting together, they presented their "verbal snare" to Him. It began with flattery: "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are."

Then came the fiery missile, "Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (Matthew 22:16–17). The implications behind this question are both deep and profound, and the answer had potential political, economic, and spiritual ramifications. The taxes that the pagan Roman government forced upon their Jewish subjects were grudgingly tolerated by some, rejected by zealots, and despised by all.

Beyond the political and economic issues, there was a much deeper and perplexing spiritual issue. The Roman Emperor Tiberius was in power at the time. He had coins minted with his face portrayed on one side and a picture of his throne on the other side. The inscription on the coin identified him as the high priest. To many Jewish people, this meant that if they paid taxes, they were in essence giving worship to the Emperor, who in fact demanded worship from his subjects since he thought of himself as a god.

The scheme of these religious leaders was cleverly devised. If Jesus said, "No, do not pay taxes," the Herodians, who were faithful to the Emperor and were brought along by the Pharisees, would report Jesus as an insurrectionist and have Him imprisoned or killed. If He said, "Yes, pay taxes," He would be denounced by the Jewish nation as a traitor to their cause.

The answer Jesus gave was both unexpected and profound:

Command Thirty-Eight

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21).

In essence, Jesus was saying, "You owe a debt to Caesar because of the public benefits that he provides for you, and you must pay the debt that you owe him regardless of his character or personal motives." Paul affirmed this perspective on taxes when he wrote to the believers in Rome, "Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another …" (Romans 13:7–8).

Just as there were zealots in the days of Jesus who were eager to throw off the yoke of Roman bondage, so there are well-meaning people today who feel that it is wrong to pay taxes to a government that does not support their values. Let's recognize our responsibility to pay taxes and make sure we fully repay this debt.

Render Honor to Caesar!

She was the wife of the king and could have demanded that he carry out the promise he had made to her. Instead, Bath-sheba and the prophet Nathan carefully planned a respectful appeal. "So Bathsheba went to see the aged king in his room, where Abishag the Shunammite was attending him. Bathsheba bowed low and knelt before the king. "What is it you want?" the king asked. She said to him, "My lord, you yourself swore to me your servant by the LORD your God: 'Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he will sit on my throne.' But now Adonijah has become king, and you, my lord the king, do not know about it. He has sacrificed great numbers of cattle, fattened calves, and sheep, and has invited all the king's sons, Abiathar the priest and Joab the commander of the army, but he has not invited Solomon your servant. My lord the king, the eyes of all Israel are on you, to learn from you who will sit on the throne of my lord the king after him" (1 Kings 1:15–20). As a result of this wise and respectful appeal, David acted swiftly to fulfill the promise he had made to Bath-sheba.

We are to "fear God and honor the king." Honor is inwardly deciding to place a high value on a person and outwardly expressing it.

To "Give to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar" is not limited to the realm of paying taxes. The payment of taxes is merely part of the higher duty we have to "honor the king." (See 1 Peter 2:17.)

Scripture identifies civil authorities as "the ministers of God." (See Romans 13:4.) When we fail to give proper honor to these authorities, we may experience their wrath. "A king's wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it. When a king's face brightens, it means life; his favor is like a rain cloud in spring" (Proverbs 16:14–15). "A king's rage is like the roar of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass" (Proverbs 19:12).

These truths were painfully illustrated in the life of an ingenious businessman. He designed a legal way to combine related corporations and increase the stock value for the shareholders. As his efforts became increasingly successful, an official from the government became involved. The businessman disliked working with this particular official and tried to circumvent his authority. This lack of respect caused the government official to become offended and angry. The situation went from bad to worse and ended with the businessman's imprisonment.

The right to be given honor does not depend on an individual's personality or his actions, but rather on his position under other authorities. Thus, Paul warns, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves" (Romans 13:1–2).

"Do not revile the king even in your thoughts ... because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say" (Ecclesiastes 10:20).

True honor must be sincere at all times and must be outwardly expressed in obedient actions and words of Gratitude to those who are providing civil benefits. When was the last time you thanked a "minister of God" for the benefits that he or she is providing for your well-being? Why not select one of these ministers of God and write a letter to him or her today to express your Gratitude and to show honor.

Command 38: Give to Caesar

Related Character Quality

Gratitude vs. Unthankfulness

Gratitude is expressing sincere appreciation to God and to others for the ways that they have benefited my life.

True Gratitude springs from an awareness of our total unworthiness and inadequacy before a holy and just God. If we received what we deserved, we would all be destroyed in an eternal hell. "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed" (Lamentations 3:22).

In light of our condition before God, Jesus instructs us to be "poor in spirit." This attitude is like that of a beggar along the side of the road hoping for his daily needs to be met and being grateful for anything that anyone does for him.

The Importance of Gratitude

Gratitude is the foundation of a believer's walk with God and of God's daily will for our lives. "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

By giving thanks for all things, including unexpected trials, physical infirmities, people who reproach or persecute us, mundane necessities of life, and distressing situations, we will pass the test of the Holy Spirit and receive the power of genuine love, joy, and peace. It is for this reason that we are to have grateful spirits.

Reasons to Thank God for All Things

It is easy to thank God for the things that obviously benefit us; however, to be grateful for trials and tribulations requires faith and obedience. The following points should provide further understanding for being grateful.

1. All things come from God's hand.

It is easy to understand that "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights" (James 1:17), but what about the attacks of Satan? Job had the wisdom to understand that all his sufferings, ultimately, came from God. After losing everything he had, he worshiped God by saying, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21).

Paul had the same discernment when he spoke of the messenger of Satan that came to buffet him. "… There was given me a thorn in my flesh … . Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:7–9).

God rewarded Job's Gratitude by giving him back double what he had lost. (See Job 1:2–3 and 42:12–13.) Paul was rewarded with the power of Christ and the glory of eternal riches.

2. All things are for our good.

The statement is true that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28). Even the sufferings that we go through are for our benefit. Paul wrote, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

Just as the correction of a father is good for his children, God's disciplines will always benefit us. "Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!" (Hebrews 12:9).

3. All things can produce Godly character.

The verse following Romans 8:28 explains how all things work together for good. "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Romans 8:29). We are not to resent trials or tribulations but should instead welcome them as friends, because they are given to develop one's character.

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2–4).

4. A right response will produce genuine love.

After being filled with the Spirit, we will be led by the Spirit into a time of testing. If we thank God for and rejoice in every test, we will then experience the power of the Spirit, which begins with love, joy, and peace. This sequence is explained in the fifth chapter of Romans: "… We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:3–5).

Love is the greatest power on the face of the earth. Through love, God is able to accomplish in our lives and the lives of others supernatural work that will bring about eternal achievement.

5. All things, including trials, can bring us closer to God.

When things go well with us, we tend to forget God. The psalmist testified, "When I was in distress, I sought the Lord …" (Psalm 77:2). The psalmist stated, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. … It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. … I know, O LORD, that your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness you have afflicted me" (Psalm 119:67, 71, 75).

Even when God removes the pressure of a difficult circumstance, we tend to forget Him and neglect to be grateful. When ten lepers were healed, only one returned to thank the Lord. Because of this tendency to forget Him, God will often put us in "impossible" situations so we can experience His deliverance and glorify Him. "call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me" (Psalm 50:15).

Personal Evaluation: How Grateful Are You?

- Do you begin each morning by thanking God for a new day?
- Do you quickly express thanks to other people?
- Do you rejoice in trials and tribulations?
- Do you think of creative ways to express Gratitude to God and others?
- Do you look for benefits in the things that normally cause murmuring?
- Do you give public recognition to individuals who have helped you?
- Do you pray for those who have benefited you?

Render Obedience to Caesar!

The family quietly filed into the North Dakota courtroom. They respectfully acknowledged the judge, gave her a warm smile, and sat down. The parents were charged with refusing to place their children in public school. Later, the judge shared that she had been prepared to "throw the book" at them, as she had already done in the cases of three other home schooling families that very morning.

However, this family was strikingly different from the others. In fact, the judge was so impressed with the attitudes and behavior of the children that she asked the parents many questions about how they educated their children. In the end, she ruled to postpone their case, pending the outcome of a bill to legalize home education, which was before the state legislature. The bill passed and later that same judge began to home educate her children! This family realized that they were under two jurisdictions: man's jurisdiction under God and God's jurisdiction over all.

Our ultimate appeal is not to the "ruler on the throne" but to God, Who placed him there.

We are to render honor and obedience to civil authorities because they are ministers of God for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do well. (See Romans 13:4.) We are to do this not only to avoid the ruler's wrath, "but also because of conscience" (Romans 13:5).

We are also to render taxes, tributes, custom charges, fear, and honor to civil government in return for benefits that have been provided for our health, safety, and welfare. (See Romans 13:6–7.) We are to do this for the Lord's sake. "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority

instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him …" (1 Peter 2:13–14).

When it comes to obedience, we must remember that all authorities are under God's authority and are accountable to Him for their decisions and actions. If a ruler commands us to disobey the higher Law of God, we must respectfully appeal, and if our appeal is rejected, we must respectfully obey God's Law. This was the case with Daniel's three friends who refused to bow to the golden image (see Daniel 3:16–18). It was also the case when the religious rulers commanded the apostles not to preach in the name of Jesus. The apostles replied, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Children learn obedience by the way they see their parents obeying the law in both big and little matters.

A father who instructs his children to obey him but drives over the speed limit, parks in "No Parking" zones, and cheats on his income taxes is, by his actions, teaching his children that you obey authorities only when it is convenient to do so. This double standard is often one of the reasons children rebel against their father's authority, especially when the father gives harsh discipline for disobeying him.

Have you been living according to a double standard by not obeying the laws that our civil authorities have put into place? If you are unsure, ask your family to help you identify any laws you may have broken, and then obey them for the Lord's sake, conscience sake, and your children's sake.

Command 38: Give to Caesar | Day 263

Render Light to Caesar!

The nation of New Zealand had a problem—rehabilitating juvenile delinquents. We worked in conjunction with their Justice Department to develop the MARC program (Making A Right Choice) that was later recognized by the Prime Minister as one of the most effective programs they had ever had.

The Philippines are facing the challenge of effectively training their orphans. We were given an opportunity to provide a six-month training program for 20 teenage orphans. Now, after a year of observing these young people, the officials have asked us to provide additional assistance in training their orphans.

In the United States, prisons face a continual battle with repeat offenders. Statistics show that in many states as many as 60-75% of those released from prison will commit another crime. As we have worked with prison officials, a six-month, faith-based program that includes the Basic Seminar and other training has been developed. Among program participants, the recidivism rate has dropped to as low as 4%!

Each of these opportunities to work with leaders has provided ways of rendering good works by serving those in authority. Through these opportunities, we have been able to let the light of Christ shine before men.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). One of the benefits of light is that it allows people to avoid obstacles that would otherwise cause them to stumble.

Many believers assume that they have fulfilled their obligations to the government by paying taxes, obeying laws, and showing honor. However, we have a much more profound debt than just this. Paul speaks of it, even in connection with a pagan empire that used tax money to put Jesus on the cross and to persecute Christians.

We are to bless those who curse us and to be light to those who are in darkness. The light will attract those who are interested in spiritual things, but it will also stir up the wrath of those who love darkness. For this reason, Paul wrote, "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Timothy 2:1–2).

Anyone who is in a position of authority will be likely to experience extra pressures in four major areas: marriage, teenagers, finances, or health. If we can share with them practical, proven answers in these areas, we will become welcomed friends and advisors to those in leadership.

We have an obligation to both pray and look for ways to bless our cities, because "Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted" (Proverbs 11:11).

A pastor of a small church went to the county board and said, "I would like to do whatever I can to serve you in the community." The board explained that they had thousands of migrant workers who needed to learn how to speak English and asked if the church could teach them. The pastor asked if he could use the Bible as their English text. They said, "Certainly." This small country church of about 100 members eventually grew to be a church of several thousand members as a result of their good works in the community.

Have you ever attended a city council meeting and learned about the needs in your community? Now would be a good time to plan such a visit. Before you go, pray for your city leaders, bless your city, and ask God to open doors of ministry for you.

Command 38: Give to Caesar

Study Question

Q: Jesus condemned the unfaithful steward for not increasing the amount of money entrusted to him. Why, then, did Jesus entrust money to Judas and not even reprove him when He knew Judas was stealing it? (See John 12:6 and Matthew 25:24–27.)

A: While at first it may appear that Judas was not reproved, in the end he was severely rebuked by God. He was entrusted with care of the money purse, and he was unfaithful to that trust. In the same way, he was disloyal to Jesus Christ and betrayed Him for 30 pieces of silver. As a result of Judas's unfaithfulness and deception, he "left to go where he belongs" (Acts 1:25; see also John 12:6).

The lesson of the unfaithful steward would certainly apply to Judas. "His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! … . Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. … And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 25:26, 28, 30).

In order to be faithful stewards of what God has entrusted to us, we must learn to view money from God's perspective. We tend to view money as our possession and assume we have the right to decide how it will be spent. We also tend to view money as a means of security for the future, storing up as much as possible since we do not know what will happen to us in coming years.

The result of this human perspective is that we make money our god, because we expect from money what only God can give us, including happiness, security, freedom from fears, and peace of mind. When we build our lives around money, we reveal that we are guilty of the love of money, which is the root of all evil, bringing with it grief, temptations, and disillusionment.

However, God views all money as His possession. "The LORD works out everything for his own ends— even the wicked for a day of disaster" (Proverbs 16:4). He even blesses the ungodly in that He "… causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45).

God created all true wealth and has given us the ability to acquire a certain amount of it. He sees money as a trust that He gives to each individual as a steward of what belongs to Him. When He instructs us to give a portion of "our" money to the government, we need to be obedient to do so. Money is not to be hoarded or squandered but wisely invested in order to bring increase that glorifies God and fulfills His purposes in the world.

Render Yourself to God!

Total dedication was my father's favorite message, and he would take every opportunity to share it. After he became a believer, he experienced spiritual growth but had limited opportunities for service until he fully dedicated his life to the Lord. A week after he made this dedication, he was

asked to serve on the board of Pacific Garden Mission. While he served on the board, the radio drama Unshackled was launched. Today, this program is heard in almost every nation around the world and is the longest running drama in radio history. Later, my father was appointed as the executive director of Gideons International, which has a worldwide ministry of providing Bibles free of charge, as well as placing Bibles in hotels.

My father loved to find Biblical analogies of salvation and dedication. One of his favorites was the account of Lazarus. Christ's raising of Lazarus from the dead symbolized salvation. However, Lazarus's effectiveness was greatly hindered until he was loosed from the grave clothes in which he had been wrapped. That, my father pointed out, represented putting off the deeds of the flesh and dedicating our lives to the Lord. (See John 11.)

Once we dedicate our bodies to God as living sacrifices they become set apart for the Lord, and usable for His service.

I still remember the meeting where I dedicated my body to God. I was about 12 years old and, at the speaker's invitation, I stood to tell God that I would dedicate my body and life to Him in obedience to Romans 12:1–2: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

As I stood making this surrender to God, I expected it meant I would have to be a missionary and said, "Lord, I will serve You for the rest of my life. I will even be a missionary pilot if you clear up my eyesight." At the time, my vision was 20/80, which would have prevented me from becoming a pilot. However, the Lord honored my request, and within two weeks my eyesight was normal!1 Later, God used this commitment to direct me to go to Bolivia. What took place on that trip was instrumental in teaching me important truths that were later taught in the Basic Seminar.

There should be no doubt about our lives belonging to God, because He is both our Creator and Redeemer.

Whatever is given to God becomes holy, which means it is set apart for God and His kingdom. In giving our lives to God, there are two aspects of holiness. First, there is an instant holiness that occurs the moment we dedicate ourselves to God. The second aspect is progressive holiness as we are conformed to the image of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 7:1 we are told, "Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."

Have you fully dedicated your life to God for His use? If not, I urge you to do so right now with a sincere and fervent prayer.

Command 38: Give to Caesar | Day 265

Render Children to God!

The parents recognized that their children belonged to God. (See Psalm 127:3.) They also understood their responsibilities to lovingly care for, protect, and train the children God had entrusted to them.

However, when opportunities for significant kingdom ministry were made available to their teenagers, the parents refused to send them out for reasons that sounded spiritual but came from hearts that were selfishly holding on to their children. They had never given their children back to the Lord or dedicated them to His service. As the teenagers grew older they began to feel trapped and soon left home under circumstances that grieved their parents. The result was that neither God nor the parents got the children.

Children who are trained in the ways of the Lord and never sent out to be salt and light in the world can be as ineffective for God's kingdom as those who were never trained.

Elkanah loved his wife Hannah, but nothing he did could take away the sadness of her heart. She grieved because she had no children. Elkanah tried to reason with her that he was better to her than ten sons, but she rejected all comfort and finally prayed, "God, if You give me a child, I will give him back to You." God responded to her petition by giving her a son whom she named Samuel. Hannah kept her promise to give her son back to the Lord, and Samuel became a great prophet in Israel. (See 1 Samuel 1:1–28.)

Isaac was the son of promise, yet God instructed Abraham to place him on the altar. When Abraham took the knife to kill Isaac, he was demonstrating complete trust in God by not withholding even his beloved son from the Lord. (See Genesis 22:1–18.) In a similar way, God wants every father and mother to hold back nothing from Him, including their children.

Historians agree that John Wesley was one of the eighteenth century's most influential religious leaders in England and colonial America. When he was asked what had influenced his dedication to God, John explained that as a boy he was almost killed in a house fire. Following this event, his mother impressed upon him the fact that God had an important work for him to do and had spared his life as "a brand plucked from the burning fire" for this very purpose. It is this sense of spiritual duty, affirmed and blessed by parents, that God wants every child to have.

Parents should instill in their children a desire to serve the Lord and then send them out with blessings to do it.

I still remember the impact that it made on me when my father and mother released me for Christian ministry with their full blessing. They continued to give me counsel but allowed me to make decisions that I felt were in line with God's call on my life.

Over the years, I have watched many parents hold back their children from serving the Lord. Careful protection and training of children in the ways of the Lord are vital, but we must not lose sight of the reason for this training and equipping—to prepare them to be effective salt and light in the world. Have you consecrated your children to the Lord, and do they know it? If not, I encourage you to do so today. Then, begin instilling in them the vision of being mighty soul winners and disciple makers!

Render Firstfruits to God!

Jihad called his pastor to explain. He would not be able to give a tithe for the next two months, because he was purchasing land in the country of Qatar. He assured the pastor that he would more than make it up when the land was sold. His pastor warned him, "Jihad, how can God bless a project when you don't first honor Him with your resources."

However, Jihad was confident that this was an exceptional investment opportunity. Therefore, he and his three friends bought the property. Sure enough, in just two weeks the land doubled in value, but instead of selling it right away they decided to keep it a little longer in hopes of making even greater profits.

The next week all land in Qatar was nationalized. This meant that only a national could buy and sell property. Jihad found a fellow employee who was a native of Qatar and asked him to sell the land in his name, offering him 10% of the sale. The man agreed, but tragically, the day before the sale was to be final, the coworker died of a heart attack. When the brother of the deceased man came to collect his personal effects, Jihad and his three friends tried to explain their arrangement. The brother would not listen and said firmly, "I don't know anything about you. This property belonged to my brother and you are trying to steal it from him!" In the end, Jihad learned the importance of honoring the Lord with his finances.

"Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing ..." (Proverbs 3:9–10).

Just as God instructed His people to pay taxes to their earthly rulers, so He expected them to pay tithes and offerings to Him. Thus, He asks, "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask,

'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings" (Malachi 3:8). The tithe honors the Lord and glorifies Him as it acknowledges that our heavenly Father is our great Provider.

As we obey God by honoring Him with our tithes and offerings He has promised to open the windows of heaven and pour out His blessing (see Malachi 3:10). He also promises to "prevent pests from devouring your crops" for our sakes (see Malachi 3:11). If we do not give our tithes to God, He may simply allow Satan to devour them. In either case, we will not be able to keep them.

A tithe reminds us that everything we have has been given to us by God and is a testimony of His ownership.

The laws of the harvest are explained and related to our generosity in giving. The more we sow the more we will reap, and the more God will give back to us for further sowing. (See 2 Corinthians 9:6.) God is able to not only fully supply our own needs but also what is needed to abound in every good work (see 2 Corinthians 9:8).

In your journal this week, make two columns. On the left-hand side, write down the specific things that we should render to "Caesar." On the right-hand side, put down the things we should render to God. We can make additional entries about future experiences we have in giving or not giving to the civil government and to God and the results of these decisions.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 22:19-21

"Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's".

Romans 13:1–2, 5–7

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. … Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."

1 Peter 2:17

"Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king."

Proverbs 21:1

"The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases."

1 Peter 2:13–14

"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right."

Keep the Greatest Commandment!

A few days after his wedding, a young husband decided to take his bride to an elegant restaurant. They were seated, and soon an attractive young waitress arrived at their table. The husband looked up at her with obvious delight, engaged in a few moments of friendly conversation, and then ordered his meal.

As the waitress walked away, the happy husband turned his eyes back to his wife and was startled by the change in her countenance. She looked hurt and grieved.

"Honey," he said, "what's wrong?"

"I saw how your eyes lit up when you looked at that waitress. That hurt me!"

He was confused, "Why should that hurt you? I was only trying to be friendly."

This did little to comfort his distressed wife. She was hurt by the delight he had in another woman. Hadn't he just vowed before God that "forsaking all others" he would love and cherish her with his whole heart?

A marriage is a covenant relationship and in such a union there can be no toleration of any competing affections.

When I first heard this story, I assumed the wife was being overly sensitive and needed to overcome her jealousy. However, later I was in a counseling situation that caused me to recall this event, and what transpired that day changed my life.

As I thought about the couple, these words of Scripture came to mind with new meaning: "…For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5). While pondering these words, I realized that God was aware of every delight, friendship, or affection that was in competition with my love for Him. He was not only aware of them, but their existence causes Him to have the same jealous reaction as this wife had.

It occurred to me that just as a wife looks at the eyes of her husband when another woman is present, so the Spirit of the Lord watches the eyes of our hearts when a worldly attraction comes before us. If our eyes "light up" with lustful delight, His Spirit is grieved. James affirms this truth: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?" (James 4:4–5).

That day I realized that either I would love the Lord with all my heart and receive His blessings, or I would delight in competing affections and experience His discipline. James 4 begins with these words: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" I purposed then to keep His greatest commandment:

Command Thirty-Nine

"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment" (Matthew 22:37–38).

Recognizing that in my own strength I could not love the Lord as I ought, I asked Him for the grace needed to love Him with all of my heart, soul, and mind. While I know that my love has been imperfect, His grace has been sufficient.

I urge you to search your heart identifying and rejecting any affections that compete for the loyalty that belongs to God alone. Then purpose that you will love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and ask Him for the grace to do so.

Command 39: Love the Lord | Day 268

Love God With All Your Heart!

Imagine an athlete, a young man who has been training for years to qualify for the Olympics as a runner. Every day he is up before dawn, preparing his body and mind for the competition that consumes his thoughts. He lives and breathes to run.

As the week of the Olympic trials finally draws near, how much time does he devote to thinking about other pursuits and interests? He doesn't have time for them! They are distractions to his one goal—achieving his dream of qualifying for the Olympics. This intense, all-consuming passion for a single goal should characterize our love for God.

To love God is to maintain an ever-deepening search to discover and enjoy His true nature, character, and power.

It is this intense search for God that He desires and rewards. Thus, He states, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). It is halfhearted, casual interest in God that makes a person vulnerable to attractive worldly distractions. These distractions draw our hearts away from God, choke out His Word, and cause us to leave our first love. (See Mark 4:18–19 and Revelation 2:4.)

In speaking of his wholehearted search, David said, "One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple" (Psalm 27:4). Paul also testified to this continual seeking after God when he stated, "… I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings …" (Philippians 3:10).

David advises all who want to love God, "Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always" (Psalm 105:4).

We discern the "face of the Lord" with our spirit. Seeking His face is seeking His favor. Just as we can sense from a person's facial expressions whether or not we are bringing him pleasure or displeasure or receiving his approval or disapproval, through God's Word we can seek His face and discern what brings Him pleasure and receives His approval.

David enjoyed fellowship with God as he communed with the Lord through His Word. He made this communion an active part of his life as he went to sleep, got up in the night watches, and awakened in the morning. (See Psalm 4:8, 5:1.)

Love is not a static condition. It is a dynamic, active relationship. Living moment by moment in the presence of the Lord and seeking His face is one of the primary ways we love God. "… you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:11).

King Uzziah discovered the rewards of seeking the Lord. "… As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success" (2 Chronicles 26:5). One of the wisest decisions we can make is the decision to love the Lord with all our hearts and continually seek after Him. Let's demonstrate that love for God by communing with Him through His Word.

Command 39: Love the Lord

Related Character Quality

Enthusiasm vs. Apathy

Enthusiasm is God's energy in my spirit expressing itself through my mind, will, and emotions.

What Are We to Be Enthusiastic About?

1. Be enthusiastic about God.

Paul was "zealous toward God" even before his conversion. (See Acts 22:3.) However, he had "zeal without knowledge." He was zealous of the religious traditions of his forefathers. (See Galatians 1:14.) When he became a believer, however, he transferred that same zeal to advancing the kingdom of God.

2. Be enthusiastic about loving others.

"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). The Corinthian believers exercised fervent love toward Paul. Titus "told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever" (2 Corinthians 7:7).

Fervent love is possible only if we first purify our souls by obeying God's truth. Otherwise we will have a mixture of affection with wrong motives and desires: "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22).

3. Be enthusiastic about prayer.

"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:16). One of Paul's co-laborers joined him in having this mind of prayer for other believers: "Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis" (Colossians 4:12–13).

4. Be enthusiastic about good works.

All believers are to be enthusiastic about doing sacrificial works that will benefit others. These works must be done without any motive of personal reward or glory. They should be carried out so that others get the credit and God gets the glory. Jesus Christ "who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." (Hebrews 10:24).

The enthusiasm of the Corinthian believers in giving an offering for needy believers motivated others to follow their example. Paul wrote, "your enthusiasm [in giving] has stirred most of them to action" (2 Corinthians 9:2).

5. Be enthusiastic about repentance.

The same zeal we are to have in serving God and others, we are to have in maintaining a good conscience toward God and man. The Laodicean believers, for whom Epaphras earnestly prayed, lacked enthusiasm. They were not "hot" for their Lord; they were "lukewarm." God reproved them for this condition and warned them to repent.

"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. … Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent" (Revelation 3:15–16, 19).

6. Be enthusiastic about trials and reproaches.

Jesus taught us to "rejoice, and be glad" when we are persecuted for Christ's sake. (See Matthew 5:12.) Paul took "delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties [for the sake of Christ]" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

How Do We Generate Enthusiasm?

Genuine enthusiasm is not something we activate by our own energy. Harmonious interaction with the Holy Spirit of God produces enthusiasm. For this reason, we are to "not put out the Spirit's fire" nor grieve Him with things in our lives that displease Him (1 Thessalonians 5:19; see also Ephesians 4:30).

It is important to distinguish the enthusiasm of our spirits from the excitement of our souls. Those who try to stir up enthusiasm in their minds, wills, or emotions will eventually experience depression and burnout.

Enthusiasm in the soul is like a candle. It gives light, but it is self-consuming. On the other hand, enthusiasm generated in the spirit is like the flame of an oil lamp. As long as we are filled by the Spirit of God and the Word of God, enthusiasm, like an oil-filled lamp, will burn indefinitely.

The psalmist describes the way in which the spirit encourages the soul in enthusiasm, because it is possible for the soul to be sorrowful and the spirit to be enthusiastic at the same time. "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (Psalm 42:11).

Personal Evaluation: How Enthusiastic Are You?

- Do you give energy to all those around you by being enthusiastic?
- Have you experienced the indwelling of the Holy Spirit through salvation in Christ?
- Do you experience emotional drain or depression by trying to act enthusiastic with your emotions rather than through God's Spirit?
- Do you give everyone a warm, enthusiastic smile or only those who are your close friends?
- Do you get more excited about sports than the challenge of the Christian life?

Love God With All Your Soul!

The Promised Land lay before the children of Israel, and they were armed with the presence and power of God. They received clear instructions from the Lord to not make any covenants or intermarry with the inhabitants but rather to completely destroy them and all the altars of their pagan gods (see Deuteronomy 7). God also warned that if the children of Israel failed to conquer these mighty nations, in the future the people and their false gods would be a snare to them (see Deuteronomy 7:16).

There are striking parallels between the Promised Land and the souls of people. Each has inhabitants with false ideas that must be conquered so that sin does not reign. If we fail to conquer them, they will be a snare in our lives, pulling us away from the Lord.

The battleground between God and Satan is our souls, and each wants to be in control.

The soul is composed of three elements: the mind, will, and emotions. The English word psychology, which refers to the study of the mind, will, and emotions, is derived from the Greek word psuche, which is translated as soul. In its natural state, the soul will not be subject to the will of God. However, God wants us to surrender the will to Him so that He can work in us that which is well-pleasing in His sight. (See Hebrews 13:21.)

In our souls, we "surrender ground" to Satan through bitterness, greed, lust, and other sins. These produce fears, guilt, depression, and a host of other destructive emotions. The good news is that we can have victory over these sins as we delight in God's Word and meditate on it day and night, because the soul is "transformed by the renewing of our minds" (see Romans 12:2).

With the Holy Spirit directing our minds, we must carry out relentless campaigns in our souls. This warfare is described in 2 Corinthians 10:5: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." As the truth of God's Word fills our minds and we purpose to obey it, we will be able to bring unpredictable emotions under the control of God's Spirit.

To love God with "all thy soul" is to build all thoughts around His Word.

When I feel my soul straying from the Lord and lose my delight in God's Word, I can always experience a revitalization of my love for the Lord and His Word by reading the Psalms. Reading and meditating on Psalm 119 is a special source of restoration of my delight in God's Word. Psalm 25 is another one of my favorite psalms and I often express my soul to the Lord by praying verses 1-2 back to God: "Unto thee, O LORD, do I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in thee: let me not be ashamed, let not mine enemies triumph over me."

Loving God with all of our souls means that we love His Word and delight in making it a part of the mind, will, and emotions. James instructs us to "receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21). Are we delighting our souls in the wisdom and treasures of God's Word every day?

Love God With All Your Mind!

If we are to love God with all our souls, and if the mind is a part of the soul, why did God specifically instruct us to love Him with all our mind? The answer is revealed in the vital importance of keeping our thoughts focused on the Lord at all times. Scripture tells us that God will keep him "… in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you" (Isaiah 26:3).

No wonder David begins Psalm 1 with a challenge to delight in God's Law and meditate on it day and night. Paul also urges believers to "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom …" (Colossians 3:16).

Loving God with all our minds means bringing our thoughts into alignment with His thoughts.

Our love for God in our thoughts has a direct bearing on the renewing of our minds that is accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit.

However, removing God from our thoughts is like turning out the light and allowing darkness to rule. "In his pride the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God" (Psalm 10:4). Paul also described the destruction that comes to a person who rejects God in his thoughts: "Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done …" (Romans 1:28).

In Romans 7, the Apostle Paul described the inward battle that takes place between the sinful old nature and the new nature in Christ. As we "feed" the new nature by delighting in God's Word, we become increasingly aware of sin in our lives and develop a greater desire to be cleansed of this sin and to obey God. This puts us in conflict with the old nature of sin that is still warring within our flesh.

The danger of not proactively seeking to love God in all of our thoughts is that we will more easily "give in" to the sinful thoughts and habits that are a part of the old sin nature. A sinful mind opposes spiritual things and causes us to be enemies of God. (See Romans 8:5–8.)

"The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace" (Romans 8:6).

A person might ask, "How can I think about God all day long and get my other work done?" God has made our minds capable of thinking of many things at the same time. At any given moment we may be talking to a person but also be aware of others in the room, remember an upcoming appointment, and be conscious of a dozen other things.

One who has a spiritual mind seeks to relate every facet of life to the Lord and the truth of His Word. Jesus demonstrated this skill as He walked through the countryside and drew analogies from His observations of vineyards, birds, flowers, and even the grass in order to communicate spiritual truths. In fact, the world around us "comes to life" when our minds are filled with love for God and we view everything around us from His perspective. Let's purpose to retain God in all of our thoughts every moment of every day.

Command 39: Love the Lord

Study Question

Q: Paul instructed unmarried Christians to please the Lord and married Christians to please their spouses. How, then, can a married couple love the Lord with all their hearts and love each other at the same time? (See 1 Corinthians 7.)

A: Loving God with all our hearts means that we respond to His grace by devoting all our affections, thoughts, wills, and strength to Him and to those things that delight His heart. It

means that on a daily basis we must present our bodies as living sacrifices and yield our members to Him to do those things that are pleasing in His sight. (See Romans 12:1.)

Our love for God is expressed by our obedience to Him. Since He is the One Who tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and tells wives to respect and honor their husbands, those who do this are effectively loving God by loving their spouses. (See Ephesians 5:22–29.)

When we love God with all our hearts, we do not need to divide our love between God and others; instead, God uses us to demonstrate His love to others. Therefore, if a married couple wants to truly love each other, they must first love the Lord with all their hearts.

Love to Be in God's Presence!

How would you have answered a 12-year-old brother who asked, "How can I grow closer to God?" Sixteen-year-old Isaac answered this question by saying, "We could get up at 4 o'clock each morning and memorize Scripture together." Derrick recalls the shock of getting out of bed at 4 the next morning to begin memorizing Matthew 5 with his brother. After they had memorized Matthew 5–7 and could quote it word perfect, they went on to memorize the Book of James and other passages. Derrick observed in Isaac's life that he did not simply memorize Scripture. Rather, he delighted in it throughout the day and would often say, "Look at the insight in this verse!"

It was evident to all who knew him that Isaac loved to be in the presence of God and to tell others about Him. In the spring of 2005, his family left the comforts of their home and went to serve the Lord in Mongolia. Little did they realize that on November 4, 2005, the Lord would call 25-year-old Isaac home to be in His presence for eternity.

After Isaac's death, his twin brother Adam wrote: "Isaac laid down his life and served his last days to bring the message of hope to the people of Mongolia. What greater love could he have shown for the One Who sent His Son, Jesus Christ, that the people of every kindred, tongue, and nation might one day stand before His throne in paradise, redeemed to God through the blood of Jesus Christ."

Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength is contagious, attracting others to God's love and light.

We can learn much about delighting in God's presence from the life of Jesus, Who is our supreme example:

- He got up a great while before day to commune with His Father. (See Mark 1:35.)
- He did nothing apart from the will of His heavenly Father. (See John 5:30.)
- He knew the Word of God. (See Luke 24:32.)
- He used Scripture to defeat all of Satan's temptations. (See Matthew 4:3–11.)
- He worshiped God by singing. (See Matthew 26:30.)
- He taught others about the kingdom of God wherever He went. (See Luke 4:43–44.)
- He used every crisis as an opportunity to demonstrate God's power. (See Matthew 15:31.)

Living in God's presence means involving Him in all of our thoughts, words, and actions.

God delights in those who delight to be with Him. Those who spend time in His presence find that the pleasures and possessions of this world lose their glitter and glamour and that God's desires become their desires.

If the thought of memorizing large passages of Scripture is overwhelming to you, don't be discouraged. The amount of God's Word that we memorize is not as important as the depth that we meditate upon it and apply it to our daily lives. Business executive Jim Sammons takes one verse each week and meditates on it day and night. He has found that rich new insights for

application of the verse come to his mind throughout the week. Let's delight ourselves in the presence of the Lord and see how He will give us the desires of our hearts (see Psalm 37:4).

Command 39: Love the Lord | Day 272

Love God by Delighting in His Words!

In her mind, the young man was handsome, strong, wise, and everything she had ever dreamed of having in a husband. Words could not describe the joy she felt when he asked her to marry him! But then, war broke out. He was drafted into the army and sent overseas. Before leaving, he promised that they would be married as soon as he returned.

The longer he was away the more her love for him increased. Every day she longed to hear from him and anxiously waited for letters from him. When one arrived, she put everything else aside and read every word he had written. Once was not enough though, and she read his words several more times. She pictured him talking to her and remembered all the times they had enjoyed together. Every letter was a treasure.

The written words of Jesus are His "love letters" to us. One way we demonstrate our love for Him is by delighting in His words.

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). Jesus wants us to keep His words in our hearts and live them out in our lives. He promised that "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7).

Some believers argue that we do not need to do things for God, and we need only to love Him. Their concern is that a requirement to do things for God implies that we are trying to earn His love, which leads to "legalism." Jesus teaches that we cannot choose between love and actions, but rather that we must choose both! "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14:21).

The Apostle John affirms this truth: "This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:2–3). His commands are not burdensome, because God gives them for our good and provides us with the grace to obey them. When we love someone, the things we do for him are not burdensome tasks. Even challenging tasks can become a delight when carried out with the motive of love.

Christ's commands are practical ways to demonstrate our love for God and one another.

Since loving God and loving His Law are synonymous, we can understand why David said, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long" (Psalm 119:97; see also Psalm 1:2–3). Jeremiah also stated, "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight …" (Jeremiah 15:16).

Is your time with the Lord a pleasure or drudgery? Do you delight in His words through meditation? Do you keep His commandments as a demonstration of your love for Him and devotion to Him? Let's allow our study of the commands of Christ to increase our love for God and His Word.

Command 39: Love the Lord | Day 273

Love God by Feeding His Sheep!

The teaching was beyond my understanding, but it made a lasting impression in my memory. I was a young boy and a new Christian. My mother was attending a Bible class that was taught by a Jewish Christian woman. One day I slipped into the back of the room and listened as she talked about the Tabernacle. She explained the intricate details of the design of its curtains, couplings, loops, tacks, boards, sockets, rings, etc. Nothing made any sense to me, but I was profoundly impacted by her enthusiasm. She was enjoying rich spiritual truths and eagerly sharing them with others.

During that meeting, I decided that even if I could not understand a particular portion of the Bible, I would never say that it had no application for my life, because "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

One day, as a youth director talked about the "boring" genealogies of the Bible, I decided to conduct a study on the meanings of the names they included. Each name revealed powerful insights about the hopes and desires that the parents had for their child. The son's choice of a name for his child often revealed how he had responded to the vision of his parents. What at first seemed to be a boring list became a treasure chest of spiritual truth that I could learn from and share with others!

After asking if Peter loved Him, Jesus gave Peter this instruction: "Feed my sheep" (see John 21:15–17).

What does it mean to feed God's sheep? Feeding occurs when a person takes a passage of Scripture and explains its truths with clarity, accuracy, and insight, causing the listeners' spirits to rejoice over the wisdom that is being shared.

One of the ways Jesus "fed" others was by explaining the Scriptures about Himself. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Those who heard Him said, "… Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

The prophet Ezra and the Levites "fed God's sheep" when they "… read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read" (Nehemiah 8:8). Some of my most cherished memories as a young boy are from attendance at a summer Bible conference. I would listen as the speaker read a portion of Scripture and then explained its powerful truths, which I had not understood when I first heard it.

One of the benefits of meditating on Scripture is that we "gather" food to give to others.

This week when we write in our journals, let's affirm our total, unconditional surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ and our desire to love Him with all of our heart, soul, and mind. Let's turn away from any distractions that cause grief to the Holy Spirit and quench His powerful work in our lives. Then, let's design practical ways to demonstrate our love for God through day-and-night delight in His Word and by feeding His sheep.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 22:37-38

"Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment".

Exodus 34:14

"Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God."

John 14:15

"If you love me, you will obey what I command."

John 14:21

"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him."

1 John 5:3

"This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome."

Matthew 10:37

"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

Deuteronomy 10:12–13

"And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?"

1 John 4:19

"We love because he first loved us."

Proverbs 8:17

"I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me."

Love Your Neighbor!

Home at last! It was late at night and after several weeks of traveling, Tim was glad to finally pull into his own driveway. As the car was unloaded and the kids put to bed, he began making a mental checklist of the things he needed to take care of the next day. Most unpleasant on his list was cutting the grass. With all the rain they had been having, the grass would be very tall and probably take twice as long to mow.

The next morning as he ate his breakfast, he glanced out the window and was startled to see that his lawn had been mowed! Wondering who would have done it, he decided it must have been a kind older gentleman who lived down the street. Tim went to thank his neighbor and asked what he owed him for cutting the grass. "Nothing!" the man replied. "We're neighbors!"

It is this kind of willingness to look out for the interests of others as if they were our own that Jesus speaks of in this command:

Command Forty

"And the second [commandment] is like it [the first], Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39).

When Jesus stated that this command is "like it," He was referring to the preceding command to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, and mind (see Matthew 22:37). This statement made by Jesus is significant because we cannot genuinely love a neighbor unless we love God and His love is flowing through us to those around us. Furthermore, our love for God is perfected as we show love to our neighbors.

The connection between loving God and loving our neighbors is clearly seen in 1 John 4:20–21: "If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."

This command is first mentioned in Leviticus 19:18: "… But love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." Throughout the epistles, this command is further emphasized. Paul wrote, "… whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Romans 13:9; see also Galatians 5:13–14). James referred to this command as the "royal law" when he wrote, "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right" (James 2:8).

Our motivation for loving others should be that in doing so, we also love God. (See Matthew 25:40.)

Violating this command produces conflicts and stress between husbands and wives, family members, coworkers, and fellow believers. Let's ask God to help us understand how to obey this command so that we can apply it to our lives and by so doing demonstrate that we love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind.

Love Yourself Correctly!

Even though she was a former Miss America, she hated some of her physical features. The problem was that they were not features she could change. They were part of God's design when He created her and formed her in her mother's womb.

David declared, "My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139:15–16).

When we reject our design, we also reject our Designer.

Self-rejection is often caused by comparing our unchangeable characteristics to those of others. Paul warned, "… When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise" (2 Corinthians 10:12).

In order to love ourselves correctly, we must be able to accept and thank God for our unchangeable features. These include our parents, birth order, brothers and sisters, nationality, ethnic origin, time in history, basic physical features, mental capabilities, and length of life. David's response to the Creator was: "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Psalm 139:14).

If we reject the way God designed us, we will tend to ridicule and reject God's design of others. As I have counseled teenagers over the years, many have acknowledged that they felt awkward and embarrassed about some of their physical features. In order to divert attention away from themselves, they would mock someone else's appearance. What a hurtful action toward God and others!

We cannot fully love others without first learning to accept the way God has made us.

Isaiah described the relationship between God and man when he said, "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Isaiah 64:8). Each pot is different, but each one is carefully designed, shaped, and molded for specific uses in His household. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

Rather than seeking to change the unique outward characteristics that God predetermined for us, we should seek to have our inner man transformed into the image of Christ through the renewing of our minds and the development of His character in our lives.

We can take a big step toward loving our neighbor by first thanking God for the way He designed us. If we have rejected any aspects of His design, let's sincerely thank Him for them and begin to look for the ways that He intends to use them to benefit our inward character and accomplish His purposes in our lives. Then, let's choose to view others as the masterpieces that God made them to be.

Command 40: Love Your Neighbor

Related Character Quality

Gentleness vs. Harshness

Gentleness is showing personal care and concern in meeting the needs of others.

The Practical Expression of Gentleness

Gentleness is demonstrated in our responses to others, especially those who are under our care. We are to discipline ourselves in order to recognize the weaknesses and limitations of others and respond to them with soft answers and patient encouragement.

Biblical Models of Gentleness

1. A shepherd caring for sheep

The very life and health of the sheep depend on the gentleness of the shepherd. The Lord compares Himself to a gentle shepherd in the following passage: "See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young" (Isaiah 40:10–11).

Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. (See John 10:11.)

2. A mother with her infant

Paul uses the concept of gentleness when describing his love and care for those whom he led to Christ: "but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children" (1 Thessalonians 2:7).

How a Gentle Spirit Is Developed

We learn gentleness at the hands of those who are gentle with us. One of the reasons God allows suffering is to provide us with opportunities to express gentleness to others.

The concept of gentleness through humbling oneself was taught by Jesus to His disciples when He said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28–29).

In order to teach us how to be lowly, God carefully takes us through trials. Through them, He gives us comfort and counsel so that we will be prepared to share with and encourage others who are going through similar trials. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

Personal Evaluation: How Gentle Are You?

- Have you developed self-discipline and humility in order to be attentive to the hurts and needs of others?
- When you give instructions or responses to others, do you take into consideration their weaknesses and limitations?
- Do you have a shepherd's mind-set toward those who are looking to you for spiritual leadership or example?
- Do you allow past pain and suffering in your life to remind you to protect others?
- Are you irritable and reactionary when people with needs intrude upon your time or energy?
- Do you give a soft answer so that you do not offend or discourage others?
- Do you see potential in others and purpose to help them grow in the Lord?

Use Wisdom in Loving Neighbors!

A kind, compassionate man thought he was showing love, but his actions ended up bringing much hurt to his neighbor and to himself. The neighbor had poured out a story of financial woes and claimed that if he could get someone to co-sign for a loan, all of his financial troubles would be over. He was persuasive and persistent, and finally the kind man agreed to co-sign for the note. However, years later his kindness was "repaid" with an urgent call from the bank demanding immediate payment of $700,000! Instead of alleviating the financial pressures, this additional loan had simply enabled the neighbor to mismanage even greater sums of money.

The Bible, which commands us to love our neighbors, also warns us of the dangers of co-signing for a loan. Co-signing makes both parties slaves of the bank and causes us to risk losing both the friend and the assets that God has entrusted to us. (See Proverbs 6:1–5, 22:7.) Often, those who have financial pressures do not need money; they need counsel from the Word of God.

Showing love to a neighbor does not mean we always do what is being asked. We must use wisdom to discern his real need.

What appears to be a physical need may actually be the result of a spiritual need. We can effectively love a neighbor by sharing with him the truths of God's Word that apply to his specific

situation. This is possible because "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

For instance, if a Christian neighbor is lamenting the fact that he cannot make ends meet due to unexpected expenses, he may need the counsel of Malachi 3:10–11 or Proverbs 3:9–10, which speak of honoring the Lord with finances. God promises to bless those who tithe and to rebuke the devourer for their sakes.

If a neighbor complains that nothing is going right in his marriage and family, we could ask him if he honored his parents while growing up or if he got married with his parents' full blessing. If not, the best counsel we can give him is how to be reconciled with his parents, because God tells us to honor our parents "that it may go well with you" (Ephesians 6:3).

As we talk with neighbors, it is important that they sense our genuine love and concern for them. James tells us, "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17).

If our words or attitudes are judgmental and condemning, our neighbors will most likely reject our advice. The Apostle Paul instructed Titus "to slander no one" and instead to to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men, remembering that we also have at times been foolish, disobedient, deceived, etc. (See Titus 3:2–5.)

Loving our neighbors wisely includes doing good works that are based on the wisdom of God's Word.

In order to love our neighbors wisely, we must know the Bible and be skilled at applying its truths to our own lives and to the needs of others. Let's continue to meditate on God's Law day and night so that we can learn the wisdom of God and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Command 40: Love Your Neighbor | Day 277

Identify Your Neighbor!

The lawyer asked a sincere-sounding question intending to trick Jesus: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:25–29.)

God's definition of neighbor includes every man, woman, and child on the earth, and so should ours.

What was the lawyer trying to justify? In Israel, the lawyers were from among the Pharisees and were experts in the Law of Moses. They had narrowed God's definition of neighbor to include only fellow Jews, and they had no dealings with Gentiles, especially the Samaritans. The contempt that the Jews had for the people of Samaria can be seen in their verbal attack of Jesus in John 8:48: "Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?"

A legal mind tends to think in terms of case studies and gives close attention to the precise meanings of words. Therefore, Jesus answered the lawyer's question with a parable that would have had profound meaning to him. It was about a certain man who was robbed, beaten, and left to die on the road. Both a priest and a Levite saw the injured man but did nothing to help him.

Finally, a Samaritan came by and had compassion on the victim. He interrupted his own schedule, treated and bound up the man's wounds, put the stranger on his donkey, and transported him to the nearest inn. When they arrived at the inn, the Samaritan stayed with him through the night and then made arrangements with the innkeeper to nurse him back to health, promising to personally pay for all of the man's expenses. (See Luke 10:30–36.)

The lawyer would have known that the Law of Moses clearly stated: "If you see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it. Help him get it to its feet" (Deuteronomy

22:4). The Law also stated: "If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it" (Exodus 23:5). If the Jews were required to give aid to an enemy's animal, how much more were they required to give assistance to a Samaritan?

Rather than asking "Who is my neighbor?" we should ask ourselves "Whose neighbor am I?"

At the conclusion of the parable, Jesus asked, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:36–37).

Are we guilty of loving only those who are close to us? Has there been a time when we have seen someone in need and walked by without giving any assistance? Let's recognize that every person we meet is our neighbor, regardless of his religion, ethnic origin, social status, age, or economic condition, and let's purpose from now on to be good neighbors.

Command 40: Love Your Neighbor

Study Question

Q: Jesus taught that if a man wants to be His disciple he must "hate his own life." How is a person to love his neighbor as himself if he is to "hate his own life"? (See Luke 14:26.)

A: In order to love our neighbors as ourselves, we must first have a proper love of ourselves. Such a love must be based on the realization that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. (See Psalm 139:14.)

God has designed all of our unchangeable characteristics, such as family, birth order, gender, time in history, ethnic origin, mental capacity, and physical features, to accomplish His specific purposes in and through our lives. David stated in Psalm 139:16, "your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

If we reject God's design of ourselves, we will not only resent God as our Designer, but we will tend to project the same negative attitude toward others, who are also created by God.

Jesus explained that the love we have for ourselves is demonstrated in how we take care of our own needs. We are to have this same care and attention for the needs of our neighbors.

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate … even his own life—he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). The word translated hate means "to detest … by extension to love less." In order to be Christ's disciples, we are to not love anything, even our own lives, more than we love Him. Following His example, we should not selfishly look only at our own needs, but we should be alert to the needs of others and be prepared to meet them (see Philippians 2:4).

There could be no greater example of this than what was done by Jesus Christ, when He laid down His life for all people. Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

Understand the New Commandment!

The parents were alarmed when their 17-year-old daughter ran away from home. There didn't appear to be any wrong friends involved, and she was not turning her back on God. She simply could not get along with her parents and claimed that nothing she did ever pleased them.

When I asked about their daughter's complaint, the parents explained, "We have always been strict on ourselves and have been strict in our training of her as well." Through their commitment to perfectionism, they had communicated to their daughter a conditional love: "We will love you as long as you 'measure up.' " In their minds, they loved their daughter as they did themselves. However, they failed to understand the basis of loving others. In John 13:34, Jesus explained the type of love we are to show others.

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

At first I did not understand what made this a "new" commandment, because it sounded so similar to the old one! Then, as I read it carefully, I saw the distinction that was being made between loving others as we love ourselves and loving others as Christ loved us.

The application of loving our neighbors according to the "old commandment" could be considered subjective—based on the love we show ourselves. However, the new commandment leaves no room for speculation about the type of love we are to show others. Jesus loves us unconditionally. He loved us when we hated Him; He loves us when we disobey Him; He continues to love us even when we reject Him.

Years ago, a shy young woman named Betty came to me for counsel. Although her parents had been missionaries and she desired to serve in missions herself, she was thoroughly defeated in her Christian life and was plagued with depression and guilt over her "unpardonable" sins. She had asked God to forgive her many times, yet she was plagued with a sense of worthlessness before God.

As we talked, I encouraged her to receive God's forgiveness, forgive and accept herself, and recognize that God was not finished working in her life. Based on several significant factors, I also encouraged her to confess her sins to her parents and dedicate her life to single service for the Lord, which she did. As Betty began to focus on the depth of God's love and acceptance of her, her love for others increased. Shortly thereafter, she went to Vietnam as a medical missionary.

At the time, Vietnam was a war-torn country, and in 1968 there was fierce fighting near the missionary clinic. One day Betty and several fellow missionaries were captured by the Viet Cong and forced to march day after day for months. She grew weaker and weaker and eventually died. Later it was learned that in the midst of her own indescribable suffering, she had shared her meager food rations with a fellow missionary who survived the ordeal.

As we recognize the great love that Christ has for us, we should be motivated to love others.

Betty's unselfish love for others was based on Christ's great love and forgiveness of her. The more she understood and received His love, the more love she was able to give others. Each of us has been forgiven a huge debt of sin. Let's thank God for the unconditional love He gives us and show that same kind of love to our neighbors.

Learn How to Love Neighbors!

A Godly woman reached out to help a young neighbor boy who was in need of spiritual motivation. After checking with his parents, she enrolled him in a Scripture memorization program. Each week she faithfully listened to the verses he had learned and then asked, "What are those verses saying to you?" Over the course of four years she faithfully and patiently invested time, prayer, and affirmation into that boy's life. I owe a debt of gratitude to this Godly lady, because I was that boy.

Loving neighbors as Christ loved us involves entering "their world" and sacrificing time and effort to bring them closer to the Lord.

Because of God's great love for us, He sent His Son to earth so that through Him we could be saved. (See John 3:16–17.) We can learn much from Jesus's supreme example of loving neighbors during His earthly ministry:

- He left the glory of His home to enter our world as a man.
- He broke down barriers of age, status, and culture by being born as a dependent baby, in a poor family, in a despised part of the world.
- He became acquainted with His "neighbors" and people from many other cities.
- He honored His parents and served His family as a carpenter.
- He honored His neighbors' special events: weddings, feasts, and funerals.

- He gave what was truly needed to those who came to Him for help, whether it was counsel, teaching, healing, or food.
- He spent long hours praying for those whom He served.
- He continued to encourage others even after departing from them.
- He shared God's truth with all who would listen.
- He forgave His enemies and those who mocked Him.

When Jesus came, He taught us how to love God and others and said, "... As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

Loving our neighbors requires taking initiative to become involved in their lives. This may require leaving the comforts of our own home and going out to meet our neighbors or inviting them to our homes.

As we get to know our neighbors, we should be alert to any special needs they might have and seek to meet as many as we can. Often, neighbors who sense our genuine love for them will begin to give us greater opportunities to help meet both their physical and their spiritual needs.

Loving our neighbors as Christ loved us is vital, because it identifies us as His followers: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). May each of us be recognized by our neighbors as one who follows Christ, because of the love we show to others.

Command 40: Love Your Neighbor | Day 280

Love With Rebukes!

Caught off guard by an unexpected winter storm, two hikers desperately fought their way through the blizzard. The wind-driven snow pelted their faces and obstructed their vision. The snowdrifts grew deeper and deeper. After hours of exposure to the bitter-cold temperatures, sheer exhaustion overcame one of the men, and he shouted to his friend, "I need to rest." Then he collapsed into the snow and fell asleep almost immediately.

His companion, recognizing the gravity of their situation, strained to see through the snow and realized that they were not far from shelter. He hurried over to his fallen friend and slapped him in the face. The sleeping man, now awakened, became angry and pursued his "attacker" into the nearby house. Once inside he demanded, "Why did you slap me?!" His friend replied, "I slapped you to save your life. If I would have let you have what you wanted, you would have frozen to death!"

"Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses" (Proverbs 27:6).

Love does not look the other way or remain silent when a neighbor is making a wrong decision. In fact, God states that if we fail to warn the wicked about the error of his way, "… that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood" (Ezekiel 3:18).

Whenever we reprove others, our motives must be genuine love and a sincere concern for his welfare. We must also demonstrate meekness and humility in the way in which we confront sin in another person's life, remembering our own frailty. (See Titus 3:2–3 and Galatians 6:1.) If we are condescending or judgmental in our attitudes toward another person, he will surely sense it and reject our warnings.

When Jesus was on the earth, the religious leaders of His day condemned Him for associating with publicans and sinners. Yet, Christ demonstrated the perspective each of us needs to develop in that He loved the sinner while at the same time He hated the sin. He saw that they were lost and extended His love to them right where they were. (See Matthew 9:10–13 and Luke 15.)

One day, I watched someone step out of a car and wondered who she was. But then *he* turned around and came into my office! He sat down and said, "You probably don't like the way I look!" I looked him in the eye and said with a smile, "I love you just as you are, but I love you too much to let you stay that way. I want to see you become the man God intends for you to be." This

answer brought a positive response, because he realized that I did not judge him but sincerely wanted the best for him.

An important aspect of love is to "correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2).

In this week's journal entry, let's start by listing our immediate neighbors and begin praying for them. Then, let's make plans to invite them over for a meal and show genuine interest in them. By doing so, we will have a growing testimony of God's working through our lives to benefit the lives of others, and we will be able to rejoice in the results that come by obeying the command to love others as Christ has loved us.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 22:39

"And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'"

Romans 13:8

"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law."

Philippians 2:3

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."

James 2:8–9

"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers."

1 John 3:17

"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"

1 John 4:20–21

"If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."

Galatians 5:13–14

"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Command 41: Await My Return | Day 281

Watch for Christ's Return!

Every time I saw this young man standing by the railroad tracks I was amazed. Day after day, in the heat of summer and in the bitter cold of winter, he just stood there waiting and looking into the distance for every approaching train. After my third year of watching him I asked someone what motivated this young man to be so faithful.

I was told that during World War II his older brother had been drafted and had left on a train from that train station. He had told his younger brother that one day he would come back. Therefore, each day this young man would come and wait in anticipation of his brother's return.

His daily vigils were a testimony to the community of a loving older brother who did not reject a younger brother with mental disabilities. The kindness and compassion that his older brother had shown him was never forgotten. His watching also spoke of the deep love that he had for his older brother and his lifelong loyalty that refused to believe the report that his brother had been

killed in battle. This young man's faithfulness caused me to compare his watching for his brother's return to my watching for the Lord's return. Christ commanded us:

Command Forty-One

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. … So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Matthew 24:42, 44).

An example of watchfulness is demonstrated in the life of Simeon, who watched faithfully for Christ's first coming. Scripture states that he was a just and devout man and "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus … Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: … For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:26–32).

Watching causes us to purify our lives even as Christ is pure. (See 1 John 3:2–3.) It also causes us to be filled and led by the Spirit of God. Failure to watch for Christ's return is associated with the loss of something that we should have been guarding and protecting. This significant association is given in many passages, including Revelation 3:3:

"… But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you."

Watching for the Lord's return should have a profound impact on everything we think, say, and do. Years ago, I remember hearing several Christian friends say that they decided not to attend movies because they would not want the Lord to return and find them in a movie theater. What would we change about our lives if we truly lived in daily anticipation of Christ's return?

Command 41: Await My Return | Day 282

Be Ready for Christ's Return!

The father of an 18-year-old boy was frustrated with his son. He had invested much time and effort in training his son to live a Godly life, and now the son was turning toward the world and negatively influencing his brothers and sisters.

As I talked with the son, I learned that his father had indeed invested much in his life. However, this father had neglected a matter of primary importance—he had never talked with his son about salvation or personally encouraged him to place his trust in Christ for the forgiveness of his sins. As the father focused on leading his family in God's ways, he took for granted the fact that his children would accept Christ as their Savior.

One way a father prepares for Christ's return is by faithfully sharing the Gospel with his children until each one repents and is saved.

We do not know the day nor the hour of Christ's return for His Church, but those who are "in Christ," both the living and the dead shall be "caught up" to meet the Lord in the air. "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thessalonians 4:15–17). Anyone, including a son or daughter, who has not received God's gift of salvation will be left behind when Christ returns.

Every child is a priceless treasure entrusted to parents from the Lord. Part of this command to watch for Christ's return involves recognizing the agenda of Satan, which is to steal, kill, and destroy. (See John 10:10.) While each person is ultimately responsible for the choices he makes, parents should do everything they can to protect their children from being carried away in the thief's "spoils" and to teach them of God's salvation. "and how from infancy you have known the

holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15).

"In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house" (Mark 3:27).

What this father did not realize was not only that his son was unsaved but also that his son was caught up in the pleasures of sin, which the "thief" was using to destroy him. When the son realized that his inability to have victory over the lusts of his flesh was God's motivation to bring him to repentance, he repented of his sins and placed his complete trust in the finished work of Christ for salvation.

Let's not only watch for the return of Christ; let's be ready for it by making sure that all the members of our families understand what it means to be a true child of God. This may require sharing the Gospel with a child numerous times as his understanding develops, but the loss is too great if we don't!

Command 41: Await My Return

Related Character Quality

Punctuality vs. Tardiness

Punctuality is showing high esteem for other people and their time.

The Importance of Punctuality

Punctuality is based on two important factors. The first is a reverence for time, and the second is a respect for other people. Punctuality is being present, prepared, and alert for appointed times and seasons. Being punctual is living in harmony with the nature of God (Who is always precisely on time). It should be part of our motivation to make the best use of every minute of each day, in light of the imminent return of Christ.

A Reverence for Time

We are to reverence time, because God created it. He established seasons of the year and seasons of life. God designed the day for work and the night for rest. He wants us to make full use of every day and finish one week's work in six days. We are then to honor Him with "the firstfruits of all our increase," including the first portion of a paycheck, the first part of the day, and the first day of the week.

If you have not been punctual toward God, consider the Word of the Lord: "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins" (James 4:17). Confess your sins to God, and write out the steps you plan to take to establish punctuality before the Lord.

A Respect for People

The second factor required for punctuality is a respect for other people and the time God has entrusted to them. Time is one of our most precious assets. We are given a limited amount of it and are accountable to God for how we use it.

When we keep other people waiting, we actually rob them of their time and hinder them from accomplishing God's will. We fail to obey the command to "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15–16). We also fail to comprehend the truth of the following quote:

"Lost, yesterday,
Somewhere between sunrise and sunset,
Two golden hours,
Each set with sixty diamond minutes.
No reward is offered
For they are gone forever."
—Horace Mann (1796–1859)

If you have robbed others of time by your lack of punctuality, make a list of those whom you have wronged, and ask for their forgiveness. Fulfill the promises that you have made to others, and design ways for others to hold you accountable for punctuality. Make this a priority until punctuality is a consistent discipline in your life.

Related Character Qualities Necessary for Punctuality

- Organization—Organizing our lives and surroundings so that we can be on time.
- Creativity—Designing more efficient ways to accomplish tasks so that we can be on time.
- Initiative—Taking the lead in doing what needs to be done in order to be punctual.
- Patience—Forgiving the lack of punctuality in others.

Personal Evaluation: How Punctual Are You?

- Do you go to bed early so that you can get up early and spend time with the Lord?
- Do you arrive for church early so that you are ready at the appointed time?
- Do you quickly do all you can to meet a need that God brings to your attention?
- Do you seize opportunities to share the Gospel as God directs you?
- Do you arrive on time for mealtimes and other family gatherings?
- Do you arrive early at your place of employment?
- Do you keep appointments that you make with others?
- Do you promptly pay your bills?
- Do you write thank-you letters and notes in a timely fashion?
- Do you promptly return books and other items that you borrow?
- Do you fulfill the promises you have made to others?

Reject Precise Predictions!

It was a startling title, 88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988! The author predicted not only the year but also the month and the day of Jesus' return. I thought to myself, "One thing we can be sure about: Jesus will not be returning on that day!" Mark 13:32 says, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

If we knew the precise day of Christ's return, we would not live in the state of continual watchfulness and readiness that God desires.

After Jesus explained that no one but His heavenly Father knows the exact time of His return, He stated, "Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come" (Mark 13:33). In spite of God's clear statements regarding the return of Christ, many people have a persistent curiosity to know the exact day of Christ's Second Coming.

On October 20, 1991, a full-page ad appeared in the USA Today newspaper stating: "Rapture! October 28, 1992. Jesus is coming in the air!" It was one of many warnings distributed by groups associated with the Hyoo-go ("rapture") movement. In Seoul, South Korea, where this movement originated, thousands of followers quit their jobs, sold their homes, abandoned their families, and incurred large debts in preparation for the end of the world.

Fifteen hundred riot police were dispatched by the government to the largest "rapture movement" church, which was pastored by Reverend Chang Man-Ho. Yet, when the long-awaited day came, nothing happened. Fifteen minutes after the Rapture was expected to occur, Reverend Chang Man-Ho stood in his pulpit and simply announced, "Nothing has happened. Sorry. Let's go home." Disillusioned followers became angry, many wept uncontrollably, and some became physically violent.

When the disciples inquired about Jesus' Second Coming and the end of the world, Jesus warned, "…Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many" (Matthew 24:4–5). In spite of Jesus' admonitions, the disciples' focus on end times persisted even after His resurrection, when they asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Once again Jesus tried to quell their curiosity: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (see Acts 1:6–7).

We should avoid the extreme of seeking precise predictions as well as the extreme of not caring about Christ's return.

This command does not instruct us to know when Christ will return but rather to be ready for His return and to expect Him at any moment. All of the debate and division among believers over the timing of Christ's Second Coming detracts attention from the great truths that we can learn from this coming event. Let's avoid getting caught up in predictions and instead live in anticipation of His imminent return!

Embrace the Purifying Hope!

After peering through the front window, the father shouted orders to his family: "Quick! Dust off the Bible, straighten things up, and turn off the TV!" The unprepared family hurriedly dashed around as the pastor walked up to their house and rang the doorbell. If the condition of our homes when an unexpected visitor arrives can cause such embarrassment, how much more concerned should we be about the condition of our lives in light of Christ's imminent return!

"... When he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2–3).

One of the primary purposes of Christ's command to await His return is the purification of our lives. John presents the need for this purifying hope: "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4).

The verses that follow give us the key to purification: "… he [Jesus] appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him" (1 John 3:5–6). Jesus explained that "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7). Christ's words include His commands, which are foundational to the cleansing of the believer. (See John 15:3.)

Peter concluded his second epistle with an appeal to use the return of Christ as a motivation for Godly living. "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives. … But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him" (2 Peter 3:10–11, 13–14).

Purity of soul comes by obeying the Word of God and should result in love for others. (See 1 Peter 1:22.)

Are there things in our lives that we know we need to be cleansed from? Would the condition of our lives cause us embarrassment and sorrow if Jesus were to return today? Let's embrace the purifying hope, looking for the "… glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:13–14).

Command 41: Await My Return

Study Question

Q: There is much debate about whether Christ will return before, during, or after the Great Tribulation. Regarding the Second Coming of Christ, what is the most essential question that we should ask?

A: The command to await Christ's return, found in Matthew 24:42–44, does not instruct us to know when or in what manner He will return but rather to be ready for His return and to expect Him at any moment.

All the debate and division among believers over the timing of Christ's Second Coming detracts attention from the great truths that we are to learn from this coming event.

This command makes it clear that no one knows the precise "hour" in which the Son of Man will return. He also warned that He will come at a time when we are least expecting Him—as a thief in the night. "So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Matthew 24:44).

The fact is that Jesus will return, and this awesome event could take place at any moment. We must watch, pray, and be ready. Therefore, the most essential question to ask is not "When will Christ return?" but "Am I ready for Christ's return?"

Discern the Signs of the Times!

As a boy growing up during World War II, I heard about World War I and how it was supposed to have been the "war to end all wars." This hope had been held out to Allied nations throughout the bloody ordeal. I remember thinking, "How could this have been thought possible in view of Christ's teaching that there shall be 'wars and rumors of wars' until He returns?" (See Matthew 24:3–8.) Over the past centuries, it has been estimated that there have been more than 14,000 wars with approximately 3.6 billion people killed.

We are not to predict the date of Christ's return or the end of the world, but we are to recognize the "signs of the times."

Jesus reproved the Pharisees and the Sadducees for being able to predict the weather but not being able to discern the signs of the times or recognize that the Messiah had come. "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times?" (Matthew 16:2–3).

The massive departure from the faith and moral collapse of society detailed by the Apostle Paul is a disconcerting sign of the end times. "There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them" (2 Timothy 3:1–5).

Peter adds another dimension to the condition of the last days by explaining how those who are steeped in sin will be oblivious to what is taking place around them and will attempt to influence others to doubt the Lord's return. (See 2 Peter 3:3–4.)

Jesus gave further signs of the times by stating that there will be natural disasters, including plagues, famines, and earthquakes. (See Mark 13:8.) Throughout history we see the unfolding of the fulfillment of His words. The bubonic plague killed an estimated 25 million people between 1347 and 1351. The two worst famines ever recorded took place in China and India from 1876 to 1879, claiming the lives of 12 to 17 million people. History's worst earthquake killed more than 830,000 people in China in 1556, and the recent Indian Ocean earthquake of 2004 claimed an estimated 228,000 to 310,000 lives.

Recognizing the evidences of Christ's imminent return should motivate us to share the Gospel and disciple others through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture promises that in the last days the Holy Spirit will be poured out on His people. This promise was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost. (See Acts 2:4, 16–17.) When the disciples asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6), Jesus told them "... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

As we see the signs of the times around us, let's not become fearful or apathetic. Rather, let's make sure we are in constant fellowship with the Holy Spirit and are walking in His truth so that He can accomplish great and mighty things through us before Christ returns!

Expect Persecution!

I walked onto the airplane, took my assigned seat, and buckled up. Then the flight attendant made what seemed to be an unusual request: "Would three of you please move to the other side of the plane?" As we were getting reseated I asked her the reason for the request. She explained that the airplane needed to be balanced and that we had too much weight on one side. If the safety of an airplane requires balance, how much more does accuracy of doctrine!

Truth out of balance leads to heresy.

As a young Christian I heard many sermons about the Second Coming of Christ. The emphasis in these messages was not how to get ready for it or how to have it as a purifying hope, but rather that Christians were to be fully assured that Christ's return would take place before the Great Tribulation spoken of in the Book of Revelation.

After listening to several such messages, I was left with the distinct impression that after we become believers we will no longer experience any tribulation or trials on earth. This conclusion was incorrect for many Biblical reasons. Jesus Himself spoke of trials and tribulations and how we are to rejoice in them. "… In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Persecution is a central part of God's plan for purification in the lives of believers. We see this clearly in Scripture: "… we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:3–5).

Luke affirmed that kingdom living includes tribulation when he said, "… We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Paul wrote, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have" (Philippians 1:29–30). Furthermore, Paul stated, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

Anticipation of Christ's return should not be based on the fear of persecution but on the hope of living by the power of God.

Peter helps us recognize the value of suffering: "Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin" (1 Peter 4:1). What an amazing reward!

There is a further benefit in persecution. Often the very ones who persecute us are used by God to bring about the great purposes that He has planned for our lives. For example, Joseph's brothers persecuted him for dreaming that one day he would be a great leader. They put him in a pit and then sold him as a slave saying, "We'll see what comes of his dreams" (Genesis 37:20). As a result of their actions, Joseph was taken to Egypt where, after additional trials and hardships, he was eventually appointed to the second highest position in the land! No wonder Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Matthew 5:11).

Are we ready to rejoice in persecution for Christ's sake, recognizing God's great purposes for it in our lives as we await and prepare for His return?

Redeem Time While Watching!

More lives were lost in this one tragedy than in any other disaster in Chicago's history. On July 24, 1915, 2,572 people on the excursion steamer Eastland were thrown into the water when the top-heavy boat slowly rolled over while still tied to the dock. Within moments, the waters were churning with frantic people, many of whom did not know how to swim. Among the horrified

bystanders was a courageous man who dived into the water to rescue as many as he could. Ignoring the exhaustion that he soon began to feel, he continued to rescue those struggling to survive in the water, realizing that his opportunity to save them was limited.

Time is like a coupon with an expiration date. We must redeem it before the date runs out.

Peter's life was productive for the Lord. We are enriched by his epistles and his life. One of the secrets of his achievements was his watching for the return of Christ. He stated, "The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray" (1 Peter 4:7). The fact that Christ could return at any moment should motivate each of us to make the best use of every minute that we have.

Based on the brevity of life and the evil in the world, Paul wrote, "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is" (Ephesians 5:15–17). Paul also gives this instruction in Colossians 4:5:

"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity."

How should we redeem time? We should redeem time by using it to carry out the great works that God designed us to accomplish. (See Ephesians 2:10.) Good works should abound in the life of every believer. They are the means of producing much fruit for God's glory, and they give evidence to the fact that we are His disciples. (See John 15:16.) When others see these good works, they will give glory to God. (See Matthew 5:16.)

Despite incredible hindrances and obstacles, the Apostle Paul made the best use of his time. I am always energized to redeem the time when I read the following paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 6:3–10: "We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything".

In our journals this week, let's list our personal responses to what has been shared about Christ's Second Coming, especially the aspect of purifying our lives by the hope of His soon return. Let's increase our watch and readiness for the return of Christ and encourage each other with this hope!

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 24:42-44

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him".

1 Peter 4:7

"The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray."

John 14:2

"In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you."

James 5:7–8

"Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near."

1 Thessalonians 5:4–6

"But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled."

1 John 3:2–3

"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure."

Do This in Remembrance!

Calendars are usually filled with important events that we are not supposed to forget. The children of Israel's "calendar" was no different. It contained many events that God wanted them to celebrate, such as Passover, which commemorated being delivered from the bondage of Egypt. Likewise, as believers God instructs us to remember the most significant event in history—His sacrifice for us on the cross—through a frequent celebration of communion.

Command Forty-Two

"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26–28).

Jesus instituted communion to be a continual reminder of His incredible love, which was expressed through His suffering and death. We are to remember the body of the Lord that was "pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities" (see Isaiah 53:5) and His blood that "is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (see Matthew 26:28).

As I take the bread in my hand during a communion service, I slowly repeat Christ's words in my mind: "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24). Jesus died only once; however, He died to pay for the sins of the whole world, including those that have been committed since the time of His death. By participating in communion I acknowledge the fact that it was my iniquities and transgressions that put Jesus through indescribable torture and death. (See 1 John 2:2.)

When I take the cup in my hands, I think about the fact that His blood was shed for my sins and that His blood cleansed me from all my sins. (See 1 John 1:7.) His blood was also the "ransom" price for my deliverance from Satan. (See Hebrews 9:22, 28.) For "… it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed … but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:18–19). This causes me to delight in the promise that as a believer, Christ is in me and I am in Him. (See John 6:56.)

Communion reminds us of the continual fellowship that can exist between a crucified and risen Savior and a redeemed believer.

Jesus longs for unbroken, undistracted fellowship with His disciples. This is the purpose for which He died for us and wants us to remember the power of His body and blood. It was to believers in Laodicea that He said: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). The next time we partake of communion, let's do it in remembrance of the great sacrifice of our risen Lord and Savior and rejoice in the daily fellowship we can now have with Him.

Make a Thorough Examination!

He had been there a hundred times before. Holding short of the runway, the seasoned pilot of the single-engine airplane waited for clearance to take off. It was just another routine flight, and as he waited his mind wandered. The process had become so familiar that he only glanced at his preflight checklist and didn't bother going through it. Receiving clearance from the control tower, he added power and took off. However, as the airplane lifted off the ground he realized something was wrong, and moments later the airplane crashed!

Every pilot knows that his life and the lives of his passengers depend upon not only his skill but also on the thoroughness of his preflight safety check. Similarly, a thorough evaluation of our spiritual lives is essential. Self-examination is one of the primary reasons for communion.

"A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28).

Paul emphasized the importance of self-examination when he wrote: "But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world" (1 Corinthians 11:31–32).

How often should we examine ourselves? This vital purpose for communion indicates the need to examine ourselves frequently. The early Church gathered for communion weekly and sometimes even daily. (See Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7.) Spiritual self-examination should become a regular part of our lives, not just before we take part in the Lord's Table. However, by taking time prior to communion to search our hearts for unconfessed sin, we demonstrate to God our desire to walk blamelessly before Him.

Not only is the frequency of communion important; the thoroughness of self-examination is important as well. When the communion service is hurriedly "tacked on" to a monthly or even weekly church service, it is less likely to accomplish its purposes. The goal of self-examination is to identify sin as we ask ourselves important questions and answer them honestly.

One of the ways we can prepare our hearts for communion is by asking ourselves questions related to the commands Jesus gave us. For instance, He said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17). Therefore, it would be wise to ask ourselves:

1. Do I have a humble and repentant spirit?
2. Have I fully repented of my sins?
3. Have I acknowledged my guilt for breaking God's commandments?

Another command Christ gave is this: "… Be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:24). From this command, we could ask ourselves:

1. Am I aware of anyone who is holding something against me?
2. Have I asked forgiveness of those whom I have offended?
3. Have I taken responsibility for all my words and actions?

Since God has given us the mandate to keep all of His commandments, it would be wise to ask ourselves questions to evaluate our observance of each one. By prayerfully and thoroughly examining our hearts and lives according to the standard of God's Word, we will be prepared to partake of communion in a worthy manner and can more fully experience the rich significance of the celebration.

Command 42: Take, Eat, and Drink

Related Character Quality

Thoroughness vs. Incompleteness

Thoroughness is knowing what factors will diminish the effectiveness of my work or words, if neglected. Thoroughness in cleaning is not accomplished by a "quick once over" but by a deep cleaning and complete washing to make sure every bit of dirt or uncleanness is removed.

Thorough Cleansing

God's chief concern for our thoroughness is in the inward cleansing of our hearts. "Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Scripture states: "If a man cleanses himself from the latter [ignoble purposes], he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (2 Timothy 2:21).

Based on the need for inward thoroughness, we should pray, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23–24).

When God thoroughly searches our hearts, He will reveal to us the hidden areas of sin and uncleanness. "Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults" (Psalm 19:12).

Outward Cleanliness

God gave strict instructions to His people to have no sewage in their camp when they went to war, knowing that sewage would breed disease and destruction among the soldiers. Their thoroughness in keeping the camp clean was also to be motivated by the fact that God would personally inspect it. "For the LORD your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you. Your camp must be holy, so that he will not see among you anything indecent and turn away from you" (Deuteronomy 23:14).

Thorough Reformation

We also need to thoroughly change our ways to please the Lord. This was one of the requirements given by God through Jeremiah. "If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place …" (Jeremiah 7:5–7).

Thoroughness in Work

We have a tendency to do work as thoroughly as is necessary to pass the inspection of those who assign us the job. However, true thoroughness is motivated by the awareness that each job we do will be personally inspected by the Lord. This is the message of Colossians 3:22–24: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

Since we are actually working for the Lord and not just for an earthly employer, we are to do a job that is consistent with God's character and standards, which will no doubt be higher than any employer's standards. Therefore, if we pass the Lord's inspection, we should certainly exceed an employer's expectations.

Personal Evaluation: How Thorough Are You?

- Are you committed to thoroughness in all you do?
- Do you consistently practice habits of good hygiene?
- Do you picture God inspecting the jobs you do?
- Do you thoroughly examine your heart before taking communion?
- Do you think through all of the factors related to a project before starting it so that you will be adequately prepared?
- Do you clean around items as well as under them?
- Do you complete all the necessary details of a job, or do you leave things for others to do, such as cleanup?

Embrace the New Covenant!

Flashes of lightning, claps of thunder, smoke, and fire accompanied the establishment of the old covenant. (See Exodus 19.) A quiet dinner setting was the atmosphere when the new covenant was instituted. God designed the old covenant for the entire nation of Israel. The new covenant is for any individuals whom God is making into "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9). God desires that each person would enter into this new covenant with Him by repenting of sin and turning to God. This is made possible through faith by trusting in the finished work of Christ for salvation (see Galatians 3 and 2 Peter 3:9).

Both covenants were accompanied by promises for obedience and penalties for disobedience (see Deuteronomy 29:1, 9, 19–21 and 1 Corinthians 11:25–31). The old covenant was dated, while the new covenant is everlasting. "By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (Hebrews 8:13). The old covenant was based on the blood of animals, but the new covenant is based on the blood of Christ.

If the blood of animals purified the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ "cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God"? (See Hebrews 9:13–14.)

When Jesus told His disciples to drink of the cup, in essence He was asking them to remember the terms of the new covenant in His blood. Covenants involve certain elements that make them binding. First, there is a statement of terms that must be agreed upon by all parties involved. Second, there is an oath made by each party to observe the terms. Third, a curse is invoked by each party upon himself if the covenant is disregarded. Finally, there is a formal ratification of the covenant by a solemn external act. (See Genesis 26:28–30, 31:44–54; Ezekiel 17; and Deuteronomy 27:15–26.)

That "solemn act" of ratification of the new covenant was the shedding of Jesus's blood on the cross. Just as the old covenant had penalties for violations, so there are serious consequences for violating the terms of the new covenant, which are these: to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as Christ has loved us (see Luke 10:27 and John 15:12).

Jesus instituted the new covenant during the Last Supper, which took place at the precise time that the Jews were celebrating the Passover feast, thus signifying that He was the Passover lamb to be sacrificed for the new covenant (see 1 Corinthians 5:7). The Passover commemorated the Israelites' deliverance from the oppression of Egypt. Through His death, Jesus unveiled a far greater deliverance from sin and all of its destructive bondage.

However, in order for that bondage to be broken, each one of us must enter the new covenant through faith in Christ. When Jesus stated, "Take, eat … and … Drink" (Matthew 26:26–27) He was speaking in symbolic terms, affirming our need to receive the sacrificial lamb and feed upon Him for our spiritual growth. (See John 1:12, 6:56–58.)

Just as Jeremiah said, "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight …" (Jeremiah 15:16), let's do the same with the terms and message of the new covenant —particularly the teachings of Christ.

Command 42: Take, Eat, and Drink | Day 291

Discern Covenant Responsibilities!

The leaders tore their clothes and fell on their faces with shock, grief, and fear. What should have been an easy military victory turned out to be a disastrous and humiliating defeat. Now their entire military campaign and the very survival of their nation was in jeopardy.

Then God spoke to Joshua: "… Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep …" (Joshua 7:10–11). The entire nation of Israel was defeated because they violated their covenant with God. But what did they do? "… They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies … I [God] will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction" (Joshua 7:10–12).

As it turned out, a man named Achan had secretly stolen forbidden items from the spoils of a previous battle and had hidden them under his tent. When his sin was exposed, confessed, and punished, the Lord once again gave victories to the nation of Israel. (See Joshua 7–8.)

Because the entire nation of Israel was in covenant with God and with each other, one man's sin caused the whole nation to suffer.

What a deep and profound truth! God is a covenant-making God. He works through covenants with people and with nations. Because every believer is part of the Body of Christ, a covenant relationship exists between all Christians (see Romans 12:5). We are all members one of another (see Ephesians 4:25). When one member suffers, we all suffer (see 1 Corinthians 12:26). It is also true that when one believer sins, every other believer is affected.

This connection of members throughout the Body of Christ should be a somber message to all believers. "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!" (1 Corinthians 6:15). God reinforces this spiritual bonding by comparing it to the marriage covenant. "Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:16–17).

Before we come to the communion table, we must repent of sins that are against God and have affected every other believer.

One church that understands this vital concept has included a time for confession and asking each other for forgiveness prior to the communion service. When appropriate, sins that have been committed are confessed before the entire congregation. In one service, a man asked the congregation to forgive him for sinning in anger that week. Another asked forgiveness for immorality. Two young believers asked forgiveness of the other church members for the quarreling and fighting they had done during the past week. This cleansing process is consistent with the admonition of Scripture to "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other …" (James 5:16).

Let's realize the seriousness of our sin and the fact that it is not a "private matter." Our secret sins affect every other member of the Body of Christ. If they are not confessed and forsaken, they will eventually result in sinful churches that are ineffective for the Lord.

Command 42: Take, Eat, and Drink

study question

Q: According to all of the Gospels, Jesus gave the cup to His disciples to drink, but He Himself did not drink. Why? (See Matthew 26:29, Mark 14:25, and Luke 22:16–18.)

A: The spiritual illumination that should take place during communion is clearly illustrated during the Last Supper. It was at this communion table that Jesus revealed He would have His body broken and His blood "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). He also revealed the true nature of His disciples: one would betray Him, all would forsake Him, and one would deny Him three times before that night was over.

In the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper, Jesus stated that He would not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the day He drank it anew in His Father's kingdom. (See Matthew 26:29, Mark 14:25, and Luke 22:18).

Luke's account records these words of Jesus: "I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22:18). After communion, Jesus expanded this statement, saying, "You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom …" (Luke 22:28–30).

Jesus used the last meal He shared with His disciples to open their spiritual eyes to see the magnitude of God's plan for them. By not drinking of the cup, He focused their attention beyond the agony of the cross to the glories that would be theirs throughout eternity.

Identify a Cause of Sickness!

Her name was regularly on the prayer list. If it was not one sickness it was another. They were genuine illnesses, but prayers for her did not seem to affect her physical condition. Nor did she improve after many visits to doctors or from taking countless pills. Her list of ailments continued year after year. Yet in her case, there was no need for these ongoing physical afflictions, because her condition and the cure were identified by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:29–30:

"For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep."

When I first met this woman and talked with her, I asked her if she was in fellowship with the Lord. She affirmed that she was. However, when I asked her if there were any people against whom she was bitter, she quickly admitted that there were.

She did not realize the vital connection that exists between loving God and loving others (see 1 John 4:20). Consequently, she was neglecting the warning of Jesus, Who said that if we refuse to forgive our offenders, He will turn us over to "jailers." (See Matthew 18:21–35.) In her case, the "jail" was rheumatoid arthritis, back pain, osteoporosis, allergies, and several other self-destructive diseases.

The connection between physical disease and lack of thorough spiritual examination is explained in James 5:14–16. The passage does not say to call for the doctor when we are sick, but to call for the elders of the church. The elders can help us discern whether we have a sickness that leads to death, a sickness for punishment, or a sickness for the glory of God. (See 1 Corinthians 11:27–32 and John 11:4.) If it is a sickness for punishment, we need to confess our faults and seek forgiveness from God and those against whom we have sinned.

When this woman confessed her sin of unforgiveness and forgave and blessed the one who had deeply hurt her, she began to experience renewed health. God has designed us in such a way that unresolved conflicts produce guilt, bitterness, fears, depression, and a host of other emotions that directly affect our physical health. John related physical health to the condition of the soul when he said, "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well" (3 John 1:2).

Thorough self-examination and confession to one another prepares our hearts for communion and helps us avoid the consequences of partaking in an unworthy manner.

I have been impressed with the way one church conducts their weekly communion service. After a time of personal examination and confession, each family within the congregation comes to the front of the sanctuary, takes the bread and the cup, and then finds a place where they can talk. They make sure all offenses are cleared up among family members; then, together they partake of communion.

There is great wisdom in this practice, because many illnesses come as a result of stress and tension from unresolved family conflicts. Let's examine our lives to see if we are experiencing any illnesses due to unconfessed sin and then humble ourselves by confessing these faults to God and to one another.

Use the Right Elements!

It seemed innocent enough and non-consequential, but it changed the entire outcome of Moses's life and kept him from entering the Promised Land. He simply hit a rock twice in the wilderness. God even worked through Moses's actions and water flowed out of the rock for a thirsty multitude. (See Numbers 20:7–12.)

This severe penalty came because Moses disobeyed the specific instructions God had given him, thereby violating the symbolism that the rock represented. The rock was a picture of Christ (see 1

Corinthians 10:4). Christ was to die only once, therefore, Moses was instructed to strike the rock only one time, which he did (see Exodus 17:6). Water flowed from the rock and the children of Israel were sustained by it. On another occasion, God told Moses to speak to the rock. However, Moses instead struck the rock twice. This would incorrectly symbolize that Christ would have to die numerous times, as is believed by those who practice the continual death of Jesus. (See Romans 6:9–10.)

The bread and the cup used for communion should be consistent with the truth which they symbolize.

When I first began taking communion, the bread that my church used was regular yeast bread. However, they now use unleavened bread. The reason for this is that the bread represents Christ's body as Jesus stated, "… This is my body, which is for you …" (1 Corinthians 11:24). His body was sinless; therefore, the bread used for communion should represent His purity.

Based on this, there should be no leaven in the bread, since leaven symbolizes influence, normally worldly influence. This was one of the reasons that the Passover feast included unleavened bread. When the Israelites fled from Egypt they were to take none of the worldly influences of Egypt with them to the Promised Land. (See Exodus 12:15.)

The cup represents the blood of Christ, which was pure and without sin. This symbolism would rule out the use of modern wine in communion, because it is made from a fermentation process which is a process of death and decay. The blood of Jesus is life and in it there is no death at all. It is significant that none of the accounts of communion in Scripture use the word wine. The word cup is mentioned eleven times and the phrase fruit of the vine is used three times, which usually referred to a fresh squeezing of grapes.

Even believing that the cup Jesus used during the Last Supper contained wine fails to take into account the differences between the wine in Jesus's day and the wine of our day. At the time, it was a common practice to dilute wine with water causing it to have an alcohol content of less than 3%. Modern wines normally contain 11-15% alcohol. Proverbs 20:1 clearly states the dangers associated with alcohol consumption: "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise."

Over the years, I have observed a correlation between the care exhibited in making sure the elements of communion are symbolically accurate and the thoroughness and accuracy of self-examination in the lives of those partaking of the elements.

The next time we take unleavened bread during communion, let's focus on the fact that we are responsible for breaking the body of the Lord. As we partake of the cup, let's be grateful that His pure blood has washed us from all of our sin.

Self-Examination

Since God has given us the mandate to keep all of His commandments, it would be wise to ask ourselves questions to evaluate our observance of each one. The following list is intended to provide a starting point to assist you in carrying out thorough self-examination before taking part in communion.

1. **Repent:** Do I have a humble and repentant spirit, having fully repented of my sins?
2. **Follow Me:** Am I following Christ to learn how to be a "fisher of men," and do I have a meek and quiet spirit?
3. **Rejoice:** Do I rejoice when others speak evil of me and persecute me for doing good, and do I maintain a joyful spirit?
4. **Let Your Light Shine:** Am I joyfully doing good works so that others glorify God, and do I have a spirit of generosity?
5. **Honor God's Law:** Do I honor God's moral law and search it out to learn how I can love God and others?
6. **Be Reconciled:** Am I reconciled to those who have something against me, and have I taken responsibility for all my words, thoughts, and actions?

7. **Do Not Lust:** Have I conquered lust in my heart and eyes, and do I exercise self-control for every thought and action?
8. **Keep Your Word:** Have I kept every promise that I have made to God and others, and have I been truthful in what I have said or implied to others?
9. **Go the Second Mile:** Do I go the second mile when I am required to carry out a responsibility, and do I show deference to the wishes of others?
10. **Love Your Enemies:** Do I love my enemies, and have I given verbal blessings to those who have hurt me? Have I found creative ways to invest in the lives of my offenders?
11. **Be Perfect:** Am I committed to spiritual maturity with a perfect heart, and am I sincere in what I say and do?
12. **Practice Secret Disciplines:** Do I give, pray, and fast in secret so that God can reward me openly, and do I have faith to believe Him and His Word?
13. **Store Up Treasures:** Have I laid up treasures in heaven, and am I practicing thriftiness so I can give more to God?
14. **Seek God's Kingdom:** Am I seeking God's kingdom first rather than seeking my own desires, and am I taking initiative to do His work?
15. **Do Not Judge:** Am I judging other people for the very same faults I have, and do I have the discernment to see my faults?
16. **Do Not Throw Pearls:** Do I cast pearls of God's wisdom to those who will only mock them and attack me, and do I use discretion at all times?
17. **Ask, Seek, and Knock:** When I ask God for something, do I then seek it out and obtain it? Am I resourceful?
18. **Do To Others:** Do I do to others what I want them to do to me, and am I sensitive to the feelings of other people?
19. **Choose the Narrow Road:** Have I chosen God's straight and narrow way to life, and am I decisive in all matters that relate to it?
20. **Beware of False Prophets:** Am I alert to false prophets who appear to be spiritual, and have I believed any false teaching?
21. **Pray for Workers:** Am I praying that the Lord of the Harvest will thrust forth laborers, and do I have compassion for the lost?
22. **Be Shrewd as Snakes:** Am I wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove when I am around those who hate the Gospel and those who represent it?
23. **Fear God, Not Man:** Have I purposed to die for the Lord so that I do not fear death, and do I have boldness in living and speaking for the Lord?
24. **Hear God's Voice:** Do I listen to God's truth with spiritual ears, and am I attentive to the things God wants me to do right now?
25. **Take My Yoke:** Have I taken on Christ's yoke so that I can learn about Him, and am I obedient to every direction He gives me?
26. **Honor Your Parents:** Do I honor my father and my mother and reverence them even when I cannot obey an unscriptural command?
27. **Beware of Yeast:** Have I removed all the leaven of sin and hypocrisy from my life and home, and am I committed to the power of virtue in my life?
28. **Deny Yourself:** Do I deny my fleshly desires, and have I taken up my cross with a determination to be faithful to the end, so I will win a crown of life?
29. **Honor Children:** Do I welcome all the "little ones" in God's kingdom, and am I tolerant of their need for maturity?
30. **Go to Offenders:** Have I gone to all those who have offended me, told them their faults privately, and sought a just reconciliation?

31. **Beware of Greed:** Have I rejected all covetousness and learned to be content with the many things that God has already given to me?
32. **Forgive Others:** Have I fully forgiven all those who have offended me, based on God's great mercy and forgiveness of me?
33. **Honor Marriage:** Am I committed to honoring marriage vows, and have I purposed to be loyal to my life partner "till death do us part"?
34. **Be a Servant:** Have I turned my desires to be great into a delight of serving others, and am I available to serve when needed?
35. **Be a House of Prayer:** Am I a cleansed house of prayer, and do I have power with God through my fervent prayers and crying out?
36. **Ask in Faith:** Do I have faith that the things I ask God for are according to His Word, and am I patient in waiting for His reply?
37. **Bring In the Poor:** Have I invited the poor into my home and honored them with a feast, and do I have a spirit of hospitality?
38. **Give to Caesar:** Do I pay all my taxes and fees in order not to offend "God's ministers" and to show my Gratitude for their part in God's kingdom?
39. **Love the Lord:** Do I love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, and do I show my enthusiasm for God by rejecting all competing affections?
40. **Love Your Neighbor:** Do I love and care for my neighbor as I love and care for myself, and am I gentle toward all people?
41. **Await My Return:** Am I looking forward to the Lord's soon return, and am I making the best use of all the minutes God has entrusted to me?
42. **Take, Eat, and Drink:** Am I thoroughly examining myself before taking the bread and the cup of communion, which speak of the awesome price that the Lord paid for my redemption?
43. **Be Born Again:** Am I genuinely born again, and am I trusting in the faithfulness of God for my eternal security?
44. **Keep My Commandments:** Do I love the Lord enough to keep all His commandments before my eyes so that I can diligently do them? Am I abiding in Christ and allowing His words to live in my heart by consistent memorization and meditation?
45. **Watch and Pray:** Am I watching and praying so that I will not enter into temptation? Am I building endurance for God's way of life?
46. **Feed My Sheep:** Do I view all believers as members of God's flock, and do I share with others what God is teaching me from His Word?
47. **Make Disciples:** Am I making disciples of everyone I can by teaching and living out these commands? Is my schedule flexible to accomplish this?
48. **Baptize My Disciples:** Have I been baptized by water and the Spirit, and do I baptize those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, remembering they are Christ's disciples, not mine?
49. **Receive God's Power:** Have I experienced the power of the Holy Spirit by rejoicing in trials and tribulations, and am I reproducing the Spirit's love, joy, and peace in others?

Conclude With a Hymn!

Two Gospel accounts of the first communion conclude with a significant statement: "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26). These are the only places in the New Testament where music is spoken of in the context of a "church gathering." Jesus is the Head of the Church; therefore, the disciples' singing after Jesus's

teaching and communion illustrate the important concept that music should be a response to the Word, rather than a preparation for hearing it.

Music can be an expression of worship by those who are cleansed from their sins and are in fellowship with God and others.

One of the most Biblically accurate statements ever made about Jesus was this: "You are the Son of God!" (Luke 4:41). Yet, when Jesus heard it, He rebuked those who proclaimed this truth. Why? Because they were devils! Peter also identified Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" and was blessed for it. (See Matthew 16:16–17.) God desires that those who worship Him would have hearts that are in full fellowship with Him and others. Jesus said, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23–24).

When the Lord's Table is properly observed with a time of thorough self-examination and confession, we can be in right fellowship with God and others. This is why God tells us to leave our gifts at the altar and be reconciled with those whom we have wronged before offering our gifts to Him. (See Matthew 5:23–24.)

"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ... Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness" (Psalm 51:10, 14).

Having souls that are in harmony with God will allow us to have Spirit-activated singing in our hearts to the Lord. "… be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:18–19).

When a group of believers is cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ through salvation and is in right relationship with God and others through obedience to His Word, there is an increased desire and motivation to become like Christ and to carry out the work of His kingdom.

Jesus clearly demonstrated the example of a servant-leader. He wants each of us to follow His example. During the Last Supper, Jesus took a basin of water and washed the feet of each of His disciples (see John 13:5–16). This act of humility should challenge each of us to serve one another rather than seeking to be served. (See Mark 10:42–45.)

In our journals this week, let's describe our usual responses to the Lord's Table, as well as how often we partake of it. Then, let's record the new insights we have learned from our study of this important command and the new covenant of which it speaks. Based on these truths, are there any practices in our lives that we should change? As a special entry, let's include examples of times when we have gone to be reconciled with a brother before communion so that we could partake of the Lord's Table worthily.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 26:26-27

"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you".

Psalm 139:23–24

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

1 Corinthians 11:28–30

"A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep."

2 Corinthians 13:5

"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?"

Galatians 6:3–4

"If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else."

Psalm 26:2

"Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind."

Lamentations 3:40

"Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD."

Be Born Again!

He had outstanding character and credentials. He was a respected spiritual leader in the nation. He was a wise man who carefully searched out important matters. He discerned that Jesus was a man who came from God and Who had supernatural powers. In spite of all these outstanding qualities, when Nicodemus sought counsel from Jesus regarding his own life, Jesus said to him:

Command Forty-Three

"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3).

In the mind of Nicodemus, this was a strange requirement. He immediately assumed that Jesus was talking about a physical rebirth and asked: "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" (John 3:4).

Jesus explained that He was talking about a rebirth of the spirit—a new birth from above, not of flesh from the earth. Then Jesus further explained the requirement: "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5).

This only increased the questions in the mind of Nicodemus, and he exclaimed, "How can this be?" (John 3:9). The Jews supposed that every Gentile who was baptized into the Jewish religion was like a newborn child. This was a birth of water from below. Yet, Jesus was talking about a birth from above. "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again" (John 3:6–7).

Recorded in the next chapter of John is Jesus's explanation of the water of rebirth to a Samaritan woman who was drawing water at a well. Jesus said to her: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:13–14).

We know that a person is born again by the work of the Holy Spirit, because no man can call Jesus Lord, except by the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 12:3). We also know that we are saved by grace through faith, and that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (see Romans 10:17).

"He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

Thus, when we put our faith in Jesus and are born again, our salvation is made possible through the work of the Spirit of God, the living water of God's Word, and the blood of Jesus Christ, "and the three are in agreement" (see 1 John 5:8). A spiritual birth, like a physical one, takes place at a particular point in time. That point in time is baptism which we will discuss later.

Consider the Brazen Serpent!

Nicodemus marveled at the ideas that he heard, and Jesus marveled at his lack of spiritual understanding: "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?" (John 3:10). In order to help him comprehend how to be born again, Jesus related salvation to an important event in the history of Israel:

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14–15).

Let's take a closer look at the illustration that Jesus used. As the nation of Israel journeyed in the wilderness, they became "impatient on the way" (Numbers 21:4). So, they "spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" (Numbers 21:5).

God had just given the children of Israel a marvelous victory over a Canaanite kingdom because they looked to Him for deliverance, and He had brought them out of the bondage of Egypt when they cried out to Him for deliverance. He also gave them daily manna for food in the wilderness. However, rather than being thankful for the mighty acts God had done on their behalf and trusting Him to provide for further needs, they murmured and became bitter at God and Moses.

So, God sent among the people "venomous snakes." (See Numbers 21:6.) They bit the people, and many died from the deadly venom. The people recognized God's judgment and repented, begging Moses to ask God to take away the snakes.

Rather than removing the snakes, God provided a remedy. He told Moses to forge a brass snake and put it on a pole. (See Numbers 21:8–9.) In Scripture, brass is often used as a symbol of judgment, and a snake is a symbol of sin and transgression. The snake on the pole represented Jesus becoming sin for us and experiencing the judgment of God in our place. (See John 3:14–15.) God instructed the people through Moses that if anyone was bitten by a snake, he must look at the brass snake in order to be healed.

Obedience to God and faith in the remedy He provided resulted in the healing of those who were bitten by the deadly snakes. The same response can also provide healing for all who are infected with deadly sin today.

Jesus concluded this analogy with these marvelous words: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Those of us who have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for our salvation and deliverance from sin can rejoice about the eternal life He has given us.

The verses that follow John 3:16 explain that God sent Jesus not to condemn the world, but so that through Him the world might be saved. God also says, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned" (see John 3:18). If you have not believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, and been baptized for the forgiveness of your sins, I urge you to respond to His love immediately!

Command 43: Be Born Again

Related Character Quality

Security vs. Anxiety

Security is structuring my life around that which is eternal and cannot be destroyed or taken away.

The Value of Security

In every person's heart, there is a deep longing for security. Unfortunately, we tend to look for security in temporal things that perish, such as money, possessions, or people, rather than in eternal realities that cannot be taken away. Ironically, the very things we depend on for security produce insecurity and anxiety.

The key to security is building our lives around that which can never be destroyed or taken away. Only God and His Word qualify as the foundations of security. By believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, we secure eternal life and have the assurance that when we die we will go to be with the Lord in heaven.

Foundations of Security

Every believer has the security of the Lord in the following specific ways:

1. Secure in His love

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38–39). "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness" (Jeremiah 31:3).

2. Secure in His fellowship

"… I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). "... Because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). "God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful" (1 Corinthians 1:9). "And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

3. Secure in His Spirit

"[God] set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (2 Corinthians 1:22). "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15). "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit ..." (Ephesians 1:13).

4. Secure in His hand

"My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:29). "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

5. Secure in His protection

"That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" (2 Timothy 1:12). "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust … He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge …" (Psalm 91:1–4). "But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

6. Secure in His Body

"so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:5).

7. Secure in His family

"As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him" (Psalm 103:13). "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Romans 8:16–17).

Personal Evaluation: How Secure Are You?

- Do you put your confidence in your heavenly Father's love for you?
- Do you focus on the things of the Lord throughout the day?
- Do you have fellowship with God's Spirit, and does He control your life?
- Is your desire for a closer walk with the Lord greater than your desire for material things?

- Do you concentrate more on spiritual strength rather than on building physical strength?
- If you lost all your possessions, would you still sense a completeness in Christ?

Command 43: Be Born Again | Day 297

Check for Vital Signs!

An important procedure takes place as soon as a baby is born. A trained attendant carefully checks specific vital signs to confirm that the baby is alive and well. A similar procedure should be followed after someone is baptized.

Being born again is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit and is accompanied by visible evidences in the person's life.

Here are some Biblical evidences of being born again and having a new nature (see Ephesians 2:1–5):

1. **A new awareness of sin.** When we are born again in the waters of baptism, we receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He enables our consciences to discern words, thoughts, and actions that displease the Lord. "We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit" (1 John 4:13).
2. **A new desire to stop doing evil things.** Many have said that after being born again they stopped drinking, taking drugs, cursing, being immoral, and committing a host of other sins. This desire to stop sinning comes because "No one who is born of God will continue to sin" (see 1 John 3:9) and is made possible because "for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4). We also have the assurance that "if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1).
3. **A new love for God's Word.** "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). This evidence was of particular significance to me because I was a very poor reader. However, after being born again, I had a great desire to read the Bible and to apply its truths to my life. "We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands" (1 John 2:3).
4. **A new love for fellow believers.** At salvation, there is an immediate bond of fellowship with other Christians, because we are now members together of the body of Christ. "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. …" (1 John 3:14).
5. **A strong desire to witness to others.** One of my first recollections after being born again was riding my bicycle around town looking for other young people whom I could invite to the Child Evangelism Fellowship® class where I had heard the Gospel. I had a new love for people and concern for their relationship with God. "… Love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7).

Are these "vital signs" present in your life? What about in the lives of your children? If these evidences are lacking in the life of someone who claims to be a believer, let's make sure he truly understands what it means to be born again.

Command 43: Be Born Again | Day 298

Claim Your New Birth Rights!

When a son is born into a royal family, he inherits all of the benefits and privileges of that family. It is the same when we are born again into the family of God. We truly do become part of a royal family, because Jesus "has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father" (Revelation 1:6).

Can you imagine the child of a king growing up in poverty, not realizing the great inheritance that was left for him, which he never claimed? This is often the condition of believers who fail to comprehend or appropriate their new status that comes by being born again into God's family.

When we don't fully comprehend or appropriate what we receive at our new birth, others will fail to see that we are children of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

It would require many pages to describe all of the marvelous benefits and privileges that we receive the moment we are born again. Following is a list of some of them:

1. We are enriched by Jesus Christ in everything (see 1 Corinthians 1:5).
2. We are called unto the fellowship of His Son (see 1 Corinthians 1:9).
3. We are given the mind of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 2:16).
4. We become laborers together with God (see 1 Corinthians 3:9).
5. Our bodies are the temple of God (see 1 Corinthians 3:16).
6. We have God's Spirit dwelling in us (see 1 Corinthians 3:16).
7. We are members of Christ's body (see 1 Corinthians 6:15).
8. We are given spiritual gifts for the good of all (see 1 Corinthians 12:4–11).
9. We are made to triumph in Christ (see 2 Corinthians 2:14).
10. We are accepted in the Lord Jesus Christ (see Ephesians 1:6).
11. We are forgiven of sin and redeemed through Christ's blood (see Ephesians 1:7).
12. We are seated in heavenly places with Christ Jesus (see Ephesians 2:6).
13. We are God's workmanship, created in Christ unto good works (see Ephesians 2:10).
14. We are reconciled to God (see Ephesians 2:16).
15. We are members of God's household (see Ephesians 2:19).
16. We are rooted and grounded in love (see Ephesians 3:17).
17. We are more than conquerors through Christ (see Romans 8:37).
18. We can do all things through Christ, Who gives us strength (see Philippians 4:13).

The more we comprehend what we have in Christ, the greater will be our self-worth and our ability to claim God's provisions.

Satan's goal is to rob us of the potential that we have in Christ. His efforts will be thwarted as we continue to study and understand our position in Christ. Let's rejoice in the many provisions He has given us and ask Him for the wisdom to fully experience each one in our lives.

Command 43: Be Born Again

Study Question

Q: Why did Jesus tell Nicodemus a story from the life of Moses rather than using the prophecies of Isaiah to explain the new birth? (See John 3:14 and Isaiah 53.)

A: Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews. No doubt he was concerned, as other leaders were, about the harsh conditions of being under Roman rule. He had probably murmured about the Jews' circumstances, just like the nation of Israel had murmured about the harsh conditions they faced in the wilderness.

While Moses was leading the children of Israel, they forgot the mighty works of God and were overwhelmed by their present circumstances. Their murmuring caused God to send poisonous snakes among the people. Those who were bitten died until the people finally recognized the judgment of God upon them and cried out to Moses to pray for deliverance. God answered Moses's prayer with instructions to "Make a snake and put it up on a pole" (Numbers 21:8). However, in order for it to be an effective cure, the person who was bitten had to look at the serpent made of brass.

No doubt, in the mixed multitude of Moses's day, there were those who mocked and ridiculed the ones who looked at the snake. It is likely that Nicodemus had similar pressures upon him from

other religious rulers who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. Scripture notes that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, possibly to avoid persecution for seeking Him out. (See John 3:2.)

Jesus used an illustration from the Old Testament that would be familiar to a devout Jew like Nicodemus. The brass serpent that was placed upon the pole represented the Israelites' sin. Similarly, when Jesus was nailed to the cross, He became sin for us by taking our sin upon Himself. Therefore, just as the Israelites in the wilderness had to look to the brass serpent in order to live, so also Nicodemus would have to look to the Lord Jesus Christ to have eternal life. (See John 3:14–15.)

Command 43: Be Born Again | Day 299

Know What Was Reborn!

When we are born again, we receive a new nature from God (see 2 Peter 1:4). In fact, the Apostle John declares, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9). Why, then, do Christians still sin?

At salvation the spirit is reborn, but the soul still needs to be transformed, and the body dedicated to God.

In explaining the new birth, Jesus said, "… the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:6). Nothing is said of the soul (mind, will, and emotions), which still needs to be transformed. Thus, we are told, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind …" (Romans 12:2). In order for this renewal to take place we must "… humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you" (James 1:21).

When we are "born of the Spirit" (see John 3:8), the Holy Spirit indwells the spirit, and we are then able to have continual fellowship with God. Paul explains this in 1 Corinthians 2:12: "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us."

Transformation of the soul is a process. It does not happen instantly like a birth does. Paul affirmed this when he wrote to the church at Ephesus: "to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22–24).

The power to transform the mind, will, and emotions comes by a continual filling of the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 5:18 tells us to "be filled with the Spirit." We are to keep on being filled with the Spirit. How do we do this? By being in fellowship with the Holy Spirit, Who convicts us of sin, righteousness, and judgment to come. (See John 16:8.)

In addition to transforming the soul, the body must be presented as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Then, we are to yield our members to God as instruments of righteousness. (See Romans 6:13.) To yield them to sin is to voluntarily make ourselves the slaves of sin.

We should rejoice in the spirit's new birth, but let's not forget the need to renew our minds daily with Scripture and to yield the members of our bodies to God. All of this requires the grace of God and asking Him daily for the power of the Holy Spirit to be at work in our lives.

Command 43: Be Born Again | Day 300

Grow Up From a Newborn!

Everyone rejoices when a baby is born and watches in knowing anticipation for each new ability he will develop. In time, he will learn to crawl, eat solid food, walk, and talk. When a baby does not show these signs of growth, it is often an indication that something is seriously wrong. In a similar manner, the writer of Hebrews cites the lack of spiritual growth in the lives of believers as cause for concern: "... by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again …" (Hebrews 5:12).

As newborn babes, we are to desire the sincere milk of the Word so that by it, we may grow up in our salvation. (See 1 Peter 2:2)

Every new believer needs a loving and dedicated mentor who will care for him. This is discipleship and requires spiritual effort even as Paul stated: "I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Galatians 4:19).

The second need is to create a desire for spiritual food. Early child training included putting wholesome food on the palate of the baby's mouth. This would help the child to develop an appetite for that food. I still remember the delight I experienced as the teacher who led me to Christ explained the rich and practical applications of Old Testament stories, which gave me a hunger for more of the same.

The third factor for spiritual growth is to give Biblical truth that a new Christian will be able to understand and apply. At first, a baby can receive only his mother's milk, which contains nutrients that help prevent infection and disease. However, as the child matures he can begin to eat other foods. As a Christian matures in his walk with the Lord by increasing his discernment of what is good and evil, he will be able to go from receiving the "milk of the Word" to receiving "solid food." (See Hebrews 5:13–14.)

The next factor is spiritual maturity. One of the signs of spiritual growth is doctrinal stability. (See Ephesians 4:14.) A mature Christian "correctly handles the word of truth" (see 2 Timothy 2:15), and also to teach others the same truths that they have learned from the one who discipled them. (See 2 Timothy 2:2.)

One of the clearest evidences of spiritual maturity is the ability to lead others to Christ and then disciple them.

The great need of our day is for mature disciples who can teach others the commands of Christ so that they will in turn be able to disciple others from a newborn babe to a mature disciple maker. This is God's mandate in the Great Commission and this is the way to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. (See Matthew 28:19–20.)

How would you rate your own spiritual growth? How discerning are you of what is good and what is evil? How many others have you led to Christ? How many are you now discipling? Let's make spiritual growth a priority in our lives so that we may be "mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:4).

Are You Born Again?

by J. C. Ryle

Are you born again? This is one of life's most important questions. Jesus Christ said, "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3).

It is not enough to reply, "I belong to the church; I suppose I'm a Christian." Thousands of nominal Christians show none of the signs of being born again which the Scriptures have given us—many listed in the First Epistle of John.

1. John wrote: "No one who is born of God will continue to sin" (1 John 3:9). "We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin" (1 John 5:18).

A person who has been born again, or regenerated, does not habitually commit sin. He no longer sins with his heart and will and whole inclination. There was probably a time when he did not think about whether his actions were sinful or not, and he did not always feel grieved after doing evil. There was no quarrel between him and sin; they were friends. But the true Christian hates sin, flees from it, fights against it, considers it his greatest plague, resents the burden of its presence, mourns when he falls under its influence, and longs to be completely delivered from it. Sin no longer pleases him, nor is it even a matter of indifference to him; it has become a horrible thing which he hates. However, he cannot eliminate its presence within him.

If he said that he had no sin, he would be lying (see 1 John 1:8). But he can say that he hates sin and that the great desire of his soul is not to commit sin at all. He cannot prevent bad thoughts from entering his mind, or shortcomings, omissions, and defects from appearing in both his

words and his actions. He knows that "We all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2). But he can truly say, in the sight of God, that these things cause him grief and sorrow and that his whole nature does not consent to them. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

2. John wrote: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1).

A man who is born again, or regenerated, believes that Jesus Christ is the only Savior who can pardon his soul, that He is the divine person appointed by God the Father for this very purpose, and beside Him there is no Savior at all. In himself he sees nothing but unworthiness. But he has full confidence in Christ, and trusting in Him, he believes that his sins are all forgiven. He believes that, because he has accepted Christ's finished work and death on the cross, he is considered righteous in God's sight, and he may look forward to death and judgment without alarm.

He may have fears and doubts. He may sometimes tell you that he feels as if he had no faith at all. But ask him if he is willing to trust in anything instead of Christ, and see what he will say. Ask him if he will rest his hope of eternal life on his own goodness, his own works, his prayers, his minister, or his church, and listen to his reply. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

3. John wrote: "Everyone who does what is right has been born of Him" (1 John 2:29).

The man who is born again, or regenerated, is a holy man. He endeavors to live according to God's will, to do the things that please God and to avoid the things that God hates. He wishes to continually look to Christ as his example as well as his Savior and to prove himself to be Christ's friend by doing whatever He commands. He knows he is not perfect. He is painfully aware of his indwelling corruption. He finds an evil principle within himself that is constantly warring against grace and trying to draw him away from God. But he does not consent to it, though he cannot prevent its presence.

Though he may sometimes feel so low that he questions whether or not he is a Christian at all, he will be able to say with John Newton, "I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am." What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

4. John wrote: "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers" (1 John 3:14).

A man who is born again has a special love for all true disciples of Christ. Like his Father in heaven, he loves all men with a great general love, but he has a special love for those who share his faith in Christ. Like his Lord and Savior, he loves the worst of sinners and could weep over them; but he has a peculiar love for those who are believers. He is never so much at home as when he is in their company.

He feels they are all members of the same family. They are his fellow soldiers, fighting against the same enemy. They are his fellow travelers, journeying along the same road. He understands them, and they understand him. They may be very different from himself in many ways—in rank, in station, and in wealth. But that does not matter. They are his Father's sons and daughters and he cannot help loving them. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

5. John wrote: "... Everyone born of God overcomes the world" (1 John 5:4).

A man who is born again does not use the world's opinion as his standard of right and wrong. He does not mind going against the world's ways, ideas, and customs. What men think or say no longer concerns him. He overcomes the love of the world. He finds no pleasure in things which seem to bring happiness to most people. To him they seem foolish and unworthy of an immortal being.

He loves God's praise more than man's praise. He fears offending God more than offending man. It is unimportant to him whether he is blamed or praised; his first aim is to please God. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

6. John wrote: "the one who was born of God keeps him safe" (1 John 5:18).

A man who is born again is careful of his own soul. He tries not only to avoid sin but also to avoid everything which may lead to it. He is careful about the company he keeps. He knows that evil communications corrupt the heart and that evil is more catching than good, just as disease is more infectious than health. He is careful about the use of his time; his chief desire is to spend it profitably.

He desires to live like a soldier in an enemy country—to wear his armor continually and to be prepared for temptation. He is diligent to be a watchful, humble, prayerful man. What would the apostle say about you? Are you born again?

These are the six great marks of a born again Christian.

There is a vast difference in the depth and distinctness of these marks in different people. In some they are faint and hardly noticeable. In others they are bold, plain and unmistakable, so anyone may read them. Some of these marks are more visible than others in each individual. Seldom are all equally evident in any one person.

But still, after every allowance, here we find boldly painted six marks of being born of God.

How should we react to these things? We can logically come to only one conclusion—only those who are born again have these six characteristics, and those who do not have these marks are not born again. This seems to be the conclusion to which the apostle intended us to come. Do you have these characteristics? Are you born again?

Command 43: Be Born Again | Day 301

Be Assured of Your Salvation!

Her eyes were filled with fear and she had suffered a mental breakdown. My goal in talking with her was to identify the cause of her deep distress. During our conversation, she explained that she had trusted Christ as her Savior years earlier but now was terrified by the thought that she had lost her salvation. Over the years, I have spoken with many individuals who have been tormented by such fears until they have understood the threefold aspect of salvation.

There is a salvation of the spirit (see Romans 8:15–16), salvation of the soul (see James 1:21), and salvation of the body (see 1 Corinthians 15:42–54).

If someone asks us, "Is it possible to lose my salvation?" we must determine, "Are you referring to the salvation of the spirit, soul, or body?" The salvation of the spirit is secure for eternity, because it is based on the new birth into God's family (see Galatians 4:4–6). A son or daughter may do things that displease his or her earthly father, and may need to be disciplined by his or her father, but the children are still members of his family.

The permanence of the salvation of the spirit is also based on the eternal seed that God puts in us when we are born again (see 1 John 3:9). It is an unbreakable covenant in which God gives us a down payment of the Holy Spirit. "Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (2 Corinthians 1:21–22; see also Ephesians 1:13–14). It is based on the covenant that God initiated with Abraham and all the sons of Abraham by faith (see Galatians 3:7). In addition to these evidences of the permanence of salvation of the spirit, Jesus promised, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28).

The salvation of the soul is a different matter. If we do not walk in obedience to God's Word, we will grieve the Holy Spirit and experience His discipline, "because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (Hebrews 12:6). The person who chooses not to follow God's ways in his soul will experience the consequences of a defeated mind, will, and emotions.

The same is true for the physical body. Sins committed in the body will have physical consequences on earth. For instance, Paul warns that if we do not thoroughly examine ourselves prior to partaking of communion, we will suffer weakness, sickness, and premature death (see 1

Corinthians 11:27–30; see also James 5:16). However, ultimately it is not until the resurrection that our bodies will be saved from the destructive nature of sin (see Philippians 3:20–21).

It is the work of God that brings us to Him and keeps us in Him. (See 1 Peter 1:3–5.)

Some are troubled over the thought of committing the "unpardonable sin." This sin can be committed only by those who reject the work of the Holy Spirit throughout their lifetime and die without God. The very concern over having committed this sin is an indication that it has not been done, because those who commit it have no conscience toward God or His Word.

In your journal this week, record the time you were born again and then describe the evidences you experienced that confirm your new birth.

Daily Scriptures

John 3:7

"You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again".

John 3:5–6

"Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."

Ephesians 4:22–24

"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

John 1:12–13

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

1 Peter 1:23

"For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God."

1 Peter 2:2

"Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation."

John 14:1

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

Romans 10:9

"That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Keep Christ's Commands!

During the days of wind-driven ships, a captain struggled to steer his vessel as fierce winds and high, rolling waves pushed the tall ship off course. Thick, dark clouds closed in around the ship for several days. The captain knew he was far off course but had no way to correct it until one night when a patch of clear sky became visible. He quickly got his sextant and calculated the latitude and longitude of his ship's position by identifying the location of the stars. He was then able to determine where he was and in what direction he needed to go to get back on course.

The commands of Christ can be used in a similar way—as dependable lights providing a point of reference to keep us on course throughout life. We can easily see the practical benefits that Jesus intended us to have when He commanded:

Command Forty-Four

"If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15).

Scripture makes a distinction between keeping God's commands and doing them. Both words are often used together in the Old Testament. One example is found in Leviticus 22:31: "Keep my commands and follow them. I am the LORD." (See also Deuteronomy 19:9.)

Just as a sea captain could ensure that his ship was going in the right direction by keeping his eyes on the stars, so those who keep Christ's commands before their eyes will have a sure course for their daily decisions.

Keeping God's commands before our physical eyes can provide valuable reminders that help us keep them before our spiritual eyes. This is what the nation of Israel did: "Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 11:18–20).

Keeping Christ's commands is not optional. It is essential for the success and well-being of our entire lives.

If we were told to keep the treasures of a great king, wouldn't it be logical to first take an inventory of all the treasures and know where they were? Clearly, Jesus has given us specific commands to keep. It is important for us to identify them so that we can keep them before our eyes on a regular basis.

Several years ago I went through all of the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels and identified general commands of Christ that are applicable to all believers. He has promised, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14:21).

Command 44: Keep My Commandments | Day 303

Gain Rewards From Commands!

On August 17, 1896, George Carmack and Skookum Jim Mason made a discovery that would send shock waves around the world. Tens of thousands of men dropped what they were doing, grabbed a few personal belongings, and rushed off to the Yukon Territory in northwestern Canada. Of the prospectors who began the rugged trip, relatively few finished the journey. Many died along the way as a result of exposure to the bitter cold, hunger, or disease, yet the stampede continued until Dawson City became an "overnight" town of more than 30,000! Many made great sacrifices; however, few actually "struck it rich" in the Klondike Gold Rush.

In contrast, God says that His commands should be desired more "than gold, than much pure gold" (Psalm 19:10) and that all those who discover them will gain true riches that will never be lost.

"My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity" (Proverbs 3:1–2).

The great treasure of keeping Christ's commands before our eyes is making the discovery of Who Christ is. This was the one consuming goal of Paul's life: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10).

Christ's commands express His true nature, which is love. All of His commands are precise and practical expressions of how to love God and others. Thus, Jesus promises, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14:21).

Love is the most powerful force on earth. It is even greater than faith and hope (see 1 Corinthians 13:13). If we keep Christ's commands, God promises to reward us with love in four important ways:

1. God the Father will love us. (See John 14:23.)

2. Jesus will love us. (See John 14:21.)
3. God will complete His love in us. (See 1 John 2:5.)
4. God will love others through us. (See 1 John 5:2.)

In addition to knowing God and experiencing His incredible love, we gain the further benefit of having our prayers answered: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you" (John 15:7). John also wrote: "and [we] receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him" (1 John 3:22).

Christ's commands are practical applications of God's Law. As we meditate on them and live them out in our lives, they will result in good success. (See Joshua 1:8.)

The IBLP ministry is a testimony of God's rewarding a focus on His commands. The Basic Seminar and the Advanced Training Institute curriculum are filled with many of Christ's commands. Let's continue to let God demonstrate His rewards to the world by keeping Christ's commands.

Command 44: Keep My Commandments

Related Character Quality

Diligence vs. Slothfulness

Diligence is accepting each task as a special assignment from the Lord and using all my energies to accomplish it.

Several Hebrew and Greek words are translated diligence in the Bible. They communicate such concepts as rising early; searching out with painstaking effort; being earnest, eager, and determined; working swiftly, skillfully, and efficiently; and pursuing a task promptly and energetically. One of the richest word pictures for diligence is found in the Hebrew word charuwts. It signifies a trench that is dug or gold that is mined.

The California Gold Rush of 1849 provides a powerful illustration of diligence. Men living on the East Coast of the United States dropped everything and rushed out to the West Coast to dig for gold. They worked swiftly and thoroughly without regard for personal weariness or sacrifice. They were motivated to work because they visualized what they could do with the gold they discovered. If this same energy and motivation is invested in every project that we undertake, the quality of diligence will be seen and honored.

The Great Rewards of Diligence

Valuable rewards are promised to those who are diligent. For example, diligent workers will receive riches, leadership, favor, a standing before rulers, an understanding of the meaning of life, and honor from God.

- "Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men" (Proverbs 22:29).
- "Diligent hands will rule …" (Proverbs 12:24).
- "… Diligent hands bring wealth" (Proverbs 10:4).

The Biblical Encouragement to Be Diligent

God encourages us to have diligence in the following areas:

- Resolving legal disputes (See Luke 12:58.)
- Carrying out leadership responsibilities (See Romans 12:8.)
- Doing good works (See 1 Timothy 5:10.)
- Seeking the Lord (See Hebrews 11:6.)
- Watching over fellow believers (See Hebrews 12:15.)
- Making your calling and election sure (See 2 Peter 1:10.)
- Developing Godly character (See 2 Peter 1:5–7.)
- Working for personal peace and purity (See 2 Peter 3:14.)

The Key to Developing Diligence

True diligence requires an expenditure of energy that is opposite to our human nature. We naturally tend to make soft choices and let others do the hard work. Whenever asked to carry out a difficult task, we usually ask ourselves two questions: "What will I gain if I do it?" or "What will I lose if I do not do it?" God provides answers to these questions in the following passage of Scripture.

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Colossians 3:23–24).

Therefore, our motivation for diligent labor is to realize that we do not work for just an earthly employer, but that we are actually employed by the Lord Jesus Christ. He will make a thorough inspection of all that we do and reward us for diligence, not only in this life, but throughout all of eternity.

Because Jesus Christ is our employer, we do not need to worry if we are not recognized for extra effort that we invest in quality work, nor do we need to wonder whether He will notice if we overlooked or avoided details that might not be noticed by others. With this understanding, we should be motivated to fulfill the instruction of Ecclesiastes 9:10: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might."

Personal Evaluation: How Diligent Are You?

- Do you complete an assigned task quickly and enthusiastically, or do you reluctantly fit it into your schedule?
- Do you plan ahead in order to do a job in the quickest and most efficient way?
- Do you redeem valuable minutes that easily could be wasted?
- Do you do a job to first please the Lord and then your employer?
- Do you work wholeheartedly to complete each job?
- Do you use every minute of company time to make your employer successful?

Search for Hidden Treasures!

Most men spend money on their hobbies, but not this man. He often makes money with his favorite pastime. He collects antique roll-top desks. Some desks he finds in junk piles; others he buys at garage sales or auctions. With each new desk there is an air of excitement. He takes precise measurements of the inside compartments and studies them carefully. He then often discovers what he is looking for—a secret compartment filled with money!

Finding a secret compartment filled with money would be exciting, but how much more excited should we be to search out all the commands of Christ! They contain inexhaustible riches of wisdom and understanding, for in Christ "… are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3). However, to get these treasures we often must search for them, because they are not visible to the casual reader. Thus, Proverbs 2:4–5 states:

"If you look for it [wisdom] as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God."

Our spiritual "treasure map" tells us that we are searching for the fear of the Lord and the knowledge of God. Why is this so valuable? Because "Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life" (Proverbs 22:4). The fear of the Lord is also the beginning of wisdom (see Proverbs 9:10).

The fear of the Lord is a continual awareness of His presence. It is moment-by-moment fellowship with His Spirit, which prepares us to do that which pleases Him and reject all that displeases Him. It is this communion of spirit for which God longs.

By studying the commands of Christ, we can learn various aspects of how we are to fear the Lord. Here are a few examples:

Christ's Commands	How They Teach the Fear of the Lord
Repent	True repentance is grieving over the loss of fellowship with God, not just over the consequences of my sin.
Follow Me	By following Jesus, my awareness of His continual presence in my life and evaluation of all that I do will increase.
Rejoice	I can be thankful for adversity and persecution, because God is watching over me and will reward my suffering.
Let Your Light Shine	By doing good deeds for God and not for men, I can expect to receive God's reward, which is far greater.
Honor God's Law	It is the Law that reveals my sinful condition before a holy God so that I can repent and reverence Him.
Be Reconciled	By seeking reconciliation I will learn humility and better understand God's great love for me and His forgiveness.
Do Not Lust	Since God sees the thoughts of my heart, I commit adultery in His eyes when I indulge in secret lust.

Completing this list by going through all the commands can increase our understanding of the fear of the Lord and our knowledge of Him, which is a true and lasting treasure!

Command 44: Keep My Commandments | Day 305

Trust and Obey Christ!

It seemed like a strange instruction. Make ditches in the dry desert valley so that water could fill them. The three kings and their armies who received this instruction most likely wondered where water would come from in a hot and dry desert. Nevertheless, they obeyed the word of the Lord that the prophet Elisha gave them, and by the next morning God had filled the ditches with water. This refreshed the thirsty armies and also caused the enemy to make a false assumption and consequently be defeated. (See 2 Kings 3.)

God's commands do not always "make sense" to us, because His thoughts and ways are far above our thoughts and ways. (See Isaiah 55:9.)

If we wait until we understand all of the reasons for Christ's commands to obey them, we will miss out on the rewards that God wants to give us for faith and obedience. However, those who choose to obey Christ's commands even when they do not fully understand His reasons will soon discover the great wisdom and rewards that come from them.

Naaman was a skilled army general who was trained to think logically before taking any action. This analytical approach caused a head-on collision with the instructions of Elisha, who gave him what seemed to be a ridiculous command. Naaman was quick to react and offered reasons why he would not follow such a silly instruction. Had it not been for his servants who reasoned with him, he would have returned home with his leprosy.

We can speculate about when Naaman was actually healed of his leprosy. Did it improve gradually with each dip in the Jordan River, or did it happen only after he had completed the seventh and final dip? It would seem consistent with the nature of God that Naaman was not healed at all until he had completely obeyed Elisha's instruction. (See 2 Kings 5:1–14.)

One command that opposes our natural inclinations and is often difficult to obey is asking forgiveness for a small offense from those who have hurt us in much greater ways. A son who was deeply hurt by his father obeyed this command and asked his father to forgive him for not having a loving attitude toward him. To his surprise his father began to weep and asked his son to forgive

him for all the ways he had offended him over the years. Not long after, the father became a Christian.

The son later understood the principle that reconciliation begins with the one who is more spiritual. That is the example that Christ gave to us when He took the initiative to reconcile us to the Father when we were without desire or ability to do so.

God will reward us when He sees in us pure hearts that seek to fully obey Him.

As followers of Christ, it is not our place to pick and choose which of His commands we will obey; rather, we are to obey them all. Let's demonstrate our trust in the Lord by obeying all of His commands even if we do not fully understand His reasons for them.

Command 44: Keep My Commandments

study question

Q: The Old Testament Law is a burden because we do not have the power to keep it; however, Christ came to deliver us from the curse and burden of the Law. Are not His commands, which restate the Law, putting us back under a burden? (See Galatians 3:13 and 4:4–5.)

A: The same God that gave His Law to Moses gave His commands to Jesus. Each had a different purpose. The Law of Moses was "put in charge to lead us to Christ" (Galatians 3:24). It brought bondage and conviction because of our inability to keep it; therefore, it was a sentence of death upon us.

But then Christ fulfilled the Law, redeemed us from its curse, and gave us faith and grace to keep His commands. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God … . This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands" (1 John 5:1–2).

In the new covenant with Christ, we have all the grace we need to live out the commands of Jesus. Although we are free in Christ, we are not to use our liberty to fulfill the desires of our flesh, but rather to serve one another in love. (See Galatians 3:23–27, 4:5, 5:13–16).

In reality, the commands of Christ are ways to love God and to love one another. John harmonizes the Law of Moses and the commands of Jesus Christ when he writes: "I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands" (2 John 1:5–6).

See Christ in His Commands!

I have a picture that makes a great object lesson. I will hand it to a person and ask him to tell me what it is a picture of. The person will often look at it, study it, and turn it different ways but will not be able to tell me what it is. However, when I point out the cow's head in the picture, he suddenly "sees it."

The Scriptures are often the same way. We can sometimes look at them, study them, and analyze them, and yet not see the real picture. This was the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They had looked at the Scriptures and knew them well when Jesus pointed out to them the "hidden picture" that they had not previously seen. (See Luke 24:13–32.)

The "hidden picture" in the commands of Christ is the Person of Jesus. When we see Him, our hearts will rejoice.

Each command gives us a glimpse into the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The command to "Repent" teaches us that true repentance from sin is a desire to restore a broken relationship. When Jesus came into the world, His goal was not simply to recover the blessings that were lost in the Garden of Eden. Rather, His desire was to restore the broken relationship between God and man that took place when Adam and Eve sinned. (See Ephesians 2:16).

The command "Follow Me" is a call for us to follow Christ, Who gave us an example of following and submitting to the will of His heavenly Father. We see this when He prayed in the

Garden of Gethsemane, "… Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). Jesus told His disciples, "… I seek not to please myself but him who sent me" (John 5:30).

We can also see the command to "Rejoice" when we are reviled or persecuted demonstrated in the life of Christ, "… who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame" (Hebrews 12:2). We also see His sovereignty and "… in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

In the command "Let your light shine," we see Jesus as the true light. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Jesus is revealed not only in His commands, but on every page of Scripture.

The command to "Honor God's Law" reveals Christ through His actions of coming to earth not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. (See Matthew 5:17–18.) This also shows us an important aspect of God's nature, which is that He is unchanging. (See Malachi 3:6 and Revelation 1:8.)

One of the greatest rewards for keeping Christ's commands is having Jesus reveal Himself to us. (See John 14:21.) Let's continue to look for Jesus as we study His commands, because He has promised that if we search the Scriptures, they will testify of Him. (See John 5:39.)

Command 44: Keep My Commandments | Day 307

Express Love in Commands!

In 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul wrote that we can have eloquent speech, prophetic powers, a mind full of understanding and knowledge, and faith to move mountains, and we can even give all of our possessions to feed the poor and give our bodies to be burned, but without love "I gain nothing" (see 1 Corinthians 13:1–3).

As Paul concluded his epistle to the believers in Corinth, he summed up this message by writing, "Do everything in love" (1 Corinthians 16:14). In essence, he is saying that love should be the driving factor behind everything that we do.

Keeping Christ's commands must be motivated by genuine love; otherwise, we gain nothing.

Love is the theme and purpose behind all of God's Law (see Matthew 22:37–40), and love should be the motivation for keeping every command of Christ. Let's look at some of the commands through the eyes of love:

1. We repent because we love Jesus and want His will in our lives.
2. We follow Jesus because we love Him and want to be with Him all the time.
3. We welcome reproach because Christ suffered for us and we love Him for it.
4. We do good works because we want others to glorify God and to love Christ as we do.
5. We love God's Law, because it is God's loving instructions to us.
6. We reconcile with others because we realize that our actions did not demonstrate love.
7. We do not lust, because we love others more than we love ourselves.
8. We keep our word because we love those to whom we make promises.
9. We go the second mile because we love the person who requires us to go the first mile.
10. We love our enemies because Christ loved us when we were His enemies.
11. We become perfect because we love the Lord and want to be like Him.
12. We practice personal disciplines as expressions of our love for the Lord.
13. We lay up treasures in heaven because we love Jesus and want our hearts to be where our treasure is.
14. We seek God's kingdom because we love God and want His will in the earth.

15. We will not judge, because we love others and want them to know God's love.

When Christ perfects His love in us through His commands, our lives will demonstrate the power of Christ's love.

Use this list as a pattern for the remaining general commands, and make your own list of how genuine love can be expressed through each of the commands. Let's review this list often to remind ourselves not only to obey Christ's commands, but to obey them out of a heart of genuine love for God and others. With this as our motivation, the power of Christ's love will flow through our lives and accomplish much for His glory!

Grace and Freedom

by Ken Pierpont

Law and Love

There are churches that send out the message, "Don't let anyone tell you that you are under the Law. You are not obligated to keep commandments because you are under grace. You have freedom in Christ." They may cite Romans 6:14, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace." Some are teaching that if you really love Jesus, you are under no obligation to keep the commandments. Yet Christ Himself said: "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). Thus we make a critical mistake when we fail to see that keeping the commands is evidence of a real love for Christ.

Understanding Freedom in Christ

Here is a helpful way to look at freedom and liberty and what it means to be under grace: Freedom in Christ is not freedom to sin. Freedom in Christ is freedom from sin. Carefully examine the following four passages and then ask yourself: Is grace freedom to sin, or is grace freedom from sin?

- Romans 6:1–2—"…Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!"
- Galatians 5:13—"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."
- 1 Peter 2:16—"Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God."
- Jude 1:4—"For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord."

Is there any indication in these passages on freedom and grace that God did not expect us to be obedient to His commands?

Faithfulness to the Groom

Worldliness has gutted many churches. Young people who should know better are being unfaithful to their Groom. "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4). I long for God to once again stir the hearts of many, many young people into a passionate commitment to holiness before the Lord. Holiness is a beautiful thing, especially when it is seen in the life of a young person. A heart given to holiness, not legalism, keeps God's commands.

It is possible for people to keep God's commandments without being truly spiritual or really righteous. Yet to keep commandments without sincerity, or by the persuasive force of Christian community, means to distort true spirituality. Only by Scriptural holiness can anyone keep the commandments of Christ.

Apply Commands With Wisdom!

A man was troubled by a large debt that he owed. The lender was putting pressure on him to pay it back, but he had no means with which to repay except for a piece of property that he owned.

He sold the property, but instead of using the money to pay off his debt, he gave it to his church. His reasoning was based on the verse that says, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap" (Luke 6:38).

This debtor's actions were based on greed rather than love. He had hoped that by giving money to God, he would get back money to pay off his debt and more besides. He was trying to use one verse to "manipulate" God; yet, in the process, he violated several other Scriptural teachings. For instance, as long as he owed money, he was the slave of his creditor. (See Proverbs 22:7.) He had no authority to spend or give away assets until his debt was paid off.

Taking a command out of the context of love and the whole counsel of Scripture will result in misapplication, confusion, and disillusionment.

A wife who is being physically abused by her husband may think that she should just "take it" because of the verse that says, "If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also" (Luke 6:29).

However, there are several problems with this application. First of all, the man is her husband. He vowed to the Lord and to her in front of many witnesses that he would love and protect her—not beat and abuse her. Furthermore, if the children are also being abused, the command to not offend little ones is also being violated by the husband's actions and should be stopped. (See Matthew 18:6, 10.)

"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

Satan is very clever at taking one command of Christ and convincing us to apply it in a way that violates other commands. He tempted Jesus to obey one part of God's Word by casting Himself down. However, if Jesus had done this, He would have violated God's instruction: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (see Matthew 4:5–7).

This is why it is vitally important for us to be well acquainted with all of God's Word. In addition to this, we should hide Scripture in our hearts through memorization so that it will be readily available for the Holy Spirit to call to our remembrance in times of need. (See Psalm 119:11.)

Daily Scriptures

In addition to meditation on John 14:15, meditating on the verses below will provide you with further insight and understanding of Christ's command: Keep My Commandments.

John 14:21

"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him."

Deuteronomy 6:6–7

"These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."

Joshua 1:8

"Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."

John 15:10–11

"If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

1 John 2:3–5

"We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if

anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him."

Command 45: Watch and Pray | Day 309

Watch and Pray!

As the parents slept, they had no idea that something tragic was about to happen in their family. In the middle of the night their two teenage sons got out of bed, quietly dressed, and slipped out of the house. Friends picked them up, and they began a night of drinking and driving. Several hours later, the driver lost control of his car while going 100 miles per hour and crashed! Three of the occupants were critically injured and two were killed—the sons of the sleeping parents. The parents could not be expected to watch their sons all the time. However, they failed to recognize many warning signs that led up to that fateful night. This tragedy illustrates an important aspect of Christ's command:

Command Forty-Five

"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak" (Matthew 26:41).

This command was given during the agony of the night in which Christ was betrayed. He went up to the Mount of Olives and told His disciples: "Sit here while I go over there and pray" (Matthew 26:36). Then Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him and "… began to be sorrowful and troubled" (Matthew 26:37) and said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me" (Matthew 26:38).

Jesus then went a little farther and began to pray. When He returned and found the three disciples sleeping, He said to Peter, "… Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" (Matthew 26:40). What a convicting question! How often do we spend an hour watching with the Lord? It was then that Christ gave the command to His disciples to watch and pray that they would not enter into temptation.

What does it mean to watch? In this command, Christ was using it not so much in the physical sense as in the moral sense. Jesus knew that even though the disciples had verbally stated their allegiance and willingness to follow Him, this resolve would soon be severely tested.

Being watchful denotes an awareness of threatening dangers. It is a conscious earnestness and alertness of mind that keeps us from spiritual drowsiness and slackening of energy in our faith and Godly conduct. (See 1 Thessalonians 5:6 and 1 Peter 5:8.)

To watch and pray is to be fully and intently focused on the things that God considers important.

Life is filled with distractions and allurements. Jesus warns us to not let the cares of this life choke out the realities of eternal matters. By watching and praying, we are taking an important step toward doing this, but it is not an easy exercise. After explaining spiritual warfare and the need to put on the whole armor of God, Paul gives this instruction: "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:18). This means that parents are to watch and pray for their children, elders are to watch and pray for the souls of fellow believers, and we are all to watch and pray for one another.

Let's purpose now to learn the disciplines of watching and praying so that we will not enter into temptation and will also be able to help others avoid spiritual defeat.

Command 45: Watch and Pray | Day 310

Turn Weakness Into Power!

A troubled Christian was in desperate need of counsel. His concerns were that he had no interest in reading Scripture, no delight in prayer, and no victory in his daily walk, regardless of how hard he tried. As he listened, the missionary Andrew Murray immediately recognized the problem.

This Christian did not understand the principle of God's strength being made perfect in man's weakness.

When we recognize and embrace our own weaknesses and inadequacies, they will motivate us to turn wholeheartedly to the Lord for strength, and we can then experience the power of His grace and all-sufficiency.

Adam and Eve gave in to temptation, Cain was not able to conquer his anger, Sarah was unable to have children, Moses could not speak eloquently, and Paul suffered with a "thorn in the flesh." We can see the weaknesses and inadequacies of mankind throughout history.

When Paul entreated God three times to remove his thorn in the flesh, God responded: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." When Paul realized that the power of God's grace would be upon his weakness, he responded: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Based on the principle of God's strength being made perfect in man's weakness, Andrew Murray counseled the man to completely accept his failure and his own inability to live righteously instead of striving against it. With this acceptance and confession, he could then sink down before God in utter helplessness. There he would learn that unless grace gave him deliverance and strength, he could never do any better than he had done before, but if he relied on the Lord for strength, that grace would indeed accomplish what he could not.

Our weaknesses become assets when we allow them to motivate us toward dependence on God for His grace and strength.

We know that the temptations Jesus faced on earth were just as real and strong as the ones we face, yet He did not succumb to them. (See Hebrews 4:15.) Why was this? Jesus recognized the inherent weakness of His humanity and wisely prepared through prayer for the great spiritual battles that would lead up to His crucifixion.

Peter, on the other hand, was oblivious to the spiritual warfare and temptations that he would soon encounter and drifted off into sleep while Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. We know from Peter's own words spoken previous to this night that he placed great confidence in his flesh, claiming that he would never deny Christ, even if all of the other disciples did. (See Matthew 26:33.) Peter's failure to watch and to pray as Jesus had commanded caused him to be caught off guard when the temptations came, and he quickly gave in to them.

Paul learned the lesson that only when he recognize that he was weak in his own strength, then he could be strong. Peter learned that when he thought he was strong, he proved that he was really weak.

Every morning I look forward to falling on my face before God, acknowledging my total weakness and inability to do anything for Him, and asking Him to give me the power of His grace, His wisdom for decisions, and the Holy Spirit to walk in victory. I strongly urge you to do this also! Prayer really does turn weakness into power!

Command 45: Watch and Pray

Related Character Quality

Endurance vs. Giving Up

Endurance is the inward strength to withstand stress to accomplish God's best.

Endurance is associated with the physical stamina required for a race. However, the character quality of endurance is much deeper than physical stamina. It includes the strength that comes by rejoicing in the reproaches that come as we follow the ways of God.

To endure is to tenaciously hold on until a goal is accomplished. Jacob clung to the angel and declared, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." God not only blessed him but affirmed, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome" (Genesis 32:28).

What Are We to Endure?

The following passages explain the types of trials we are to endure:

1. **Endure hardness**—"Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:3).
2. **Endure afflictions**—"But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry" (2 Timothy 4:5).
3. **Endure persecutions and tribulations**—"All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering" (2 Thessalonians 1:5).
4. **Endure undeserved suffering**—"For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God" (1 Peter 2:19).
5. **Endure chastening**—"Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?" (Hebrews 12:7).
6. **Endure temptations**—"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).
7. **Endure all things**—"Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory" (2 Timothy 2:10).

How Do We Endure?

Endurance is based on hope. A runner will endure rigorous and painful training because of the hope that he will win the race. Jesus endured the cross and despised the shame associated with it for the joy of knowing that His death would conquer Satan and bring redemption to mankind for all eternity. (See Hebrews 12:2.) The believer's hope is that by enduring trials he will experience a greater measure of spiritual power in this life, as well as rewards in heaven.

How Does Truth Motivate Endurance?

Truth sets us free from the destructive attitudes and influences that diminish endurance. When trials and temptations come, we are to meet and endure them with the following four responses:

1. Thank God for each trial.

We can be thankful for all things, because all things come from the hand of God. They are for our benefit and can teach us character. We "know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28). Job endured a great affliction, and he understood this important point: "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21).

2. Rejoice in all things.

Once we recognize the benefits that God intends through our trials, we can rejoice in them. If we lack wisdom to discern these benefits, we can ask God for it and He will give it to us. (See James 1:5.)

3. Cry out when necessary.

Some situations cannot or should not be endured and require us to cry out to God for deliverance. "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me" (Psalm 50:15).

4. Overcome by doing good.

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).

Personal Evaluation: How Strong Is Your Endurance?

- Do you live as a soldier who is in the most critical spiritual war ever waged, or as a civilian in a time of peace, prosperity, and pleasure?
- Do you rejoice when rejected by those who do not follow the ways of God, or do you complain that you have to suffer because of your identification with God?

- Do you rejoice in being falsely accused and blamed for things you did not do, or do you become reactionary, defensive, and bitter toward those who question your integrity?
- Do you accept God's chastening for things you have done wrong, or do you become discouraged and want to give up on the Christian life?
- Do you resist temptation and bring every thought into captivity, or do you easily surrender to the lusts of the flesh and the lusts of the mind?

Watch for Fellow Believers!

The preacher could tell by the expressions on their faces that two of his listeners were praying for him during the service. Week after week they would pray for him as he preached and tell him after the service that they had done so. Finally, he asked them, "Why don't you pray for the people?" to which they responded, "Because you need the power of the Spirit."

Nothing created as great a hunger in D. L. Moody's soul for the filling of the Holy Spirit as did the earnest and faithful prayers of these two parishioners. God did indeed fill Moody with an uncommon passion for souls and used him mightily for His kingdom in the United States and England.

By supporting other believers through prayer, especially pastors and Christian leaders, we can play a vital part in their ministries.

These two parishioners understood that in addition to watching and praying for ourselves that we enter not into temptation, we should also intercede in prayer on behalf of other believers, even as Jesus did for Peter. "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail …" (Luke 22:31–32). Jesus also prayed for all believers who would come to a saving knowledge of Him through the testimony of the apostles. (See John 17:20.)

Pastors, missionaries, and other Christian leaders are especially in need of our prayers. No one is immune from the temptation of sin, and those who are doing the greatest damage to Satan's kingdom will often fall under the greatest attacks of spiritual warfare. In addition to praying for God's blessing and grace to be upon their lives, we can ask God to keep them from the temptation of pride. This is vital, because "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18; see also 1 Corinthians 10:12).

When we see others depending on their own abilities, we should ask God to bring them to a place of total dependence on Him and His grace.

Watching and praying requires vigilance and spiritual discernment. We often are unaware of the struggles and temptations that other believers are facing, but through prayer we can still "Carry each other's burdens" and thus fulfill the law of Christ (see Galatians 6:2).

In my life, the Holy Spirit has often brought to my mind an individual whom I have not thought about for years. I have learned that God often reminds me of individuals at the precise moments that they are especially in need of prayer. When I have prayed for them and then called them to see how they were doing, I have been amazed to learn what they had been going through. A few of them have even said that they were praying that I would call them!

Let's purpose now to become those who watch and pray for other believers "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints." (Ephesians 6:18).

Watch for Dangers!

It was his greatest dream. The little boy would sit on the shore of the Mississippi River and watch the steamboats go by, wishing he could take a ride on one of them. He imagined how wonderful it would be to be a captain and to go exploring up and down the river, enjoying the interesting

sights. One day his dream came true! A captain invited the little boy to join him on his boat for the day to observe the skills of being a captain.

As they pushed off from shore, the boy began to gaze in wonder at all that was taking place around him. However, the captain called him over and told him that a good captain always keeps his attention focused on the water. He explained that even though the river was wide, the channel was narrow. If a captain did not discern the path of the channel and guide the boat carefully through it, he would ground the boat. He also explained that the differing shades of water must be carefully observed, because the channel's location could have changed during a storm.

At the end of the trip the boy disappointedly exclaimed, "I did not get to see the scenery along the shores!"

The captain wisely replied, "The goal of a captain is not to gaze at the sights along the way, but to guide his boat safely to its destination." The same is true for our lives.

Guiding our lives safely through the storms and dangers of life requires us to keep our focus on Jesus, the Captain of our Salvation. (See Hebrews 2:10.)

There are several important signs of danger that we must watch for in our Christian lives so that we do not end up shipwrecking our faith. (See 1 Timothy 1:19.) One sign of spiritual danger is losing our appetite for spiritual disciplines, such as reading, memorizing, and meditating on God's Word and communing with God in prayer. This danger occurs when we fill our lives with the things of this world rather than the things of God. 1 John 2:15 tells us: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

Another sign of spiritual danger is losing our first love for the Lord. God said to the church in Ephesus, "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (Revelation 2:4–5).

An additional sign of danger is when we allow sin to remain in our lives. We are instructed to "... throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1). If we fail to notice and respond to these signs of danger in our lives, we will become the servants of sin, vulnerable to further attacks of Satan. Thus, we are warned in 1 Peter 5:8:

"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

The reward of watching and praying is avoiding destructive temptations and the resulting slavery to sins and addictions. (See Romans 6.) Let's realize the seriousness of watching for spiritual dangers in our lives and ask God to deliver us from them.

Command 45: Watch and Pray

study question

Q: Job is an outstanding example of one who watched and prayed for his ten children, yet they were all destroyed. What went wrong? (See Job 1:1–22.)

A: Job was the most righteous man of his day. He kept a regular watch over his children. Whenever his sons and daughters had a celebration in one of their houses, Job went before the Lord on their behalf. "When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom" (Job 1:5).

The faithful watching that Job carried out was effective in building a protective hedge around his family and possessions. Satan even complained about it. "Does Job fear God for nothing?" Satan replied. "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land" (Job 1:9–10).

Not only was Job's watching so effective that Satan complained about it, but there is every indication that God protected Job's sons and daughters because of his watching and praying.

When God removed His hedge from around Job, Satan killed Job's ten children, had all of his flocks and herds stolen, and destroyed his health. Three miserable friends came to "comfort" Job, but instead accused him of sin.

Job spent much time during those days listening and watching. As he remained faithful to the Lord, God restored double the amount of the material goods that Job lost. God also gave him seven more sons and three beautiful daughters. The fact that God did not give Job double the number of children after his testing would indicate that Job's first ten children were not actually "lost" but instead went before him to heaven. Indeed, Job's steadfast watching and praying did have a positive effect in the lives of his children.

Command 45: Watch and Pray | Day 313

Watch and Pray With Thanksgiving!

His family and friends were stunned. He was a Godly young man and a role model to all who knew him. He was attending a Bible college, regularly witnessed to others about the Lord, and was the leader of a Bible study. So, it came as a complete shock when one morning his parents discovered that he had taken his own life. The only clue to why he had done this was a suicide note explaining that because he was unable to conquer a certain sin, he had decided to end his life.

This young man was extremely sincere about his walk with the Lord. He was very mindful of the temptations in his life, but he did not have a Biblical focus in his watching. He focused on his inward failures, which caused him to experience great depression and defeat. If he had used his temptations and failures as motivation to look upward at Christ and to cry out to God for His powerful grace, he could have received hope, strength, and forgiveness instead of being overcome with discouragement.

By focusing on the Lord's ability to deliver us from temptation and to cleanse us of sin, discouragement and defeat can be replaced with thanksgiving and rejoicing.

If Satan cannot succeed at discouraging us with our own failures, he will often try to discourage us with the victories of those who oppose God. There is a time to be a "watchman on the wall" and to cry out warning alarms because of the attacks of the enemy. However, if this is our single focus, we will tend to be anxious because of the "progress" that the enemies of the Lord are making. Scripture specifically tells us, "Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away" (Psalm 37:1–2).

Watching and fretting is what Satan wants us to do, because it keeps us defeated and discouraged, but watching with thanksgiving leads to joy and encouragement. Scripture states that we are to bring to God every detail of our need in earnest and thankful prayer. (See Philippians 4:6.) In order to watch with thankfulness, we must see the bigger picture of God's power and purposes in what He allows.

For example, we may watch as various Christians walk away from the Lord. However, instead of becoming discouraged, we can be thankful that God is big enough to reach down and bring them back to Himself. We can thank Him that "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. … As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him" (Psalm 103:10, 13). We can also thank God for the opportunity to demonstrate our love for Christ and fellow believers by praying earnestly for their spiritual condition and trusting God to work in their lives.

We can watch and pray with thanksgiving, knowing that Christ is our source of deliverance from that which would ensnare us. (See 2 Peter 2:9 and Colossians 4:2.)

Lack of thankfulness to God often springs from an anxious, troubled heart and leads to many other sins. (See Romans 1:21.) Let's purpose to watch and pray rather than watch and worry,

giving thanks to God in all things, because this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for us. (See 1 Thessalonians 5:18.) Remember, Christ has already won the victory!

Command 45: Watch and Pray | Day 314

Watch for Opportunities!

He was no ordinary beggar. Friends carried him every day to the gate of the Temple, where he asked those who went into the Temple for money. Everyone knew him and no one was exempt from his pleas, including Peter and John.

Peter recognized that this was an opportunity for a public demonstration of God's power and love. Turning and looking at the lame man, Peter boldly declared: "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6). He then explained the way to salvation to the astonished multitude, and 5,000 men became believers!

The envious religious leaders had Peter and John arrested and put into prison. When they were asked by what power the lame man had been healed, Peter answered, "… It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed" (Acts 4:10).

Just as the first-century religious leaders forbade the disciples to use the name of Jesus, many governments throughout the world are doing the same today.

There is power in the name of Jesus. With courts outlawing public prayers in the name of Jesus, it is time for believers to watch for opportunities to demonstrate the power of that name by crying out to God for the healing, salvation, and freedom from addictions of those whom the world views as "hopeless."

As we take these opportunities to cry out to God, we can expect to encounter the opposition of spiritual warfare. One goal of watching and praying is to withstand Satan so that God's purposes can be carried out unhindered both in our lives and in the world around us. We need to "… be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" (Ephesians 6:10). Thus, Paul writes, "Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground …" (Ephesians 6:13).

Paul then lists the pieces of the armor of God that we should put on, and concludes this list by saying, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel" (Ephesians 6:18–19).

God will often do His greatest work in times and in places where people do not believe in Him or His power.

Today as much as in any other time in history, we need to be vigilant in our prayers and alert and equipped to withstand Satan's opposition. We must have the power of God's grace perfected in our weaknesses so that we can do great works in the name of Jesus. Then, when people ask us, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" we can boldly declare, "In the mighty name of the Lord Jesus Christ and through the power of His grace."

Command 45: Watch and Pray | Day 315

Pray for an Hour!

During my college days, one night I drove a group of students home after we had finished our weekly Christian radio program. The first person I dropped off was a delightful nursing student. I told the others in the car that I would walk her to her door and be right back. When I returned to the car, the rest of the passengers exasperatedly informed me that I had been gone for more than an hour! I was shocked, because it seemed to me that I had been gone for only a few minutes.

Why do we find it easy to talk to friends for hours, yet difficult to talk with the Lord for one hour?

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus said to Peter, James, and John, "Stay here and keep watch with me" (Matthew 26:38). However, when Jesus returned, He found the disciples asleep and said to Peter, "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" (Matthew 26:40). Following this, Jesus gave them the command to watch and pray. Just as these disciples found it difficult to spend an hour in prayer, in our lives today it can be a challenge as well to spend an extended period of time in prayer.

At a recent Counseling Seminar, I announced to the hundreds of young people who were attending that we were going to break into small groups and pray for an hour. Many of them had never prayed for a solid hour and wondered what it would be like. After the hour of prayer, they were so encouraged that the entire group wanted to do it again.

This group benefited from an outline that divided the hour into 12, 5-minute segments, each with a specific prayer focus. Here is the outline they followed:

1. **Praise**—Praise the Lord for His character and for Who He is. Use His names to praise Him. Praise Him for His acts and for His creation.
2. **The Word**—Read or quote a Psalm of praise to the Lord. Pray through a Psalm.
3. **Meditation**—Take the time to meditate silently on the Scripture that has been read or on other passages that come to mind.
4. **Confession**—Confess your sins to the Lord and ask for forgiveness. If in a group, confess sins appropriately in prayer. Confess the corporate sins of the nation.
5. **Intercession**—Beseech the Lord on behalf of others. Pray for revival in the hearts of believers.
6. **Listen**—Ask the Lord to speak to you, and quietly listen to Him.
7. **Record**—Write down insights and direction that God gives you during your time of prayer.
8. **Petition**—Present to God specific personal needs and desires that are according to His will.
9. **Family**—Pray for your family and families in general, especially for the unity of marriages, and for fathers.
10. **Church**—Pray for the unity and purity of the collective Body of Christ as well as your local church leadership.
11. **Government Leaders**—Pray that God will give them wisdom and understanding.
12. **Thanksgiving**—Give thanks to the Lord for what He has done and will do.

When we delight in the presence of the Lord, we will lose all sense of time.

Let's delight in God's presence by taking an hour to pray. Then, for your journal entry this week, write about your experience and the results. Also, write out any instances in which God prompted you to pray for a certain individual, and then find out what specific needs he or she was facing. Let's make watching and praying a regular part of our lives.

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 26:41

"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak".

James 5:16

"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

Ephesians 6:11–12

"Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Romans 8:26

"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

1 Corinthians 16:13–14

"Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. Do everything in love."

Matthew 6:13

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

1 Corinthians 10:13

"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

Feed God's Sheep!

A number of the disciples had been fishing all night, but at daybreak, their nets were still empty. Discouraged, they headed toward shore when a man called out to them, "Have you caught anything?" They replied, "No," and the man told them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. Within moments, the net was full of fish—to the point of breaking! (See John 21:3–6.)

The Lord, Who was standing on the shore, had given this instruction. When the disciples recognized Jesus, they quickly came ashore and had breakfast together. After the meal, Jesus turned to Peter and asked a series of very important questions:

Command Forty-Six

"Simon ... do you truly love me more than these? ... Feed my lambs. ... do you truly love me? ... Take care of my sheep. ... do you love me? ... Feed my sheep" (John 21:15–17).

This command involves all of a shepherd's responsibilities, such as training, protecting, and leading, in addition to feeding. Additionally, Jesus told Peter to care for both lambs and sheep. Each has unique needs and requires different levels of care in their feeding.

In this command, Jesus charged Peter, as a spiritual leader in the Church, with the responsibility to feed and tend God's lambs and sheep—to help new believers grow into maturity and to continue tending and feeding them once they become mature. This responsibility would also apply to anyone in a God-given position of leadership, including fathers, who are to be the spiritual leaders in their homes.

When a father hears this command, he should not picture sheep far away; he should picture the faces of his own children.

Let's purpose now to demonstrate our love for the Lord by adopting His interests as our own and by learning the skills necessary to feed His sheep. These skills are revealed as we consider how Jesus fed His sheep when He was with them on earth.

Follow the Shepherd's Example!

The parents had exercised great caution, but they had not anticipated this particular danger. Their daughter wanted to go to music school, so the parents visited the school, interviewed the teachers, and felt that it would be a safe place to send their daughter. However, what they did not

realize was that her piano instructor had the personal goal of capturing this young lady's heart for his own wicked purposes.

After only six months at the school, the daughter called her parents and informed them that she would not be returning home. She had decided to stay with the piano teacher. Rather than grieving and surrendering their daughter, this couple swung into action and took every step necessary to get their daughter away from this teacher. Later, as I heard the whole story from this young lady, she expressed great appreciation for the fact that her parents had not given up on her. Those parents had the mind-set of a good shepherd, not a hired hand. (See John 10:12–14.)

Jesus said: *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).*

David was the master shepherd of Israel. We see from his life that feeding sheep involves far more than just leading them to food. David rescued sheep from the mouth of both a lion and a bear and gave them reassurance and comfort when needed. (See 1 Samuel 17:34 and Psalm 23:4.) This is the kind of shepherding that fathers are to do for their children and elders are to do for those under their spiritual care.

Jesus, Who is our Chief Shepherd, identified three major characteristics of a good shepherd. First, the good shepherd personally knows his sheep: "… He calls his own sheep by name …" (John 10:3). In Bible times, a shepherd would often give names to the sheep for which he was responsible. As he took care of the sheep, the shepherd would become well acquainted with the unique characteristics and habits of each sheep. We should spend time with each person for whom we are responsible in order to discover his or her individual needs.

The second characteristic of a good shepherd is his leadership of the sheep: "When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:4). The shepherd not only leads his sheep to rich pastures; he also examines and prepares the fields to make sure there are no poisonous plants that could harm his sheep. In the same way, we are to disciple those under our care by teaching them the words of Jesus and protecting them from wrong doctrine or harmful activities that would damage them.

Finally, a good shepherd sets aside his personal goals in order to care for the sheep: "… I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15). The Lord Jesus laid down his life for us and we must be willing to lay down our lives for those He has placed under our care. This means that we must place the needs of our sheep ahead of our own plans and priorities.

"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Would those whom God has placed under our care say that we have fed and cared for them like a good shepherd or like a hireling? Let's purpose now to show our love for Christ by following His example of servant leadership.

Command 46: Feed My Sheep

Related Character Quality

Dependability vs. Inconsistency

Dependability is fulfilling what I consented to do, even if it requires unexpected sacrifice.

The Importance of Dependability

Every believer should want this quality to be evident in his life. It is one quality Jesus will use to evaluate our work for Him: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21).

It is also one quality that is required for God to entrust resources to us and the quality that will win a crown for eternity: "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2). "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

Characteristics of Dependability

- A dependable believer will be in harmony with the heart and mind of God. "I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind ..." (1

Samuel 2:35). "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8–9). "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4).

- A dependable Christian has a great reverence for God. "I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most men do" (Nehemiah 7:2).
- A dependable person is faithful in little things as well as big things. "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much" (Luke 16:10).
- A dependable person has a heart attitude of faithfulness. "You found his [Abraham's] heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him …" (Nehemiah 9:8).
- A dependable person keeps confidential information private. "A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret" (Proverbs 11:13).
- A dependable person communicates energy and health. "A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a trustworthy envoy brings healing" (Proverbs 13:17).
- A dependable person is truthful in all that he says. "A truthful witness does not deceive, but a false witness pours out lies" (Proverbs 14:5).
- A dependable person will not tell people how good he is. "Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find?" (Proverbs 20:6).
- A dependable person encourages those whom he serves. "Like the coolness of snow at harvest time is a trustworthy messenger to those who send him; he refreshes the spirit of his masters" (Proverbs 25:13).

The Source of Power for Dependability

Even though God and others expect us to be dependable, God knows that the ability to demonstrate such a quality does not reside within us—our strength must come from Him. It is through His faithfulness to us that we can be faithful to others. But how do we "tap in" to His faithfulness?

Paul explains the process in his letters to the first-century Church. He discovered that the power of Christ is available only to those who acknowledge their weakness before Him. The first expression of weakness is crying out to Him for salvation. Next, it is crying out to Him in daily dependence upon Him. Paul learned how to translate trials and tribulations into reminders of his own weakness and Christ's sufficiency.

These reminders were so important to Paul that he gloried in them by thanking God for them and seeing potential benefits in and through them. Paul was dependable to the end of his ministry and explained the secret to his faithfulness. "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Personal Evaluation: How Dependable Are You?

- When you give your word to do something, can others always count on you to do it, even if it is more difficult than you expected?
- If you experience unexpected difficulties, do you use them as excuses for not finishing a task?
- Do you picture the things you do for others as actually serving Jesus Christ?
- Do you pay your bills promptly and make the wisest use of the resources God has entrusted to you?
- Do you graciously but firmly decline invitations that will distract you from fulfilling your responsibilities?

All at the same time, there were 3,000 "newborns" who needed to be fed! They were part of a revolutionary movement that would literally shake the world. God provided those who would feed them properly, and the newborns grew in strength and in number. They became part of the first-century Church, fed and cared for by the apostles.

The feeding of these 3,000 early believers provides a pattern for the nurture and care of all future "lambs."

After willingly receiving the words of Peter and repenting of their sins, they were baptized. This was not an easy thing to do. It would bring reaction and rejection by those who rejected Christ, yet Jesus declared: "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:32–33).

Once they were baptized, these 3,000 new believers received spiritual nourishment as "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

1. **The Apostles' Doctrine:** The early Church was established before the New Testament was written. So, new believers were taught what the disciples had learned directly from Jesus. The newborn believers could not have been given any richer "milk of the Word" than the direct instructions of the Lord. Paul continued this pattern of feeding lambs when he established the Gentile churches. (See 1 Corinthians 14:37.)
2. **Fellowship:** Spiritual growth can be stimulated by fellowship among believers. Every "lamb" is a member of the Body of Christ, and these new believers needed to learn to function in harmony with every other member. They were also given spiritual gifts with which to serve each other. (See Romans 12:5–8.) This bond of fellowship resulted in generosity toward each other. No one lacked basic necessities, because they shared their resources with each other. (See Acts 4:34.)
3. **Breaking of Bread:** Fellowship is vital for the growth of new believers, but relationships are fragile. A spirit of unity can be easily damaged by misunderstandings and hurts that come from lack of spiritual maturity. Therefore, Jesus, the Head of the Church, instituted the communion table, not only as a time to remember what He has done for us but also as a time of soul searching and mending of any broken fellowship with God or with one another. (See 1 Corinthians 11:28.) They carried this out on a daily basis. (See Acts 2:46.)
4. **Prayers:** Their prayers were not a ritualistic repetition of words. They were dynamic times of crying out to God and witnessing mighty results, from the opening of prison doors to the shaking of the place where they had gathered to pray. (See Acts 4:31.)

In our day, there is a tendency to focus on winning people to Christ. We rejoice when we hear of hundreds or thousands who were saved, but what about the feeding they require? Little lambs, newborn babies, and new Christians all need to be fed in order to grow. They need constant care and protection. They need practical training in order to function effectively in life.

It may be that some of these elements were missing in your spiritual upbringing; however, let's do all we can to help new believers grow to maturity by feeding them the Word of God, including them in our fellowship, teaching them the significance of the Lord's table, and by praying with them and for them.

Seek to Be a Qualified Shepherd!

The rebellion was well planned and widespread: the entire nation, three religious leaders, and 250 famous princes against the two shepherds whom God had appointed—Moses and Aaron.

In response to the rebellion, God acted supernaturally. First, He opened up the ground and swallowed the three rebels and all the princes who followed them. Then, He sent a plague that killed 14,700 people. (See Numbers 16.) These signs proved to the children of Israel that God had sent Moses to be their shepherd. (See Numbers 16:28.) Later, God established Aaron's

leadership in the eyes of the people by causing Aaron's rod to bud, blossom, and bring forth fruit. (See Numbers 17:6–8.)

Throughout history, God has called and confirmed those who are to be His spiritual leaders.

A spiritual shepherd must be called by God to this duty. "No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was." (Hebrews 5:4) Also, it should be evident that God is working in and through him. The ability to lead others to Christ would be essential. Through the church, his teachings, and his epistles, Paul discipled those whom he had led to Christ in Corinth.

A shepherd must be gentle and patient. (See 2 Timothy 2:24.) Caring for sheep requires giving time and attention to each one's needs. A shepherd must be an example to the flock, not an overlord of them. This means that although he is not sinless, he is to be "… above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent …" (1 Timothy 3:2–3).

A shepherd must have the ability to bring those with differing viewpoints to a common understanding. Paul was grieved by reports of divisions among the believers in Corinth and wrote these words to them: "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval" (1 Corinthians 11:19). A shepherd must first unite any factions in his own family. "He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Timothy 3:4–5). This would also require that he and his wife have a loving relationship.

A shepherd "must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil" (1 Timothy 3:6). He must have experience in living out the commands of Christ so that he can lead others over the same "ground" he has covered.

When we realize that the flock we look after is not ours, but God's, we will be more concerned for their good than our gain.

Being a spiritual shepherd is a serious responsibility. The lives of others are shaped by what he teaches and how he leads. Any motives of personal gain will be detected and despised by those under his care. A shepherd must not be greedy of gain but instead have a passion for God's sheep and be willing to make sacrifices for their good.

God's qualifications for spiritual leaders in His Church provide important goals for each of us to strive for, because "If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task" (1 Timothy 3:1).

Command 46: Feed My Sheep

Study Question

Q: Since the Lord knows every sheep by name and laid down His life for them, why does He entrust their daily feeding, encouragement, and protection to under-shepherds who may be inadequate or inconsistent in carrying out these vital tasks?

In the New Testament, God gives detailed requirements for those who would be under-shepherds of His flock. Peter was the disciple whom Jesus commanded, "Feed my lambs," "Feed [tend] my sheep," and "Feed my sheep." Peter was also the one who recorded God's precise instructions to the under-shepherds of His flock.

"To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (1 Peter 5:1–4).

In the Book of Titus, Paul lists more qualifications of those who would shepherd others: "An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined" (Titus 1:6–8).

However, because we all have a sin nature, no one serving as an under-shepherd will perfectly represent the Chief Shepherd all the time. Because of His great love for His sheep, God will hold those who lead them to a higher standard. James addresses this tremendous responsibility placed on under-shepherds: "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1).

Be an Effective Shepherd!

It came as a stern rebuke, but it provides a clear picture of the job of a good shepherd: "… This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? … You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured …" (Ezekiel 34:2, 4).

If we narrow the role of shepherding to only providing food, and we neglect the health of the sheep, we will not be completely effective.

In the nation of Israel, the priests ministered not only to the spiritual needs of the people but to their physical needs as well. This is also true of the elders in the New Testament Church. When a believer is sick, he is not only to seek medical remedies; he is also to "… call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up …" (James 5:14–15).

The need to address both physical and spiritual problems simultaneously is because many sicknesses are the result of violating God's laws and principles. Therefore, the instruction in James continues: "… If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (James 5:15–16).

Not all sicknesses are the result of spiritual problems. They can also result from a lack of proper care for our bodies. A wise shepherd will find the still water and green pastures for his sheep. (See Psalm 23:2.) Doctors have observed that an effective way to achieve better health is by increasing the intake of pure water. This reduces strain on the kidneys and cleanses the body of harmful toxins. Another important factor in maintaining good health is eating nutritious food. Many of our diseases result from eating unhealthy foods or eating too much food.

Proper rest is also vital for good health. A wise shepherd will protect his sheep from too much work, exhaustion, and continual tension. "He makes me lie down …" (Psalm 23:2). However, in spite of following practical steps for good health, there still will be needs for deeper remedies and spiritual counseling.

"Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits- ... who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Psalm 103:2, 5).

Have you considered the whole scope of shepherding? Does your care for those in your "flock" include the health of their spirits, souls, and bodies? John wrote, "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well" (3 John 2). Let's ask God to make us attentive to all the needs of those under our care and to give us wisdom to help meet those needs.

Feed Sheep the Word of God!

I still recall the joy I experienced when Bible conference speakers would explain rich spiritual truths and then confirm them with other passages in the Old and New Testaments. I believe my excitement must have been similar to that of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus opened up the Scriptures to them, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

The health, vitality, and growth of "sheep" is based largely on their internalizing of God's Word.

All feeding must be based on the Word of God. It is not important what we think but what God says. Teaching should be consistent with all of God's Word, not just an isolated verse here or there. I have discovered that the best commentary on the Bible is the Bible. Passages in one portion of Scripture are usually amplified and clarified with other passages.

Over the past few years, it has been one of my greatest delights to take a command that Christ gave and then study its foundation in the Old Testament and its applications in the apostles' writings. For each command, I have asked God to give me wisdom to understand the riches of His Word. It is then a joy to share with others the treasures that He has taught me.

As we read and study the Bible for personal edification and also to teach to others, it is important to keep in mind that there is only one interpretation of a passage of Scripture, but there can be many applications. For example, the Eighth Commandment is "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15). The interpretation of this verse is that we should not take that which belongs to another. There are many possible applications of this commandment: not stealing time from an employer, not stealing money from a parent, or not stealing recognition from one who is deserving of it.

In the right application of Scripture, the ways of God are honored and genuine love is demonstrated. In the wrong application of Scripture, man's ways are justified and a spirit of selfishness is cultivated. Jesus affirmed the importance of genuine love when He said that the two great commandments were to love God and to love our neighbors. (See Matthew 22:37–40.)

With diligent study we can understand the words of Scripture, and with illumination of the Holy Spirit we can understand and apply its meaning.

Feeding spiritual sheep requires diligence in studying the Word of God. The Bible is filled with analogies, types, patterns, pictures, symbols, parables, and allegories. To properly feed sheep, a shepherd needs to dig into God's Word for himself and mine the rich treasures that are underneath the surface.

One of the best ways to do this is to make use of Bible research tools, such as concordances, Bible dictionaries, and cross-reference materials. A whole new level of understanding can be gained by looking at the original languages in which the Bible was written.

People are looking for lasting answers to life's problems. True wisdom is learning to see life from God's perspective. As we study the Word of God, let's ask God for His wisdom so that we can properly feed His sheep.

Know Your Flock!

The father was shocked when his 18-year-old daughter ran away from home. When he called me for counsel I asked him if he thought he knew his daughter. After a moment he said, "Well, I've had 18 years with her. I guess I know her." I then asked him four or five questions on matters that would be important to his daughter, and he could not answer any of them. He then began to realize that he didn't know his daughter as well as he thought he did.

When I talked to the daughter, she affirmed, "My father doesn't really know me. He rarely talks to me and doesn't show interest in my life or what I am thinking." This is certainly contrary to the statement Jesus made about His own shepherding: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them …" (John 10:27).

"Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds" (Proverbs 27:23).

About 15 years ago, a series of questions for fathers to ask their sons and daughters was developed. I encouraged fathers to meet with their children individually and go through these questions, writing down the answers that were given. Then, fathers were to design practical projects for their children based on the needs that were discovered.

Recently, one of the fathers who carried out this exercise more than 15 years ago asked his son and daughters, "Do you remember those questions I asked you and the projects we did?" They enthusiastically responded that they did remember and that these interactions with their dad were cherished memories. Here are the types of questions that were asked:

1. Who is your best friend? What qualities do you admire in him or her? Does this friendship tend to build you up or pull you down?
2. What do you want to do with your life? Whom do you want to be like? What skills do you want to develop? Do you wonder what God's will is for your life?
3. What fears do you experience? (Fear of the future? Failure? Rejection? Abandonment? Past failures being revealed?)
4. What books have influenced you the most? How did they influence you? Have you ever thought about writing a book? What topic could you write about?
5. What things in our family discourage you? (Clutter? Conflicts with siblings? Tension between parents? Unfinished house repairs? Lack of space? Rules?)
6. What changes would you like to see in me? (More time spent with family? Less time watching television or on the Internet? Not getting upset or angry? Greater spiritual leadership?)
7. What do you enjoy doing in your free time? (Sports? Reading? Projects? Time with friends?)
8. What hurts have you experienced from others? (Friends? Family? Neighbors?)
9. What things about yourself or your past would you like to change?
10. If you could ask God any question, what would you ask Him?

Setting aside an afternoon or weekend to spend with each child and going over these and other questions would make a profound impact upon your children and you. The better you know the members of your flock, the better equipped you will be to shepherd them. Why not look at your calendar right now and designate a time that you could begin this project.

In your journal this week, write down the needs you are aware of in the lives of those under your care, and ask God to show you creative ways to meet those needs as you seek to feed God's lambs and sheep.

Daily Scriptures

John 12:15-17

"Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word".

1 Peter 5:2–4

"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."

Psalm 78:72

"And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them."

Acts 20:28

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."

1 Timothy 4:16

"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."

Ezekiel 34:2

"… Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?"

Go and Make Disciples!

His father did not follow the Lord, but his mother and grandmother were women of faith. He was young, timid, and had frequent stomach ailments. His natural abilities did not suggest that he would make a dynamic and influential church leader. However, that is exactly what Timothy became. Timothy responded to the Gospel through Paul's preaching. Then Paul discipled him in the ways of the Lord as commanded in the Great Commission:

Command Forty-Seven

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19–20).

The command to make disciples is a charge to do one of the greatest works for which we were created! Through His Son, God blessed all families of the earth with the free gift of salvation. (See Galatians 3:2–15.) By sharing Christ with others and discipling them, we cooperate with God's strategy of distributing that blessing.

As we obey Christ's command to make disciples, we will discover that many of our own basic needs will be met in the process, including:

1. **The need to know God:** Jesus said: "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14:21).
2. **The need to be special to others:** Paul revealed how special he was to his disciples when he wrote: "… if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me" (Galatians 4:15).
3. **The need to share our hearts:** Speaking to his disciples, Paul wrote: "For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God …" (1 Thessalonians 2:11–12).
4. **The need to be understood:** As disciples mature, they will reach deeper levels of understanding in the things of God that we share with them. "But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14).
5. **The need to do something significant:** Jesus told His disciples: "… anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12).
6. **The need to do something that lasts: Jesus said:** "… I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last …" (John 15:16).
7. **The need to receive recognition:** In anticipation of having his works recognized by Christ, Paul said of his disciples: "For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we

will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you?" (1 Thessalonians 2:19).

When we try to fulfill our basic needs in our own ways rather than God's way, we will experience disappointment and frustration.

The potential of discipleship is enormous. If you make 10 disciples a year and each one of them does the same, the whole world could be discipled in less than 10 years! Let's recognize the urgent need to disciple all nations and dedicate our lives to this task!

Command 47: Make Disciples | Day 324

Deepen Relationships by Discipleship!

A significant conversation took place when the boy was about 12 years old. His father took him on a special outing and during their time together said, "Son, every man faces moral temptations. I want to have victory in my life, and I am sure you do also. Let's keep each other accountable by sharing how we overcame temptations with the Word of God." The son agreed, and a deep fellowship began between that son and his father and it has continued for more than 20 years!

Discipleship involves building relationships around the commands of Christ and the goal of becoming conformed to His image.

Jesus is our chief example of how to make disciples. Not only did He invite others to listen to His teaching, but He invited them to share in His life as well. Jesus walked and talked with His disciples, discussing life's situations, taking the time to answer questions, and further explaining the truths of God that He had taught. The disciples were committed to the goal of advancing God's kingdom; however, they needed to be taught how to do it. As Jesus spent time with His disciples, their understanding of Him and His way of life increased, and they became equipped to advance God's kingdom.

One of Christ's earliest presentations of kingdom truths was His Sermon on the Mount. (See Matthew 5–7.) He began by explaining several vital attitudes that should characterize the lives of believers, beginning with humility. Then He addressed the topics of anger, reconciliation, lust and adultery, making promises, lawsuits, relating to enemies, personal disciplines, handling money, judging, and entering the strait gate that leads to life.

In addition to presenting messages to multitudes, Jesus made use of "teachable moments" in the lives of individuals to teach specific commands that related to the needs of those He met along the way. Over the years, I have found that people usually experience problems in four primary areas: marriage conflicts that often result from personal failures, such as anger and lust; conflicts with sons and daughters; health problems; and financial pressures often caused by debt and bills.

Discipleship is not merely an opportunity to give our advice; it is an opportunity to seek God with a fellow believer and grow in the wisdom that comes from Christ's commands.

Deeper relationships can be built by entering into the joys and sorrows of other people before trying to give them any direction for solving their problems. We are told to "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). Only when others see that we truly care about them as individuals will they be interested in a discipling relationship.

One practical way to enter into the joys and sorrows of other people is to ask sincere questions about their health, children, goals, and any pressures they are facing that they would allow us to pray for. It is then important for us to bring their requests to God in prayer and ask Him to bless them with the qualities they need in order to mature in Christ. As we invest in the lives of others through this type of sharing, a loving relationship that will provide the basis for presenting the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ and helping individuals make application of them to their lives will develop.

Let's ask God with whom He would want us to develop this kind of relationship and begin taking steps to do so today!

Related Character Quality

Flexibility vs. Resistance

Flexibility is not setting my affections on ideas or plans that could be changed by God or others.

Flexibility is an important and necessary character quality, yet the word flexibility is not used in the Bible. Thus, a search for the concept of flexibility must be carried out. One must understand that being flexible will usually involve change and that change will often result in tension. According to studies, one of the most stressful events in life is uprooting the family and moving to a new location—especially one that is unknown.

With this in mind, we see that flexibility is one of the first qualities that God teaches His followers. God called Abraham to leave his country and kindred and move to a land that He would show him. He called the nation of Israel out of Egypt, and throughout their wilderness journey He had them watch the cloud over the Tabernacle. When the cloud moved, they were to move. Therefore, they had to be in a constant state of flexibility.

When Jesus called His disciples, He asked them to leave their homes and vocations and follow after Him.

Peter described the essence of flexibility when he wrote, "I urge you, as aliens and strangers …" (1 Peter 2:11). An alien is a visitor from another country, and a pilgrim is "one who journeys in foreign lands" or "one who travels to a holy place as a devotee." The necessity for such an outlook is underscored by our need to be in the world, but not of the world.

The flexible attitude of "aliens and strangers" is related to conquering the lusts that war against the soul. "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11).

God says: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:15–17).

How Does Flexibility Relate to Serving?

An excellent example of flexibility in serving is referred to in the following passage: "As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God …" (Psalm 123:2).

Flexibility is the willingness to change plans or ideas according to the direction of our authorities. The less we become emotionally involved in plans or ideas, the easier it will be to change them.

Martha was attentive to the details of serving, but Mary was attentive to the personal teaching and direction of the Lord. (See Luke 10:38–42.)

Ultimately, flexibility is based on the desire and delight to do the will of God, and an inflexible attitude reveals an insistence to do our own wills. David was flexible because he delighted to do the will of God. (See Psalm 40:8.)

Personal Evaluation: How Flexible Are You?

- When plans are changed, do you get discouraged, or do you look for reasons why the new plans could be better?
- When you learn that you must move, does it cause anxiety in you, or do you rejoice in it as a further reminder that you are a stranger and a pilgrim?
- When God calls you to a ministry or work, do you resist and make yourself busy with other activities?
- When others suggest a better way to do something, do you try it, or do you keep doing it the way you had been doing it?
- Do you misuse flexibility by having no daily plans or life goals?

- Are the thoughts of your heart in harmony with the will of God so that changes are easy transitions?

Command 47: Make Disciples | Day 325

Have Faith in God's Promise!

One dark night, a shy 15-year-old girl looked up into the star-filled sky and asked God for two things. God's answer to that prayer can be the only explanation for what has happened in her life over the six years since that night, including being asked to speak in public high schools in the United States, working with youth in other nations, writing a book that is impacting thousands, and much more! Her requests were: "O God, make me as bold as a lion, and let me influence as many people for you as the stars in the sky!"

We need to ask God for His grace, wisdom, and power to impact and disciple as many people as we can for Him.

God said to Abraham, "… Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them … So shall your offspring be" (Genesis 15:5). Scripture records that "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3).

Abraham had only one son, Isaac, but after he yielded Isaac to the Lord, God said: "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (Genesis 22:17–18).

The Apostle Paul points out that the promise made to Abraham also applies to us: "Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Galatians 3:7–9). The seed of Abraham that has blessed the entire world is the Lord Jesus Christ. (See Galatians 3:16.)

Since believers are made heirs with Abraham through Christ, the promise given to Abraham to have his descendants become as the stars extends to our lives as well. We will be limited in the number of disciples we can make in our lifetime, but think of all the disciples that our disciples will be able to make!

Jesus said, *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you …" (John 17:20–21).*

We may feel that what we are doing for God is insignificant; however, God wants to use each one of us to impact the world for Him. Right now by faith, let's believe God's promise to make Abraham's spiritual descendants as numerous as the stars of the heavens and begin to pursue the opportunities that are around us to make disciples and disciple makers!

Command 47: Make Disciples | Day 326

Share Treasures From Your Life!

A father was startled to see the flashing lights of a police car behind him and quickly checked his speedometer to make sure that he was traveling below the speed limit. His family, who was in the car with him, confirmed that he had honored the posted speed limit while other cars sped past them. Nevertheless, the policeman who had pulled him over maintained that he was clocked at 70 MPH in a 55 MPH zone!

Before the father's court appearance, a lawyer advised him to tell the judge that his equipment was faulty, so that the judge would make a deal, giving him a lower fine to pay and not putting the offense on his record. He told the lawyer that he could not do this, because it would be untruthful. He took a day off from work and drove two and a half hours to appear before the judge. After waiting four and a half hours, he was told that he would have to return the next month because he chose to not plead guilty.

"As I read the reasons why I can rejoice and give thanks for everything God allows in my life, tears of thanksgiving came to my eyes. I had failed to recognize the truth that everything that happens in my life is allowed by God, Who loves me and knows what is necessary to conform my life and will to His." This man discovered the riches of Christ's teaching by realizing that the unjust fine was not nearly as important as his response to it.

A message prepared in the mind will reach only a mind, but a message developed in a life will reach other lives.

Scripture tells us that "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him …" (Matthew 12:35). As we disciple others, let's not overlook the importance of sharing examples from our lives of how we have personally lived out Christ's commands. One of the benefits of keeping a journal is the ability to recall and share specific details of past events in our lives with those whom we are discipling.

Most of us can empathize with being falsely accused at some point in our lives. Therefore, when this father shares his story of how God taught him to respond properly to unjust treatment by obeying Christ's command to Rejoice (see Matthew 5:12), others will readily identify with the message and be challenged in their own future responses to similar situations.

Command 47: Make Disciples

Study Question

Q: Jesus told His disciples that a disciple is not above his teacher and a servant is not above his master. Why, then, did Jesus later say to His disciples that they "will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father"? (See Matthew 10:24–25 and John 14:12.)

A: Before Jesus's ascension into heaven, He instructed His disciples to go throughout the world and make disciples of all nations. He then explained how to do this: "Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20).

This particular command is significant because it illustrates the essence of discipleship. A disciple must take the information that has changed his or her life and also teach it to others, who will in turn pass it on to even more people. Paul described this sequence of discipleship to Timothy: "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

In John 14:12, when Jesus told His disciples that they would do "greater things" than He did, He was not referring to works of a greater quality or nature, but was emphasizing the fact that they would perform a greater quantity of works. Jesus's earthly ministry lasted only three short years and was confined to Judea. During this time, He focused on the people of Israel and training 12 disciples. His disciples, however, would have an entire lifetime and a limitless mission field of the whole world, thus allowing them to do an even greater number of mighty works and make an even greater number of disciples.

Be Enthusiastic!

In 1994, a host of diseases threatened his life. Seventy doctors in seven nations tried to help, and hundreds of treatments were followed, but his condition grew worse. His weight dropped from 180 to 104 pounds. Then he decided that God must have some significant things to say about health, since He is the One Who made us. He discovered Biblical answers, which he followed, and within four months his health had been restored! As he enthusiastically told friends and others about what God had done in His life, the news spread like wildfire. He even wrote his story in a book and millions of copies of it have been sold.

When we find answers and enthusiastically share them with others, they will want to experience the same results.

To be an effective discipler, we must be enthusiastic, and others must see Christ's commands working in our lives. Enthusiasm is God's energy in our spirits expressing itself through the mind, will, and emotions.

Enthusiasm is contagious. Whatever we are excited about and interested in we tend to share with others, and as a result they begin to share in our enthusiasm. How has your life been impacted by keeping these commands of Christ before your eyes during the past months?

Maintaining enthusiasm requires continuous fellowship with the Spirit of God through the Word of God.

Now that you have nearly completed this series, I encourage you to go through it again, this time with several others as you enthusiastically share what God has done and is doing in your life!

Speak With Authority!

As the teaching ended, a hush fell over the crowd that was gathered on the mountainside. They were astonished by what they had just heard, "because he taught as one who had authority …" (Matthew 7:29). What was the source of the authority by which Jesus spoke? As the Son of God, He explained the commands that He had received from His heavenly Father, and He often shared them in the context of real-life situations.

When we teach Christ's commands out of our own life experiences, we can speak with greater authority.

No one else has had exactly the same experiences that God has given to you. However, many people probably have had similar experiences and will identify with your problems, because "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man …" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The goal in sharing our personal struggles with others is to do so in a way that will help as many people as possible relate to both our problems and the solutions that we discovered as we applied the appropriate commands of Christ. One effective way to do this is to use a four-part testimony:

1. **Define the Problem.** People relate to problems. In fact, sharing problems can promote healing. We are told, "... confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Problems should be stated in general terms rather than using specific details that may have happened only to you. For instance, if you had a disagreement with your parents, don't focus on the details of the disagreement; rather, state the problem in a more general way, like this: "For many years I had reoccurring conflicts with my parents." Most people will be able to readily identify with this problem.
2. **Describe Your "Solution."** Explain how you tried to solve the problem in your own way and made it worse. For example, you could say, "I tried to reason with my parents, but it always ended up in heated arguments that caused further separation."
3. **Explain God's Answer.** What command or Biblical principles did you apply in order to resolve the problem? "I finally realized that I was not honoring my father and mother, and they were reacting to my spirit of pride and disrespect. I asked them to forgive me for this."
4. **Report the Results.** Describe how God's solution has brought new resolution to the problem. "When I humbled myself, my parents also asked me to forgive them for their actions, and we now are able to enjoy open communication."

This same four-point testimony can be used to teach and explain every command and principle of Scripture.

By taking the time to write out personal testimonies (in a four-part format) on each of the commands of Christ, you will be storing treasures of wisdom in your heart. Then, as you are talking with others, especially those whom you are discipling, you will be able to draw upon these good treasures and share them with others in a way that will impact their lives.

Our human tendency is to not recognize God's "classrooms" as opportunities to learn and apply His commands. Therefore, the next time a conflict arises, let's ask ourselves what commands relate to the situation and then obey them so that we can enjoy God's lasting solutions. These experiences will give us a powerful platform for discipling others.

Disciple Nations!

It is a marvel of history: a nation with no outlet to the sea, no great military might, totally surrounded by more powerful nations, rich, and influential, and yet it has escaped the ravages of war for centuries. In a large measure, Switzerland owes its peace and prosperity to the Godly influence of one man: John Calvin. In the 1500s he "stood in the gap" and helped the nation establish a legal system based on the teachings of Christ.

"I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it ..." (Ezekiel 22:30).

What are the requirements of one who wants to "stand in the gap?" First, he must be a born-again believer in Christ, Who was in the line of Abraham. God promised Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you" (Galatians 3:8; see also Genesis 12:3). That blessing comes through Christ, Who brought salvation, and through the wisdom He gave us in His teachings. (See Romans 16:25–26.) Thus, we should seek to understand all of the commands of Christ and be a living demonstration of them.

Years ago, I had no real desire to stand in the gap for other nations. However, as I learned Christ's commands and as I met people from other countries, God enlarged my heart as He promised in 1 John 2:5: "But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. …" God loves the whole world with a perfect love.

Through Christ we can enter into this promise: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession" (Psalm 2:8). When the Holy Spirit caused this verse to stand out to me years ago, I claimed it. Within months, unimagined opportunities opened up to reach schoolchildren who did not know the Lord and to receive facilities through which to offer training in other nations.

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is Psalm 67: "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, Selah that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. … And all the ends of the earth shall fear him."

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations ..." (Matthew 28:19).

We live in a world filled with the darkness of sin—a world that desperately needs the light of God's truth. Let's continue to keep these commands before our eyes, so that we can indeed be living examples of God's love to the world as we obey Christ's commission to make disciples of all nations by teaching them Christ's commands!

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 28:20

"and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age".

2 Timothy 2:2

"And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others."

1 Corinthians 11:1

"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

Luke 14:26–27, 33

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not

carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ...In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple"

John 13:35

"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Acts 14:22

"strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. ..."

Colossians 1:28–29

"We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me."

Baptize New Believers!

A miracle was about to happen on the dusty road leading south to Egypt and Ethiopia. An impressive chariot rolled along with a high-level government official in it who was reading from the Book of Isaiah.

God told Philip to join the man in that chariot. Philip then had the opportunity to explain the passages in Isaiah that the man had been reading and to preach the Gospel to him. When they came to some water, the Ethiopian eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" (Acts 8:36). Philip then baptized the Ethiopian eunuch in obedience to Christ's command:

Command Forty-Eight

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

The word translated baptism is derived from the Greek word baptizo, which means "to immerse, submerge for a religious purpose." Baptism is a spiritual participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Paul affirmed this when he stated, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:4).

The command to baptize disciples was carried out on the Day of Pentecost when 3,000 men were convicted of their sin and cried out to Peter and the other apostles: "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ...Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:37–38, 41).

Peter's response to those that were "cut to the heart" is important as it gives us some insight to the significance of baptism. His response address the:

- What should we do? - "Repent and be baptized"
- Who should do it? - "Every one of you"
- How should it be done? - By Immersion and "In the name of Jesus Christ"
- Why should it be done? - "For the forgiveness of your sins"

There are many who will mistakenly assert that baptism is a work and therefore, nothing more than an outward sign or public profession of our faith. They also state that "If baptism washed away our sins, then there would be no need for the blood of Christ." This could not be further from the truth as the Word of God clearly teaches that "This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21).

While baptism has no value in removing physical "dirt" from the body, it has profound spiritual significance. Speaking to the church at Rome, Paul asked "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection." (Romans 6:3-5).

Baptism is a spiritual participation in Jesus' death on the cross "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin." (Romans 6:6). In baptism, we are also "buried with Him" so that like Him, we are "raised from the dead" to "live a new life."

The scriptures leave no room for "mis-interpretation" in regards to the necessary elements in the plan of salvation. They are:

- **Hear the message**

"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17)

- **Believe in Jesus Christ**

"I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins" (John 8:24)

- **Repent**

"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:10)

- **Confess**

"That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Romans 10:9-10)

- **Baptism by immersion, for the forgiveness of sins**

"And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16)

What about the thief on the cross? The book of Luke records the conversation that took place on the cross between Jesus, and the two criminals who were also being crucified along with Him. The first criminal hurled insults at Jesus saying "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" (Luke 23:39). The second criminal expressed deep humility and remorse "... Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:40-42).

At this, Jesus replied "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). This passage is often used to incorrectly suggest that if the criminal could enter into paradise (presumably without being baptized), then baptism was not necessary for salvation. It is important to note three facts:

1. Jesus is the Son of God and had authority on earth to forgive sins (See Matthew 9:6)
2. At that time, all the living were still under Mosaic law, as the new covenant which began with the death of Jesus, had not come into effect. (See Hebrews 9:15-17)
3. Lastly, since baptism is uniting with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, it would be impossible to require baptism before those key events even occurred. (See Romans 6:5)

As baptism is the point at which our sins are forgiven (See Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16), it would be contrary to Scripture to suggest that we can somehow receive the gift of salvation, through faith in Jesus Christ, without our sins being forgiven. A person who professes to be a Christian and yet has not been "raised with Christ" through baptism, is still in sin (See 1 Corinthians 15:17).

Know the Purpose of Baptism!

The death rate following surgeries was extraordinarily high. The applicable phrase could well have been: "The operation was a success, but the patient died." At the time, patients usually died of infection rather than because of the surgery itself.

Then one man began to share his "revolutionary ideas" with the medical community. He urged surgeons simply to wash their hands before an operation and to use sterilized instruments. At first, fellow surgeons mocked and ridiculed Joseph Lister. They did not understand how cleanliness could have a direct effect on the success of their operations. However, as Dr. Lister began to have greater success in the surgeries he performed, others eventually began to adopt his techniques, and the post-surgery mortality rate was greatly reduced.

The need to cleanse the body of physical impurities should emphasize the vital importance of spiritual cleansing and separation from sin, which should characterize our lives after baptism.

Baptism does not physically cleanse us from sin. Rather, it is symbolic of our vicarious death, burial, and resurrection with Christ and should remind us of the holiness and newness of life to which we are called.

In Romans 6, Paul exclaims: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:1–4).

Paul continues the analogy of baptism to give great hope of victorious Christian living: "If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection" (Romans 6:5).

Just as Christ died once, in the life of a believer, baptism occurs once. However, the newness of life that baptism symbolizes requires a continual death to sin and living to God. "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires" (Romans 6:11–12).

Baptism does not guarantee victorious Christian living. The power of God's grace is required for daily victory.

It is the grace of God that brings salvation, "It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Titus 2:12). This is possible only as we acknowledge our total weakness and surrender ourselves to the reign of God's grace in our lives. That grace will give us the desire and the power to overcome sin. "so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:21).

If we have been striving to live the Christian life in our own strength, and failing, let's remember what baptism represents and acknowledge our total weakness as we yield the members of our bodies to God as slaves "to righteousness leading to holiness" (Romans 6:19).

Command 48: Baptize My Disciples

Related Character Quality

Cautiousness vs. Rashness

Cautiousness is knowing how important right timing is in accomplishing right actions.

What Is Cautiousness?

Cautiousness is recognizing that we have natural inclinations that are opposite to God's ways. These tendencies seem right but lead to destruction and death. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (Proverbs 16:25). "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8–9).

If we act according to our natural tendencies, we will act foolishly and pay a heavy price. "He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe" (Proverbs 28:26). "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5–6).

When people speak evil of us, it is our natural tendency to speak evil of them. The opposite response, doing good to them, is consistent with the teaching of Scripture. "... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" (Matthew 5:44–47).

How Do We Develop Cautiousness?

1. **Acknowledge that our natural inclinations are often wrong, and cry out to God for His wisdom.**
   - "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know" (Jeremiah 33:3).
   - "And call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me" (Psalm 50:15).
   - "And if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:3–5).
   - "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).
2. **Learn from the experiences of others.**

The biographies that God wrote in the Bible are filled with both rich counsel on how to do things God's way and accounts of what happens when God's ways are rejected. "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7).

King David thought that bringing the holy Ark of God to his capital city of Jerusalem would be a good idea. He organized a huge procession and began the venture. However, he failed to exercise the cautiousness of confirming his direction with Scripture.

The Ark was sacred, and God had given special instructions on how it should be moved. The Philistines, who captured the Ark, put it on an ox-drawn cart to return it to Israel. David thought he could use the same method; however, his idea resulted in death.

As the oxen pulled the cart, the cart was shaken. Uzzah reached out to steady it and instantly died, because no one was to touch the Ark. (See 2 Samuel 6:3–8.)

Later, David exercised cautiousness by following God's regulations for carrying the Ark. Two poles were put through the rings on opposite sides of the Ark, and it was carried on the shoulders of several priests. The Ark was safely delivered to Jerusalem, and all the people rejoiced. (See 1 Chronicles 15:11–15 and Exodus 25:10–15.)

3. **Consider the opposite action of natural inclinations.**

Since our natural inclinations are often opposite to God's universal principles, it may be helpful to ask, "What would I naturally do?" and then see if the opposite action is confirmed by Scripture. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105).

4. **Seek wise counsel.**

A caution sign on the highway may mean that others have not exercised sufficient cautiousness in that spot and have paid a costly price for it. A cautious driver will slow down, make sure he is following all the rules of the road, and be extra alert to danger.

There are similar "caution signs" on the highway of life. Others have failed to heed them and have painful memories to share. They will usually be willing to tell their stories to those who want

to avoid the consequences they experienced. We would be wise to learn from their mistakes. Get experience as inexpensively as you can—others have paid a high price for it! "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed" (Proverbs 15:22).

Personal Evaluation: How Cautious Are You?

- Do you seek God's will for every situation?
- Do you ask for counsel from wise and experienced people?
- Do you learn from the mistakes of others?
- Do you think about what you are going to say before you speak?
- Do you consider how your actions will affect others?
- Do you plan ahead and count the cost, especially for big endeavors?

Command 48: Baptize My Disciples | Day 332

Baptize in the Right Name!

The battle raged on for hundreds of years following the first century: a perpetual conflict between Gnosticism and true Christianity. The Gnostics regarded higher knowledge and secret revelation—rather than the revelation of the Scriptures—as supreme and as the basis of salvation. They denied the true humanity of Christ. The New Testament writers battled the seeds of this heresy in Scriptures such as Colossians 2:9: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form."

When a person is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, these heresies are refuted. (See Matthew 28:19.)

To baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is to honor each Person of the Godhead.

Each person of the Godhead has a specific function, not only in the creation of the world, but also in the redemption of mankind and the sanctification of believers.

God the Father is the source of all things. He is the One Who planned and ordained the redemption of mankind. Jesus, the Son, is the One through Whom all things were created. He is also the Sustainer and Preserver of the universe. He overcame the power of death and is now the risen Savior. He established and commissioned His Church, which is also His bride. The Holy Spirit is the One Who inspired the writing of Scripture and guides us into all truth. He indwells the bodies of all believers, who then become His living temples.

Around the first century, it was common for Gentiles who desired to convert to Judaism to be circumcised and baptized into the Jewish religion. It is likely that some of the 3,000 believers to whom Peter spoke on the Day of Pentecost were proselytes who had already been baptized into Judaism but had not been baptized in the name of Jesus. Thus, Peter declared:

"... Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

When we carry out baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and understand the meaning of each element, we can avoid much doctrinal confusion and establish a solid foundation for our faith. Let's ask God to help us understand the importance of each Person of the Godhead and the role each has in our lives.

Command 47: Baptize My Disciples | Day 333

Live Day to Day After Baptism!

Crowds cheered as the majestic sailing ship was christened and faced the ocean waves for its maiden voyage. The ship sailed to its destination and was loaded with the precious treasures of the New World. Once it was filled with as many goods as it could carry, the ship began its return voyage. However, a tragedy was about to take place. As the ship sailed along the coast, it

encountered a stretch of sharp coral reef that tore a gaping hole in its side. The hull rapidly filled with water and the ship sank.

This mighty sailing ship was built to withstand the powerful winds and waves but not to sustain major damage to its hull. Future shipbuilders lessened this risk by adding multiple watertight compartments to the design of the ship's hull. This meant that if one compartment filled with water because of a hole, the ship could remain afloat because the rest of the compartments were sealed off.

The same principle can help us live in victory. We shouldn't let the things that happened yesterday "sink" our ship. Just because yesterday's "compartment" was full of problems and challenges, we should not let those difficulties dominate the new day. We must learn to live one day at a time. Jesus made this point clear when He said:

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:34).

The problems of yesterday will rob us of today's joy, and the concerns of tomorrow will often hinder our ability to see creative solutions for the challenges or tasks we are facing today. What does all of this have to do with baptism?

Baptism represents death to sin, to self, and to our old way of life; it also represents the newness of life that God gives us through salvation. (See Romans 6:4.) Through baptism, we proclaim our decision to both submit to Christ as our Lord, and receive Him as our savior.

When we keep the perspective that we "died" in baptism, each day thereafter can be viewed as an extension of life from God, to be lived for Him.

On December 24, 1995, I was almost electrocuted while giving a chalk talk in Moscow, Russia. Afterwards, I realized that my life had been spared by the miraculous intervention of God. Since that event, I have more fully treasured each day as a special opportunity that is entrusted to me by the Lord. I know that I must live it out as fully as I can, because I will have to give an account to the Lord for how I used it.

I meet many people today who are taking medications for depression, hypertension, insomnia, and other ailments. In many cases, their suffering is due to living with yesterday's problems and tomorrow's concerns. We are not to be anxious about the problems of life, but rather to place our confidence in the Lord and bring those needs to Him in prayer. (See Philippians 4:6.) Let's purpose to live one day at a time in the strength of God's grace so that we can bring Him glory and experience the lasting success He wants to give us.

Command 48: Baptize My Disciples

Study Question

Q: Why did Jesus send out His disciples to teach and baptize, but "did not send me [Paul] to baptize, but to preach the gospel"? (See Matthew 28:19 and 1 Corinthians 1:17.)

A: Paul baptized very few believers, and Jesus did not baptize any; however, their disciples baptized other believers. (See John 4:1–2.) When Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, he reproved them for their sinful divisions:

"... One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. … For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel …" (1 Corinthians 1:12–17).

Paul later reminded the Corinthian church that they had all been baptized by one Spirit into Christ's body and warned them to guard against schisms that would divide and distract them. (See 1 Corinthians 12:13, 25.) He recognized the danger of Christian leaders attracting loyalty to themselves or to their group by adding their own requirements or methods to the simple command of Jesus to believe and be baptized.

Therefore, Paul's focus throughout his entire ministry was simply to preach the Gospel and make disciples wherever he went, according to Christ's command: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19–20).

Command 48: Baptize My Disciples | Day 334

Recognize Analogies of Baptism!

At the Lord's direction, 12,000 men were chosen from the tribes of Israel to go to war against the Midianites. The children of Israel were victorious and conquered the nation of Midian. (See Numbers 31:1–12.) When they returned with the spoils of the war, Eleazar the priest told the Israelites: "… anything else that can withstand fire must be put through the fire, and then it will be clean. But it must also be purified with the water of cleansing. And whatever cannot withstand fire must be put through that water" (Numbers 31:23).

God's command to His people to purify the spoils of war from a Gentile nation before they could be used gives us a picture of baptism by water and fire for purification. This is the same pattern we see in the redemption of man. The Lord Jesus fought for the souls of men and conquered Satan. Believers are, in effect, the "spoils" of that war, and they need to be cleansed.

At salvation, Christ's blood redeems, cleanses, and makes our spirits righteous in God's sight. Then the Holy Spirit begins an ongoing work of searching, cleansing, and purifying our souls.

It is significant that God gives us analogies to baptism in the Old Testament. The deliverance of the nation of Israel from the bondage of Egypt is similar to God's deliverance of a person from the bondage of sin through salvation. Then, God "baptized" the entire nation of Israel by leading them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, taking them through the Red Sea. "… our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Corinthians 10:1–2). Just as they were baptized unto Moses by water and fire, so we are baptized unto Jesus by water and fire.

The passage goes on to explain that even though all of Israel was baptized, "… God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters. … We should not commit sexual immorality. … We should not test the Lord. … And do not grumble … ." (1 Corinthians 10:5–12). When we find ourselves doing those things that displease the Lord, we should seek the cleansing that He makes available to us.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

The Flood provides another analogy of baptism: "… in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:20–21).

These analogies illustrate important aspects of baptism and help us understand the great importance of the cleansing that baptism symbolizes. The Lord will use fiery trials throughout our lifetime and the water of His Word to conform us into His image. Let's purpose to allow God to take us through the water and fire to make us usable for accomplishing great works!

Command 48: Baptize My Disciples | Day 335

Identify With Christ in Baptism!

It was a disgrace to the watching world. Those who claimed to be Christians were getting drunk during the communion meals. Others were going without food because they could not afford it. Arguing, contentions, and lawsuits among those who were supposed to love each other were

rampant. These believers were even committing immorality that was more shameful than anything the pagans did!

Paul was grieved when he learned what was taking place at the church in Corinth. In a letter of stern rebuke and exhortation, he confronted them about their sin and challenged them to place their loyalty in Christ alone, Who died for them and Who was the foundation of their faith.

"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Knowing that the effectiveness of the church required a spirit of unity among all the members, Paul was greatly troubled when he heard that there were divisions and factions among the Corinthian believers. Therefore, he wrote: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. … One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name" (1 Corinthians 1:10, 12–15).

Paul identified sinfulness as the root of their problems: "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ … . You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?" (1 Corinthians 3:1, 3).

Baptism is to be an identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, not a denominational division.

One of the most convicting complaints by nonbelievers against Christians is the complaint that hypocrisy and disunity exist among believers. Nonbelievers immediately recognize the contentions and factions caused by believers who fail to identify first with Christ. For example, when a Christian is asked about his faith, often he will say: "I am a Methodist (of John Wesley)," or "I am a Presbyterian (of John Knox)," or "I am a Lutheran (of Martin Luther)," or "I am a Baptist (of John Calvin), etc. Denominationalism is unscriptural.

Paul was grateful that he himself had not baptized many believers, because he recognized the danger of attracting loyalty to himself rather than to the Lord. To him, unity in the Body of Christ was of utmost importance.

Jesus taught, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Let's purpose to let our identification with Christ be known to the world through our unselfish love for all members of the Body of Christ.

Command 48: Baptize My Disciples | Day 336

Put on Christ in Baptism!

In desperation, he came for counseling. How could he conquer two addictions that were destroying his body and soul? The first addiction was to liquor and the second was to pornography. These addictions were robbing him of time, money, and fellowship with God and his family. He had tried for years to rid himself of these damaging habits, but nothing had worked.

There was one primary reason for his continual defeat. He was violating the instructions of Romans 13:12–14: "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

In his basement, this man kept numerous bottles of liquor, pornographic magazines, and a computer by which he could access pornographic websites. He obviously was making much

provision for his fleshly desires. Yet, even if he removed these provisions from his life, how was he to "put on" Christ?

"for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:27).

Paul affirmed that baptism represents death to sin, and being raised to walk in newness of life. (See Romans 6:4.) This newness of life should have several characteristics:

First, we are to tear down all barriers that would hinder believers from being united in Christ. "for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27–28). This bond of unity should transcend any national, cultural, economic, or gender divisions.

Based on this unity among believers, there should be genuine love between one another that expresses itself in generous giving to the needs of others. We see this kind of love demonstrated after Pentecost: "Those who accepted his message were baptized … . All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" (Acts 2:41, 44–45). Lydia demonstrated generosity through hospitality after her baptism. (See Acts 16:15.)

Another characteristic of our "newness of life" is moral purity: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ [symbolized in baptism], set your hearts on things above … . … Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:1, 5).

"... Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Romans 12:9).

To "put off" sin is not enough. We need to renew our souls (mind, will, and emotions). We can renew our souls by memorizing and meditating on God's Word, so that His Word permeates our lives. James wrote, "Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you" (James 1:21).

Let's purpose to live in the reality of our death to sin and walk in the newness of life that Christ has given us by putting on Christ and doing those things that are pleasing in His sight. In your journal this week, write about your baptism and the changes that have come into your life since that time. Also, write about your experiences in living "one day at a time."

Daily Scriptures

Matthew 28:19

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

Acts 2:38

"Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Acts 8:36

"As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"

Ephesians 4:4–6

"There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

Mark 16:15–16

"He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

1 Peter 3:21

"and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Command 49: Receive God's Power | Day 337

Be Endued With Power!

He quietly entered and began walking through the mill, looking at the faces of the young people working there. Many of them recognized him because they had come to hear him preach the night before. Now, as Charles Finney looked at them, one by one they began to tremble and weep until finally the factory owner said, "Stop the mill, and let the people attend to religion; for it is more important that our souls should be saved than that this factory run." Within a few days, nearly all the workers at this factory had been saved.

The same effectiveness in converting sinners followed Charles Finney throughout his lifetime. It began after his own conversion when he received a special anointing of the Holy Spirit's power, spoken of in Christ's command:

Command Forty-Nine

"I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49).

A group of about 120 people, including the disciples, stayed in Jerusalem for 10 days until the Holy Spirit came upon them with power for the special ministry of establishing the church. (See Acts 1–2.) The factors that were required of them in order to receive that anointing of the Holy Spirit are also applicable for us today.

First, they followed Jesus' strategy by beginning in Jerusalem. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). God wanted His power to be demonstrated "at home" before His followers went to all other nations.

Your "Jerusalem" is your family and community—often the hardest places to live for God. The people who know us best do not expect powerful things to come from us. Even Jesus experienced this and said, "... Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor" (Mark 6:4).

The disciples were initially filled with the Holy Spirit by Jesus after His resurrection (see John 20:22), and believers today are indwelled with the Holy Spirit at baptism. However, this command speaks of further anointings of the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish the great works for which He created us.

Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit at salvation but later was given a special anointing for ministry. (See Acts 9:17, 13:2.)

We will never be effective for the Lord in other cities and nations until we first learn how to wait upon the Lord in our "Jerusalem." As we look to the Lord for direction, He will give us power to demonstrate His love to our most difficult "mission field." Let's take a new look at our "Jerusalem," and ask God for the power of His Spirit to demonstrate His love to all those around us.

Command 49: Receive God's Power | Day 338

Perfect the Power of Grace!

Coughing and sputtering, his arms flailed wildly as he fought desperately to stay afloat. His strength waned while he continued to struggle, not noticing the life preserver that had been thrown to him by an attentive lifeguard. Meanwhile, the lifeguard kept his eyes fixed on the struggling man, ready to spring into action the moment the life preserver was grasped. Nothing could be done to help the drowning man until he stopped struggling, took hold of the life preserver, and allowed himself to be pulled to safety.

This illustration is analogous to our lives. God knows our struggles and our inability to overcome them on our own. He has extended to us His powerful grace. Yet, we must first stop depending on our own efforts before He will demonstrate His power and might in our lives.

Only when we recognize and acknowledge our total weakness can we ask for and receive the power of God's grace.

If we were totally honest with ourselves, most of us would probably acknowledge that we try to live for God to the best of our abilities, and then when special problems come we ask God for the strength to get through them. However, herein lies the problem! Living for the Lord is not our works plus God's grace; it is completely a work of God's grace in our weaknesses. In order to remind us of our inability to do any acceptable work for God apart from His grace, He gives us inborn weaknesses.

Three times the Apostle Paul appealed to God to remove his particular weakness, which he called a "thorn in the flesh." However, God explained: "… My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness …" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Paul discovered that when he became weak, he was strong in the power of God. (See 2 Corinthians 12:10.)

God's grace is His divine favor toward us, and it gives us the desire and power to do His will. Jesus declared, "By myself I can do nothing …" (John 5:30). Yet, He was "full of grace and truth" to carry out His heavenly Father's will. (See John 1:14.) Paul stated the same thing: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10).

Let's recognize and embrace our total inability to do anything for God apart from His grace, and "approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Command 49: Receive God's Power

Related Character Quality

Orderliness vs. Disorganization

Orderliness is preparing myself and my surroundings so that I will achieve the greatest efficiency.

How to Be Orderly

1. Follow a wise schedule.

God's first act in Creation was a demonstration of orderliness. He created light and then separated the light from the darkness. "God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night" (Genesis 1:5).

Many of us are familiar with this time-honored proverb: Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise. The truth of this saying is guaranteed if we meditate on Scripture while going to sleep and waking up in the morning. "Blessed is the man … . [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. … Whatever he does prospers" (Psalm 1:1–3).

As orderly people, we should make the best use of every minute, because time is our most valuable asset.

2. Practice orderly behavior.

Orderly behavior is in harmony with the will of God and allows the Holy Spirit to produce His fruit in our lives. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22–23). Disorderly conduct is described in Galatians 5:19–21: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Perverted behavior occurs when that which God created for one purpose is instead used for an adverse and damaging purpose.

3. Maintain clean surroundings.

Clutter breeds filth and confusion. The saying "cleanliness is next to godliness" is not quite accurate, because cleanliness is indeed part of godliness. (See Exodus 19:10–11, Leviticus 10:10, and 2 Corinthians 6:17.)

Orderliness is easier to maintain when we keep only those things that are needed, have a place for everything we keep, and keep things in good repair.

4. Have order in God's house.

Church order begins with qualified leadership. "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Timothy 3:5). Order also involves coming to the house of God with reverence for the King of all the earth.

Orderliness also pertains to the sequence in which we give gifts to God. We are to give Him the firstfruits of all our increase, including the first part of our day, our week, and our income. "Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine" (Proverbs 3:9–10).

To accurately portray Christ to the world, order within the church service is also important. "So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? … For God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (1 Corinthians 14:23, 33).

Personal Evaluation: How Orderly Are You?

- Do you begin your day with quality time with the Lord and wise planning?
- Do you go to bed early and go to sleep meditating on Scripture?
- Do you seek to discern God's will for every decision?
- Do your clothing and appearance reflect order and show respect for how God made you?
- Do you have an orderly system for necessary record-keeping?
- Do you maintain your home, yard, and car carefully?
- Do you have a place for everything and keep everything in its place, or do you own more than you can keep organized?

Win Battles With "No Power!"

It was an awesome array of military might: An army of 580,000 mighty men of valor, all well armed and skillful in warfare. However, the army that came against them had a million men and 300 chariots!

King Asa could have simply asked God to give him some additional power to equalize the two-to-one disadvantage his army had. Instead, he did two things that brought him the victory. First, he cried out to the Lord, acknowledging that all his military might was of no significance compared to the power of God.

King Asa said: *"LORD, there is no one like you to help the powerless against the mighty …" (2 Chronicles 14:11).*

The second thing Asa did was to acknowledge that the battle was not between himself and the enemy, rather it was between the enemy and God. "… Help us, O LORD our God, for we rely on you, and in your name we have come against this vast army. O LORD, you are our God; do not let man prevail against you" (2 Chronicles 14:11).

The results were spectacular as God's power was unleashed: "The LORD struck down the Cushites before Asa and Judah … and Asa and his army pursued them … Such a great number

of Cushites fell that they could not recover; they were crushed before the LORD and his forces. The men of Judah carried off a large amount of plunder" (2 Chronicles 14:12–13).

David recognized these same vital truths when he faced the giant Goliath. He said: "… You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me … for the battle is the LORD's …" (1 Samuel 17:45–47).

When we are on the Lord's side, it doesn't matter how big the foes are; God is always stronger and more powerful.

I have met many people who had disabling diseases that the medical community said were incurable. As we talk, I first make sure that they are born-again believers who have dedicated their bodies to God. If they have, then it is actually God's body, not theirs that is in need of restored health.

Then I ask them to determine the ways in which they will benefit God's kingdom if He should decide to heal them. Finally, we cry out together for the Lord's power to triumph in their weaknesses. (See Psalm 50:15.) Many times the Lord has demonstrated His power by miraculously healing the person. With some the results have been immediate, and with others healing has come over a period of time; however, all who have acknowledged their total weakness and have asked God for His mighty power, have experienced the work of God in their souls, giving them a new confidence in God's claim: "I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?" (Jeremiah 32:27).

We all face "impossible foes" in our own lives and as we seek to minister to others. Some challenges are physical and some are spiritual. Too often we think that we must be the ones to overcome them. However, the path to victory is to acknowledge our total weakness before God and our need for His strength. Therefore, let's look to the Lord to give us the victory and rejoice in His mighty power!

Command 49: Receive God's Power | Day 340

Increase Power Through Testing!

After Jesus was baptized by John, He was "full of the Holy Spirit" and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for testing. Christ stood firm against Satan's temptations by responding to each one with the Word of God. After passing these tests, He returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit and "news about him spread through the whole countryside." (See Luke 4:1–14.) This same sequence of filling, testing, and receiving increased power of the Spirit is evident throughout the New Testament and can take place in our lives as well.

Our human tendency is to avoid pain, suffering, and trials. However, if we face these tests of faith by relying on God's grace, He will strengthen us through them, and we will experience a greater measure of His power in our lives. Therefore, by looking at difficulties from God's perspective, we can see that they are not intended to destroy us, but they are actually opportunities to have more of His power flowing through our lives! James revealed his understanding of this perspective when he wrote:

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2–4).

We are told that "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). What types of tests can we expect God to lead us through in order to experience more of His power? God's testing includes:

1. **Painful Trials:** "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice …" (1 Peter 4:12–13). Fire

burns away the dross in our lives and makes our faith stronger. Paul suffered the loss of all things with joy so that he might know more of Christ. (See Philippians 3:7–10.)

2. **Infirmities:** These are physical weaknesses that God designed into us or allows us to experience to remind us to call upon Him and rely upon His grace. "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (2 Corinthians 12:9).
3. **Reproaches:** These often come in the form of ridicule and reviling in response to our commitment to Christ and to the holiness that God's Spirit requires of us. "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Peter 4:14).
4. **Tribulations:** "… In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Tribulation includes great distress, grief, afflictions, and being crushed. We can rejoice in the midst of it, because tribulation produces patience, which results in experience, which leads to hope, which causes the love of God to be shed abroad in our hearts. (See Romans 5:3–5.)

What is our perspective of temptations, painful trials, infirmities, reproaches, and tribulations? Do we see testing as part of God's work of purifying our souls and conforming us to the image of Christ? As we pass the tests that God brings into our lives by properly responding to them, we will experience an increased measure of the Holy Spirit's power in our lives.

Command 49: Receive God's Power

Study Question

Q: If a person is indwelled by the Holy Spirit at the point of salvation, why did the believers in the Corinthian church succumb to such gross immorality and sinfulness? (See Romans 8:16 and 1 Corinthians 3:1–4.)

A: There are three stages of work that the Holy Spirit carries out in our lives in order to produce fruit that glorifies the Lord. The moment we become believers, we receive the Holy Spirit, and He "testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Romans 8:16). However, the Spirit's work has just begun.

Once we are filled with God's Spirit, we will be tested by His Spirit. The purpose of this testing is to purify our souls [mind, will, and emotions] and conform us to the image of Christ. When we respond correctly to the tests of the Holy Spirit, then God brings upon our lives the power of the Holy Spirit. The power of God's Spirit is actually the power to exhibit His fruit in our lives—beginning with the power to love others as God has loved us.

Although the Corinthian believers had received the Holy Spirit at salvation, they failed to pass the tests that followed. They quenched the power of God in their lives and became entangled in immorality and worldly philosophies. Only by passing the tests God chooses for us will we be able to fully experience the glory, virtue, and power of God's Holy Spirit.

In order to allow the Holy Spirit to achieve all of His goals in our lives and to accomplish mighty works in and through us, we should thank Him for indwelling our spirits at salvation. Then we should invite Him to fill and rule our souls, and we should yield the control of our bodies to Him.

Choose to Pass Tests!

He hurried down the concourse to catch an important connecting flight. As he arrived at the gate, he noticed that the door was closed and the airplane was just pulling away. Looking at his watch, he stepped up to the counter and said, "I don't understand. The airplane is leaving eight minutes early. I really needed to be on that flight."

The representative replied, "Yes, unfortunately the airplane left early, and I am sorry but we cannot call it back." After making arrangements to be included on the next flight, the pastor sat down to wait. A little while later, the representative, who had been watching him closely, came over and asked, "Why are you so pleasant? I expected that you would get angry after what happened."

The pastor explained, "I belong to God. He controls all things. If He wanted me on that airplane, He would have kept it here until it was originally scheduled to depart. I know that since He didn't allow me to catch that flight, He must have something better for me, and for that I am grateful." This pastor passed an important test to get more of God's power:

"give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

How can we prepare to "pass the tests" that God gives us? One of the most important ways is to develop a thankful heart that recognizes and accepts His sovereignty in our lives.

There are at least four good reasons why we should give thanks for whatever God allows to happen in our lives. First of all, God is in control of all things. Nothing happens without His awareness and permission, not even the falling of one sparrow. Therefore, we can be sure that God is fully aware of everything that happens to us. (See Matthew 10:29–31.)

Second, if we love the Lord and are committed to doing His will, then we can be confident that what He allows to happen will be for our ultimate good. (See Romans 8:28.)

Third, one of the highest purposes for which God allows difficulties in our lives is to conform us to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we learn to respond as Christ would to whatever situations we face, we develop His characteristics, including patience, endurance, compassion, discernment, wisdom, humility, self-control, and many other important qualities. (See Hebrews 12:5–11 and Romans 8:29.)

Fourth, God wants to teach us His ways, which are higher than our ways, and His thoughts, which are higher than our thoughts. (See Isaiah 55:9.) By humbling ourselves and thanking God for whatever He allows us to experience, we will demonstrate meekness, which is strength under control. Scripture promises, "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way" (Psalm 25:9).

When we rejoice in tribulation, we gain patience, experience, hope, and love, which come by the power of the Holy Spirit. (See Romans 5:3–5.)

This pastor thanked God for allowing Him to miss his airplane, because he knew it was the right thing to do. However, he later had more reasons to be thankful when he learned that the airplane he missed had tragically crashed.

If we want to experience more of the power of the Holy Spirit, we must begin by fully surrendering ourselves to His control and exhibiting a grateful attitude for whatever He allows in our lives.

Do Not Grieve Your Power Source!

There was no future for him as a Christian in his native land. He desperately wanted freedom from the oppressive Communist regime, but was not sure what he should do about it. As he sought the Lord for direction, God made it clear that he was to leave. In the days that followed, he made an unusual acquaintance with a former border guard who offered to lead this Christian to freedom. They met together and made careful plans for the escape.

On the appointed night, they started out. The former guard told him, "You must follow me closely or this will not work." The Christian agreed and they began what turned out to be a harrowing experience, but when it was all over, he was free!

The Holy Spirit is the only One Who can lead us to spiritual freedom. We are not to grieve Him or quench His power in our lives.

Jesus promised that He would send the Holy Spirit to the disciples after He departed from them. (See John 16:7.) The power of the Holy Spirit came upon them as He descended in "a violent wind" and filled the room. Each disciple had a tongue like fire upon his head, and they began doing mighty deeds. (See Acts 2.)

It is important for us to realize that the Holy Spirit is a person of the Godhead, not simply a power. He responds to us as a person. Therefore, we are instructed to "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30). If we grieve the Holy Spirit, we will quench His power in our lives and violate the command: "Do not put out the Spirit's fire" (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

On the other hand, if we walk in the power of God's Spirit and follow His instructions, He will lead us to freedom from the bondage and destruction of sin! Thus Paul stated: "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature …" (Galatians 5:16–18).

The Scriptures go on to list the types of things that grieve the Holy Spirit, beginning with the works of the flesh, which are: "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like" (Galatians 5:19–21).

"Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25).

In order for God's Spirit to be "at home" in our lives, we must give careful attention to the matters that concern Him. "The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. … And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you" (Romans 8:6–11).

Let's examine our lives and ask the Holy Spirit to show us what things we are doing that grieve Him and quench His power within us. By confessing these sins and obeying God's Spirit we will be able to delight in true freedom and have His power flowing through our lives.

I'm Tough, I'm Tough

by Ken Pierpont

Calling For Help

I took my three-year old son Charles to the church one day. Leaving his books on the floor he shuffled down the hall to the men's room. When he didn't come back right away, I decided to approach the door to investigate. I heard the little guy puttering around and singing, and I imagined him on his tiptoes trying to wash his hands. I decided to have a little fun with him and held my foot against the door so he couldn't exit. Then I waited. The water shut off and soon I felt a little "bump" against the door. It didn't budge.

Not readily discouraged by this set back, since the restroom door often stuck in humid weather, his voice came faintly from the other side of the room: "I'm tough, I'm tough." He ran and slammed himself into the door. When it didn't move, he paused, took a deep breath and cried out with an intensity that shocked me: "Daaaaaaaaaaaaad!"

He then repeated the scenario.

"I'm tough, I'm tough." Silence. Then "thud" on the door.

"Daaaaaaaaaad!"

The fear in his voice touched my heart and I quickly pulled open the door. As Charles realized what I had done, we laughed together.

Thinking about this event I realized that my own reaction to life is often similar to my young son Charles' reaction to the stubborn door. When I come up against a difficult problem, I throw all my weight against it. I say, "I'm tough, I'm tough." Sometimes when I give it everything I have I find that problems give way. But there are those times when every ounce of strength I can muster, every bit of creativity at my disposal, every talent I can apply leaves me helpless with my problem. Then I remember to cry out "Daaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaad" and my Heavenly Father's heart is stirred by the desperation of my cry and He comes to my help. The Fatherly heart of God is tuned to my cry! "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

You won't be long on this earth before you find out you are no match for life alone. God didn't intend for you to try to do things supernaturally with your own natural ability and He has a specific way for you to overcome and help others do the same.

Weapons For Battle

We live in perilous times. Spiritual warfare takes place all around us. There is a cosmic battle in the unseen realm where demons and angels struggle for the allegiance of the souls of men, women and children. (See Romans 1:20.)

Spiritual conflicts play out right there in your neighborhood. Spiritual casualties result—eternity spent in the torments of hell. We are entrusted with the privilege and responsibility to be agents in this struggle. We are commissioned to be agents in the outcome of this life-and-death wrestling for souls. Everyone you know is a spiritual being. The neighbors, garbage collectors, and the grocer, the one that you pass at an intersection: each will end up in heaven or hell. Everyone you know will live forever either in the presence of God or in the torments of hell, and we can influence their eternal destiny.

Security

This simple message of truth, once believed and received, will secure eternal life for anyone who turns from their sin and comes to Christ. That simple message of truth is called the gospel. It is the good news that Jesus died so that sinners can be forgiven.

So that we aren't overwhelmed by the task of seeing a person who has no apparent understanding or interest in spiritual things, it is helpful to understand how God works. When someone comes to faith in Christ, it is a process, it is a team effort and it is a miracle of God.

The Planned Process

God works on a timeline drawing a person to Himself. We don't have to guide a person in a few minutes from total ignorance or antagonism toward God and spiritual things to repentance and conversion.

We can explain that message of truth and prepare the soil of their heart and plant the seed of truth in it. We can invite them to places where that life-giving message will be explained. We can give them books or pamphlets or tapes or videos that make that message clear. We live in such a way that makes that message attractive to them.

Yet we must remember that God only uses us to "nudge" them one step closer because it is a process. The journey of faith is a journey of many stages, and it is God that develops those stages.

Working as a Team

God works with teams, small platoons of faithful Christians, each contributing something unique. Every Christian has a particular strength to contribute. We don't have to do everything alone. When God begins to draw a person to Himself, He will burden someone to pray for them. He will bring circumstances to bear that make that person receptive. He will place a number of Christians in his path.

"Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying 'One sows and another reaps' is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor" (John 4:36-38).

"What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe —as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ...The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:5-6, 8-9).

Your Unique Gift

You are not the whole team. Instead, you are one player with a simple job to do. Each person shows their special ability, often called a spiritual gift, in various ways. Some are good at building, others at organizing. Some are great with words. Some are gifted in hospitality. Some are good at making sin clear and stirring the conscience of one who is far from God.

It's encouraging to know that you are especially gifted to do that job and to do it well. Your God-given ability is actually supernaturally empowered. These may seem like benign and simple gestures, but all put together and empowered of God they are factors in spiritual warfare. I love the way Joe Aldrich put it:

"Bake bread, pies, cookies, or muffins. Fix garbage disposals or toilets, help people with their homes or projects, celebrate with them, and grieve with them. Done in the name of Christ such actions become spirit-empowered weapons which are mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds."

You are "supercharged" to be effective in accomplishing God's purpose and in His time. The battle happens in the unseen realm of the spirit, and you can whisper, "I'm tough, I'm tough" when you realize God fully equips and empowers you to accomplish your job in the fight.

Command 49: Receive God's Power | Day 343

Get Fresh Power Every Day!

A famous mountain climber who was praised for conquering Mount Everest once made this somber declaration: "In mountain climbing, there are no conquerors, only survivors." One of the primary necessities for surviving the treacherous and grueling ordeal of climbing up and down a mountain is having a proper supply of food and oxygen.

Some of the most touching diary entries of mountain climbers are the final words of those who are found frozen to death, describing how they were pinned down by an unexpected blizzard and consequently ran out of provisions.

In the same way that a mountain climber needs the right daily provisions to survive, we need the daily power of the Holy Spirit.

Packages of food and bottles of oxygen are life-and-death necessities for mountain climbers. In our spiritual lives, the Holy Spirit and nourishment from the Word of God are equally as necessary. Jesus stated: "… Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Jesus gave His disciples practical insight on how to get a daily provision of God's power when He said: "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:11–13).

Just as we can ask for and receive daily food from God, so we can ask our heavenly Father on a daily basis for the filling of the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 5:18 tells us to "be filled with the Spirit."

There is the need not only to be indwelled by the Holy Spirit at salvation but also to have the power of God's Spirit transforming our souls and controlling our physical bodies on a continual basis. Only when this is true can we walk in the Spirit and have the power we need for daily victory. (See Galatians 5:16.)

Each day we can ask our heavenly Father to give us daily bread and a fresh anointing of His Holy Spirit.

Since learning this important Biblical truth, I have had the joy not only of acknowledging my complete inability to do anything for God and, therefore, asking Him for the grace and wisdom I need for the day, but also the joy of asking Him daily to fill me anew with His Holy Spirit. Each time that I do this, I have the sense of being properly equipped to face the day in God's power rather than with my own feeble efforts. I urge you to begin asking God for a fresh filling of His Spirit on a daily basis.

In this week's journal entry, let's record how we experienced more of the power of God's grace by recognizing and acknowledging our total inability to live the Christian life. Then let's record the results of daily coming to God's throne of grace and asking for His power.

True learning takes place when information changes our lives and we are then able to tell someone else how it happened. Based on this, I encourage you to review the journal entries you have made over the past 49 weeks and select some that would be special encouragements to others. Each of these reports can become a significant chapter of your life message. As you share them with those whom you disciple, they will receive practical encouragement to be further conformed to the image of Christ and to develop His character in their lives.

Daily Scriptures

Luke 24:49

"I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high".

Acts 1:8

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

John 20:21–22

"Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Romans 8:15–16

"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

2 Timothy 1:7

"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."

Galatians 5:22–23, 25

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. … Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

Luke 11:13

"If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"