

Walking In The Spirit

Workbook 4 – Studies 76-100

Mustard-Seed Ministry & The Principles of the Kingdom



25 brief studies plus 33 questions in the workbook section.
Please read all the studies before attempting the workbook questions

Eternity Christian Fellowship
304 E. Realty St.
Carson CA 90745
Email: johned@aibi.ph

(Donations to support this work are appreciated and can be sent to the above address)

© Copyright, John Edmiston / Eternity Christian Fellowship 2009

This work may be freely used and distributed for non-profit Christian (Kingdom) purposes, providing that it is not changed and that there is proper attribution of authorship. It is not to be sold in any way.

Table of Contents

How To Use This Workbook	- 3
Mustard-Seed Ministry	- 4
The Kingdom of God Is Like Leaven	- 6
Loaves and Fishes: Consecration and Multiplication	- 8
Christ, The Mustard Seed	- 10
God As Our Resource	- 12
The Small Important Things	-14
The Parable Of The Sower	-16
Seeking The Specific Goodness of God	-20
Being Astonished By God	- 23
The Benefits of Complaining (To The Lord)	- 26
The Wheat and The Tares	- 29
The Parable of the Dragnet	-32
Sudden Disaster	-35
The Unfruitful Fig Tree	- 38
The Woman Bent Double	- 41
The Narrow Gate	- 44
Fifteen Useful Spiritual Principles	- 47
True Faith vs. False Faith	- 50
Assurance of Salvation	- 54
Fulfilling The Law	- 57
Our Key Leadership Differences (Between the Church and the World)	- 60
Three Good Reasons To Pray	- 63
The Prayer of Mercy	- 65
God, Mammon and Eternity	-68
A New Commandment	-71
Review Questions	- 74

How To Use This Workbook

This workbook can be used for personal study or in a group setting such as in a church or bible class.

It is in black and white, letter-sized format for easy reproduction & distribution.

This manual is designed for anyone who wants to learn about Walking In The Spirit. I have tried to avoid using any highly specialized theological language.

You may readily translate this manual into another language providing that you ask permission by sending me an email at: johned@aibi.ph

PERSONAL STUDY

Read one study per day and you will finish all 25 studies in just under a month. Then go on and do the exercises at the end of the manual. These 33 questions will help reinforce what you have learned.

WEEK-BY-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

Do one or at most two studies per week in your group allowing plenty of time for discussion.

Check out the bible verses that are referenced.

Always ask what people are learning on an individual level from the study e.g. "Mary what was the point that struck you most today?"

Emphasize application to practical daily issues of life.

Each week collect prayer points from group members and close in prayer.

When you have completed the manual go right through all the exercises as a way of tying it all together.

AS A TRAINING COURSE

Send copies of the manual (by post or email) to the students and give them about one month to read the material and do the exercises (see personal study section above). Make yourself available as a mentor during this time.

Then gather all the students together for *at least* three hours, open in worship (30 minutes) and then review the manual and go through the exercise questions together.

Get the students to submit their answers to the exercises to you, then grade them. (There are 33 questions so each answer can be worth 3% with 1% given just for showing up!)

76: Mustard-Seed Ministry

There are five references to 'mustard-seeds' in the Bible, in two contexts. One referring to the Kingdom of God, and the other to our faith:

Kingdom of God

Matthew 13:31-32 MKJV *He put out another parable to them, saying, The kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; (32) which indeed is the least of all seeds, but when it is grown it is the greatest among herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in its branches.*

Mark 4:30-32 ESV *And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? (31) It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, (32) yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."*

Luke 13:18-19 ESV *He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? (19) It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."*

Faith

Matthew 17:20 MKJV *And Jesus said to them, Because of your unbelief. For truly I say to you, If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, Move from here to there. And it shall move. And nothing shall be impossible to you.*

Luke 17:6 ESV *And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."*

Yellow mustard seed is extremely small and fine, almost like flour. It is sold online at "100 mesh and up". Which means the largest particle is 149 microns in diameter which is approximately 0.006 inches. This is around twice the thickness of a human hair. Black mustard seed is larger, about the size of the head of a pin. The resulting shrub can grow 12 to 15 feet high (4-5 meters).

In ancient Jewish thought the mustard seed was the smallest thing that had any real existence. It was, in some ways, their idea of the 'atom' or basic particle size. The mustard seed was also seen as a symbol of the humble ego. The thing that did not boast of itself.

The Roman historian Pliny describes the ancient mustard plant: *With its pungent taste and fiery effect, mustard is extremely beneficial for the health It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand, when it has once been sown, it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once. (Pliny, "Natural History" 19.170-171)*

Later (around 200 AD) the Mishnah forbade the planting of mustard seeds in domestic gardens because the tiny seeds would be spread everywhere by the wind (including the neighbor's yard) and the seeds would 'germinate at once" (in 3-10 days in cold moist soil) in turn producing a new mustard plant which would repeat the process until it was totally out of control like a noxious weed.

The Kingdom metaphors are obvious: small beginnings, becomes large, spreads everywhere, out of control, impossible to eradicate, blown by the wind of the Spirit, immediate propagation, 3 days in the earth (grave) before new life, fiery, pungent, cleansing, healing.

A mustard-seed ministry starts small and is full of faith and of the life of God so that it rapidly propagates in bible studies, small cell groups, house churches and is 'blown by the wind of the Spirit' to start in new places and spread new life there as well. Soon these small bible studies become churches on their own so that people can come and be at home there and they can be places of spiritual rest.

Mustard-seed ministry is fiery and holy and pungent and healing. It brings the gifts and the power of the Spirit to bear. It moves mountains and uproots the established order of evil and oppression and casts it into the sea.

Mustard-seed ministry is always counter-cultural to some extent. It is the outbreak of the Kingdom of God amongst the kingdoms of this world. It upsets the principalities and powers of wickedness that seek to control the governments, religions, media and business operations of this world.

The mustard-seed is small and humble and planted in the earth, the very opposite of the boastful self-exalting sin of the Devil who sought to set his throne 'above the most High' (Isaiah 14:13,14). Yet this radical humility brings great vitality and fruitfulness and in the end the mustard-seed becomes a substantial sized tree. The seed does not remain small forever. The idea is to get as many saved as possible. So God scatters many mustard-seeds, blown by the wind, and makes each into a large tree.

The tree with the 'birds of the air' nesting in it is used as an image of human empires in Ezekiel 31:3-6 (where it refers to Assyria) and Daniel 4:12 (where it refers to Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon). In both cases the birds of the air are the people of the many lands that are conquered. In Ezekiel 17:23 the twig that becomes a great tree is the Messiah and the great tree is the Kingdom of God.

Ezekiel 17:22-24 ESV *Thus says the Lord GOD: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. (23) On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. (24) And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it."*

My interpretation of this is that Ezekiel 17 refers to the Kingdom of God as a whole. This shall be massive and will defeat great empires such as Assyria and Babylon. In the end the Kingdom of God will be the 'stone cut without hands' that shatters the kingdoms of this world (Daniel 2). Within the Kingdom of God as a whole are many different mustard-seed ministries which are planted by the Holy Spirit. These can be in all stages of growth from just germinating bible studies to well established churches.

The common thing about all these mustard-seed ministries is that they have 'mustard-seed faith'. They do not move in the flesh. Instead they rely on the word of God and prayer. They see themselves firstly as spiritual organizations with a spiritual inner dynamic. They may need to consult architects, engineers, accountants and lawyers but they are not controlled by them in the same way as a human corporation would be.

Their leader is God, first and foremost and while there is leadership, and it is respected and financially supported, they do not look to any man or woman as a mediator between them and God. Their eyes are on Christ.

The mustard-seed analogy is very potent as we approach the End Times. We need to quickly propagate the gospel if the task is to be achieved. We cannot (metaphorically) wait for tiny acorns to turn into mighty oaks which then take 20 to 70 years to produce the first acorns of their own. That is the institutional model and it won't evangelize the world in time. We need to spread the gospel like a holy weed that plants itself everywhere and which cannot be eradicated. This will come about as we develop explosive faith, spiritual sensitivity to God's timing and methods and boldness in proclamation.

77: The Kingdom of God Is Like Leaven

Matthew 13:33 ESV *He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."*

There is a Greek word play here. Leaven (yeast) = *zeo*, whereas the word for God's life is *zoe*. The same letters in a different order, an anagram. So the leaven is the all-pervading eternal life of God working through the soul of the believer and then throughout society as a whole.

The three loaves are possibly, on an individual level the body, soul and spirit - and on the societal level the three divisions of mankind in the ancient world (sons of Shem, Ham and Japeth).

The woman in this parable, is the Church, the bride of Christ, which does the hard work both of getting the gospel into the hearts of men and women and of spreading the gospel throughout the nations of the world.

Since leaven was a well-known symbol of spiritual contamination and is associated with everything from immorality to hypocrisy, malice and evil (Deuteronomy 16:4, Matthew 16:6,11,12; 1 Corinthians 5:1-8; Galatians 5:9) it then seems a very unusual choice for a symbol of the Kingdom of God! Leaven symbolized the pernicious, corrupting nature of sin that could start small and then defile a whole church or society.

Jesus however used it in the opposite sense – of how a small amount of good could influence and take over a whole society!! This actually happened with the Roman Empire.

One of the things we need to understand about the Kingdom of God is that it cannot be defiled. It has too much life and power for that! When Jesus touched a dead person He was not defiled – rather the dead person was raised to life! When a woman with an issue of blood touched Jesus, Jesus was not defiled, rather the woman was made whole. When Jesus reached out to a leper, He was not made unclean, instead the leper was made clean and new. And when Jesus was offered as a sin offering on the cross and took all the sins, all the pain, all the sickness and all the uncleanness of the world on Himself -He still rose from the dead!

Thus when faithful Spirit-filled Christians are mixed into society, it is not the Christian that will be defiled – but rather society that will be influenced and transformed (providing that we stand firm in our faith and do not compromise). There is no food, drink or circumstance that 'automatically' taints us if we are seeking to be holy. We can reach out to lepers and to broken hurting people without fear of spiritual defilement.

Paul put the possibility of our victory over evil this way:

Romans 12:21 ESV *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

The abiding Spirit-filled Christian does not need to fear the world. Instead the world and its demons, powers and principalities should fear the powerful life of God that dwells in the heart of the believer!

Now the leaven has to be kneaded into the dough. So often we compartmentalize our faith and keep the leaven over in one part of our life, or the church over in one part of society unable to influence the rest. Every part of your life must be surrendered to God and filled with the transformational life of God.

Leaven is organic, exponential, fast-growing and powerful. My brother Peter and I found out just how powerful yeast is when as curious young boys we decided to have a go at making 'fermented orange juice wine'. We knew you needed orange juice and yeast and a bottle that could take the pressure. So we got an old champagne bottle from our parents,, two packets of baker's yeast and the orange juice and mixed it all together, wiring down the cork with an enormous amount of fencing wire.

A few hours later we went to check on it and found orange juice spurting out from under the cork and the wire stretched to breaking point. It was about to explode! Peter got some pliers and undid the wire. The cork flew out, juice sprayed everywhere, and the eaves of our house were covered with a revolting black mold that was impossible to remove. The yeast had quietly but powerfully created an enormous pressure inside.

This is the powerful hidden force of life. The force that disrupts the old order and even breaks through rocks and concrete. The leaven is 'hidden' in the flour. It is invisible at first but its effects soon take over, changing everything. A believer with the life of God within them will undergo an explosive transformation. Even though the gospel is hidden in the heart it will soon do its work and transform the whole person breaking up even the toughest areas of the human personality.

So we see the twin parables (mustard-seed and leaven) are about things regarded as pests because they were so rapidly propagating, powerful and all-invasive. The life of God is a powerful, explosive, world-invading force.

We have to have confidence in the Kingdom. We do not need to seal the leaven in a glass jar to protect it. Rather we are to mix it in. We are to get out there and encounter the powers and principalities being totally confident that we are the more powerful force.

The faith-filled believer knows that what he or she has can topple the walls of Jericho. There is a sense that our life is real and the world is just a shadow that is passing away. We are the agents of change, the quiet revolutionaries, the leaven and the mustard seed. The small, small, lively things that disrupt everything else.

78: Loaves & Fishes - Consecration & Multiplication

Luke 9:11-17 MKJV *But knowing this, the crowds followed Him. And He received them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God, and He healed those who had need of healing. (12) But the day began to wear away, and coming up the Twelve said to Him, Send the crowd away so that they may go into the villages and farms all around, and lodge, and get food. For we are here in a deserted place. (13) But He said to them, You give them something to eat. And they said, We have no more than five loaves and two fish, unless we go and buy food for all these people. (14) (For they were about five thousand men.) And He said to His disciples, Make them recline by fifties in a company. (15) And they did so, and made them all recline. (16) And He took the five loaves and the two fish. And looking up to Heaven, He blessed them and broke, and He gave to the disciples to set before the crowd. (17) And they ate and were all filled. And there was taken up twelve hand baskets full of fragments of that left over to them.*

This story is repeated in all four gospels: Mark 6:35-44, Matthew 14:15-21, Luke 9:11-17 and John 6:5-15 , John's version adds the details of the small boy and the dialogue with Philip. It was a turning point in Jesus' popularity, after it some even wanted to make Him King by force (John 6:15).

There is an enormous need for Christ in the world, and the hour is late and evening is falling and the multitudes are hungry for the bread of life and Christ says to us ' go and feed them'. We cannot demur because we are only one, or few, or under-funded. For a small mustard-seed ministry, when blessed and consecrated, can 'feed the multitude' with the Word of God.

Jesus was not put off by the disciples questioning or by the lack of material resources. He had a lesson to teach them and a miracle to perform. His statement to the disciples 'you give them something to eat' was a deliberate test because Jesus knew all along what He would do (John 6:6). Jesus wanted them to appreciate the weight of the task, and to sense that it was impossible, before He made it possible.

The key to mustard-seed faith is believing that the impossible can be made possible. It is knowing that 'nothing is impossible with God' (Luke 1:37, Matthew 19:26, Mark 10:27) and all things are possible to Him who believes (Matthew 17:20, Mark 9:23).

The resurrection is the greatest New Testament example of the impossible being made possible. In the Old Testament the conception of Isaac was an illustration of Abrahamic faith bringing the 'impossible' into reality. Other examples in the Bible include the parting of the Red Sea, the collapse of the walls of Jericho, the defeat of Goliath, the stilling of the storm on Lake Galilee and the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus constantly worked to increase the faith of His disciples and His sharpest rebuke was 'o ye of little faith' (Matthew 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8). Jesus' main method of teaching faith was via experience. Jesus would ask the disciples to do the impossible or put them into situations that were frightening, dangerous or increasingly difficult – such as encountering demon-possessed people who were so wild they could break chains. As they saw God's miraculous power demonstrated they grew in faith and eventually learned to walk in faith themselves.

In the miracle of the loaves and the fishes Jesus is asking the disciples to stick their necks out socially. The disciples get everyone into fifties, expecting to be fed, before there is any sign of food appearing. It would have been like having a family of six sit down for dinner, with plates and cutlery all out on the table, when all the food you have is one small potato chip. It would have felt incredibly risky, ridiculous and potentially embarrassing. It would have produced a situation of 'trust in the midst of tension'.

Trust in the midst of tension is an operational definition of how God grows us 'from faith to faith'. Mustard-seed ministries operate under constant tension over issues such as finances, security, spiritual attacks, workload, the need for volunteers etc. We have to trust God as we face problems that we are simply too small to solve on our own. The blessing of Jesus is the solution to our overwhelming sense of embarrassment and inadequacy when we are faced with the needs and demands of God's work.

It was as Jesus blessed and broke the bread that the miracle occurred. The blessing of Jesus on the loaves and fishes mirrors God's original blessing on Creation:

Genesis 1:22 ESV *And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."*

Notice the commands – “*be fruitful and multiply and fill...*” Blessing produces fruitfulness, multiplication and the potential to fill the designated area of operation (in this case the earth). With the loaves and fishes the area of operation was a crowd of 5000 people *And they ate and were all filled*. A blessed ministry – such as a church will 'fill' the people with the bread of life in the area of operation that God has assigned to it. We are not to be content with occupying a small patch of land when God has called us to fill a city or a region with the gospel!

Acts 5:28 MKJV (The High Priest) *saying, Did we not strictly command you that you not teach in this name? And behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine and intend to bring this man's blood on us.*

The out-poured revival blessing of Pentecost resulted in the first assigned territory (Jerusalem) being filled with the gospel and thousands coming to faith. Twelve consecrated men of God were enough to do the job.

So what does the story of the loaves and fishes teach us are the steps and stages to such blessing, to such multiplication and to the filling of our assigned territory?

1. Recognize the vast need
2. Recognize your own inadequacy to meet the need
3. Seek the solution from Jesus Christ
4. Do what He tells you even if it seems crazy, believe for the impossible to occur
5. Be part of the solution – consecrate yourself to distributing the loaves and fishes
6. Receive the blessing
7. Move outward to the people, confident in the blessing
8. See the miracle
9. Make sure everyone is filled
10. Measure the miracle (5000 men) and pick up the pieces (the 12 baskets)

Small ministries can have big impacts if they see the supernatural blessing of God on their 'loaves and fishes' - with all their heart.

79 – Jesus As THE Mustard-Seed

John 1:14 MKJV *And the Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us. And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and of truth.*

Jesus is the mustard-seed, the energetic life-source from which the whole Kingdom of God grows and spreads and becomes great. The Son of God, the Word of God, became flesh and dwelt among us and the name given to Him was Jesus, because He would save His people from their sins.

As a baby in the manger Jesus was insignificant, but as the mustard-seed of God, He was powerful, the King of Kings in swaddling clothes. He grew and became a man and dwelt unrecognized by the world until after His baptism. Then the mustard-seed blossomed and became a great tree and filled the whole earth.

Now all 'mustard-seed ministry' must be founded upon Christ. He must be the center of all that we do and say and teach and become. True ministry flows from who we are becoming in God. As we grow more and more into the image of Jesus Christ and go from glory to glory through the work of the Spirit, so the quality of our ministry increases in the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:18 MKJV (18) *But we all, with our face having been unveiled, having beheld the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, are being changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Lord Spirit.*

All our leadership, teaching, energy, and dignity flows out of being in the image of Jesus Christ. All our spiritual giftedness proceeds from the holy mustard-seed within us. All our righteousness, just-mindedness, and depth of character flows from Christ. We cannot construct such things on our own, they are imparted to us by God. They are free gifts from Heaven given from the life of God dwelling in our the midst of our being.

Ministry has to proceed from the Spirit, it cannot be done in the flesh because the flesh has no knowledge of Christ or of holiness. It wants quantity when God wants quality. Look at the epistles! The apostolic concern is always with the quality and nature of the church and never even once with its numerical growth, its budget or its facilities.

In Acts, Luke reports numbers as historical facts but numbers are never central to what God demands of His ministers. Paul never writes to Timothy saying "you must witness to at least four people a day and bring at least two people to Christ a week". Paul's concern is that Timothy stir up his gifts, teach the truth, walk in righteousness, flee youthful lusts and endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. These are all quality issues not quantity issues.

Whether Paul is writing to the Ephesians about being one in Christ Jesus or Peter is writing to the church elders telling them to shepherd the flock without compulsion - it is quality issues that count.

The issue is whether we are showing forth the life of Christ that has been planted within us, the 'seed' of the Word implanted in us.

1 Peter 1:22-25 ISV *Now that you have obeyed the truth and have purified your souls to love your brothers sincerely, you must love one another intensely and with a pure heart. (23) For you have been born again, not by a seed that perishes but by one that cannot perish-by the living and everlasting word of God. (24) For "All human life is like grass, and all its glory is like a flower in the grass. The grass dries up and the flower drops off, (25) but the word of the Lord lasts forever." Now this word is the good news that was announced to you.*

1 John 3:9 ISV *No one who has been born from God practices sin, because God's seed abides in him. Indeed, he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born from God.*

The Kingdom of God manifests itself as righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). these are inward qualities produced by the life of God dwelling in us; they are the fruit from the seed, and the seed is Christ:

Galatians 3:16 MKJV *And to Abraham and to his Seed the promises were spoken. It does not say, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, "And to your Seed," which is Christ.*

(the same Greek word family 'sperma' is used for mustard-seeds and for the Seed being Christ).

Christ is the incarnate Word, the Word is also the seed the sower sows, the Word is what saves us and that which plants the seed of God into us when we are born-again, and that divine seed within us, the holy mustard-seed, is Christ and from this small but eternal beginning we grow into maturity in all spiritual things.

It is not our human abilities that make a great ministry, rather it is our conformity to the image of God, our acceptance to being ruled by the life of Christ that is planted within our souls. When we get to Heaven our positions, possessions, and finances will be of no account. What will count, and what will be admired there is our likeness to our Lord.

80: When God Is Our Resource

Luke 1:37 MKJV *For with God nothing shall be impossible.*

Abraham went out from Ur of the Chaldees with God as his only resource. And God guided, provided, blessed and multiplied him and now his spiritual and physical descendants are 'as the sand of the seashore'.

Moses took on Pharaoh and the empire of Egypt with God as his only resource and liberated three million Israelites and led them to the brink of Canaan. Through the Red Sea, through the wilderness, through grumbings, through lack of food and water, God provided and blessed and led and guided. God was ALL Moses had and God was sufficient for everything.

John the Baptist went out into the wilderness of Judea, without buildings or an organization or wealth or power and called for an entire nation to repent. And they came to him in their thousands and were baptized in the River Jordan. The power of the Holy Spirit was his resource, and the Spirit was sufficient for every aspect of John's ministry.

Throughout church history men and women of God have gone to nations where they were unknown and had no inheritance, without material resources or any human help, and they have brought the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ to that place and to that nation. God has been their only resource and God has always been sufficient for their need.

All these people believed that God had called them (out of Ur, out of Egypt, to preach repentance, or to the foreign mission field) and that God's calling would be God's enabling.

If God has placed a certain calling on your life then God's calling will be God's enabling and nothing within the scope of that calling will be impossible for you!

Mark 9:23 MKJV *Jesus said to him, If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.*

The faith of those who are truly called is a faith that sees mountains and moves them!

Matthew 17:20 MKJV *And Jesus said to them, Because of your unbelief. For truly I say to you, If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, Move from here to there. And it shall move. And nothing shall be impossible to you.*

If you are called to evangelize then God will move all the mountains you need to share the Word, and if you are called to pastor then God will move all the mountains needed for you to be a good shepherd to the flock!

God's enabling is totally different to man's enabling. God enabled Jesus by having the Holy Spirit abide upon Him in power at His baptism. God gave His Spirit and that was the enabling and with the anointing came the providing. There was a time of 'starving' (40 days in the Wilderness) and testing. But after that everything was given in abundance and Jesus was free to turn water into wine, and to feed the five thousand and the four thousand!

With the anointing comes the ability to transform people's lives. And as we change lives people give – just like Joanna and the other women that supported Jesus. Jesus didn't have to worry about provision because so many people were blessed that they just kept on giving and they had to have a treasurer and even had enough left over to give to the poor.

Luke 8:1-3 MKJV *And it happened afterwards, He traveled in every city and village, proclaiming and announcing the gospel of the kingdom of God. And the Twelve were with Him, (2) and also certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities; Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven demons, (3) and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, who ministered to Him of their possessions.*

If your aim is to run an institution then you will always be running out of money. But if your aim is to change lives under the anointing of God, then you will never run out of money unless you are a spendthrift. People sense your aim and know your blessing. They know if you are touching their lives or if you are just building your own kingdom. If you are trying to build your own kingdom then its time to repent!

There are a lot of spiritually stale ministries out there running programs and relying on man's resources and on stewardship campaigns. This recession may get even worse, and if it does, they will soon be out of business. However the mustard-seed ministries that operate by faith and by anointing and which really change people's lives for good; those ministries will be the one's that survive!

Are you called? Are you anointed? Are you aiming to really change people's lives? Are you believing that nothing shall be impossible with God? Are you calling on the Lord to move all the mountains that need to be moved for you to accomplish all of God's will? Are you aiming high? Are you going to inherit the land, overthrow Pharaoh, take Jericho, or bring revival to Israel?

Last year (2009) was really tough for me – but I am believing for better things for this year. With God as my resource I am going to achieve all that He wants me to achieve. I am NOT going to look at the bank account and say “I cannot do God's will because there is just no money to do it with!” I am going to be strong and I am going to have courage.

Moses didn't need a bank account to lead Israel out of Egypt. Feeding three million people wasn't Moses' problem, it was God's problem! With God as your resource and my resource we can do everything that we are called to do in 2010. We are going to need to pray for each other and we are going to need to call on God together. It might be a wild ride, but God will see us through because He is faithful!

I don't think that God will resource us by dropping a million dollars into our each of our various bank accounts at the beginning of the year. If Scripture is any guide God will resource us by setting us on fire for Him so that people ring up and say “I heard your preach brother, that was anointed, come to my church and preach as well.”. So when you pray for provision just don't pray for money. Pray for power in your ministry, power that will change so many lives that people will just give and keep on giving because you are always a blessing to them.

God is your spiritual resource before He is your financial resource. It is the anointing that breaks the yoke of bondage:

Isaiah 10:27 MKJV *And it shall be, in that day his burden shall be taken away from off your shoulder, and his yoke from off your neck, and the yoke shall be destroyed because of the anointing.*

If your ministry is under a 'yoke', under a great restriction and heaviness, then pray for a mighty anointing. Pray for revival power, pray for an unusual ability to transform lives. God has got you to the point of desperation so that He can force you to ask for more. Not more money - but more power, more grace and more joyful harvest results.

Your resource isn't money. Your resource is the power of God, God on your side. Cast yourself on God and ask Him to turn up. When God turns up people will turn up like moths to a flame. If God turns up your church of 200 will become a church of twenty thousand. Ask for more of the Lord and everything else will follow (Matthew 6:33).

Romans 8:31-32 MKJV *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? (32) Truly He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?*

81: The Small Important Things

John 15:12 MKJV *This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

I just read a friend's blog today (ponderworthy.org) – full of poetry and ideas and emotions. Not a huge ministry, but to those who are part of it, very "real" and very much part of their lives, a place to share. A bible study group that is 'real' can be a greater ministry than a mega-church that is shallow.

There is a wonderful Greek word in the NT ἀλλήλων (allelown) – "one another". There are over 30 commands featuring this word. Commands such as 'wash one another's feet', 'love one another', 'be of the same mind toward one another', pray for one another and so forth.

This 'one another' life is supposed to be active. At no point in the Bible do I see the command 'just sit next to one another and be quiet for that is your whole duty in church'.

If we are to encourage one another, comfort one another, love one another fervently from the heart and wash one another's feet – then we need to be in small groups. You simply cannot do this in a 'meeting'. The Christian life is not just about glory filled meetings. Its about glory-filled relationships and glory-filled lives.

These small places in which we can be real and authentic and give and receive the love of Jesus Christ are at the very heart of the Kingdom of God. The small acts of kindness are what touch lives and turn them around. Twice in my life I have been saved from deep almost suicidal despair by such acts of kindness. One was a birthday card when I was desperately lonely, the other was someone bringing me a hamburger when I was feeling at my very lowest after a broken relationship.

These small acts, that these people hardly thought about, are part of the reason I am still here and ministering today. You may have similar stories in your own life.

We need a lot more than information and emails if we are to grow in God. We need human love. We need encouragement, hope, and counsel. We need the reality of another human being 'being there for us'.

When Jesus loved people He loved each one individually. He did not say "Oh that's just another blind guy, bring him here and we will do the opening of the eyes thing". Jesus knew names of people like Bartimeus, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. He ate with them, stayed with them and got to know them. His disciples did not just sit in rows in a classroom – they lived with Jesus, walked with Jesus and got into boats with Jesus.

The small things are often the big things. To the thief on the cross Jesus said: "Today you will be with Me in Paradise". Just a single sentence to a dying man – and it made all the difference in the world.

When Jesus told His disciples: **John 15:12 MKJV** *This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you* He was not talking about programs and buildings.

The next line makes that clear - **John 15:13 MKJV** *No one has greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*

We have retreated far from self-sacrificing, foot-washing, life-giving love! And our retreat has been into what? Into ourselves and our materialism? Into 'not bothering'? We have to start bothering. We have to start doing the small acts of kindness and love that the whole Kingdom of God is built upon. Jesus was 'moved with compassion' and we should be too! And not just to people in far-off places on mission trips(though that is also good) but to those closest to us, those right next to us who are hurting and lonely and desperate.

Our bible study should lead us into acts of love. It should get us to reflect on what it means to "love one another as I have loved you". Paul wrote to Timothy, the pastor of the church at Ephesus about what the goal of ministry was: **1 Timothy 1:5 MKJV** *But the end of the commandment is love out of a pure heart, and a good conscience, and faith unfeigned,*

This kind of love and maturity is built into us by other people who care for us. Nobody is matured in a theater, nobody becomes strong just by watching someone on a stage! We have to live out our faith and love in true relationship and in small daily actions that are full of the love of Christ.

Now God gives us plenty of opportunities to live out our faith by placing needy people directly in our path; just like Lazarus who lay day and night at the gate of the rich man. The poor will always be with us because God places them among us to see how we will react to them. Are we kind, compassionate, forbearing and caring? How do we react to the disabled, the mentally ill, and those with lives full of torment and confusion? That tells us a great deal about how real our faith is: **James 1:27 MKJV** *Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their afflictions, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*

Bumper stickers and big black bibles are not the same as living faith that results in good works at the daily individual level of Christian community. God has saved us by grace but also in His grace he has made us new creations to do good works that He has prepared beforehand for us to do:

Ephesians 2:8-10 MKJV *For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, (9) not of works, lest anyone should boast. (10) For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them.*

Most of these good works are 'ordinary' in that God places us right in front of our nose, because He has for ordained that we should walk in them. When your wife needs companionship or your son needs you to hear him out, that is a good work that God has put in front of you for you to do. It might not seem 'religious' but it is good.

Think back over your life – it is these small acts of care that have mattered most. Whether your parents loved you or neglected you, whether your boss appreciated you or did not appreciate you, whether people took time to genuinely care about you, or whether they just passed on by. Go to any funeral and listen to the stories people tell. The stories are not about how many bridges that person built or about how many books they wrote or even about how much money they made – but about who they were as a person, and how they touched human lives.

Do you want your children to say: “We never really got to know our Dad because he was just so busy with the church all the time?”. Stop and think about the small important things, the relational things, the acts of kindness, love, encouragement and foot-washing. Think of the service that you can perform because it is in these small scale acts that you will find the true Kingdom of God.

82: The Parable Of The Sower

Matthew 13 explains the parable of the sower in great detail, how the seed is the Word of God, the four soils are four kinds of different hearers with different responses to the gospel and how the Devil interferes through stealing the Word, persecution and making us full of the cares and anxieties of this life. But it leaves me with a few questions such as:

1. Why didn't the sower just sow into the good ground?
2. Why is the Devil allowed to mess with our spiritual growth?
3. Are the four soils (spiritual states) predetermined or can we change from hard ground to good ground?
4. What does it mean to bear much fruit?
5. How come some bear thirtyfold while others bear sixty or a hundredfold?

Here are some of my answers. God allows the sower to 'waste' the Word of God on hard and unproductive ground in order to display the justice of God. Everyone gets a chance to hear. Nobody should be able to say to the Lord “I never was told about there being a good God who made all things and who requires reverence and awe and a life of love.” Even the heavens themselves declare the glory of God. The existence of God should 'be obvious'. Paul even says that they are 'without excuse':

Romans 1:18-20 MKJV *For the wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, (19) because the thing which may be known of God is clearly revealed within them, for God revealed it to them. (20) For the unseen things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being realized by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, for them to be without excuse.*

Romans 10:18 MKJV *But I say, Have they not heard? Yes indeed, their voice went out into all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.*

This last quote is Paul quoting Psalm 19 which concerns the general revelation of God to man (particularly in Creation). So the word goes out, but it is not heard because of the hardness of heart and the dullness of the spiritual senses of humankind. Jesus states this directly in a question and answer interlude in the middle of the parable of the sower:

Matthew 13:10-15 MKJV *And the disciples said to Him, Why do You speak to them in parables? (11) He answered and said to them, Because it is given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven, but it is not given to them. (12) For whoever has, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance. But whoever does not have, from him shall be taken away even that which he has. (13) Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not; nor do they understand. (14) And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which said, "By hearing you shall hear and shall not understand; and seeing you shall see and shall not perceive; (15) for this people's heart has become gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and they have closed their eyes, lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them."*

In the justice of God all must hear. So the Sower must sow, even on the hard soil and in the stony places. But the justice of God also operates on how we hear. Those who are spiritually receptive will receive even more, while those who turn away from the gospel will have even what they have taken from them!

This leads to my second question "Why is the Devil allowed to mess with our spiritual growth?" The Devil does not mess with those who have a good heart, but with the others he is very successful: a) stealing away the word from their minds, b) discouraging folk so they quickly give up on the Christian life and c) distracting them with concerns over money and the things of this life.

Why do such tests come? Does God want people to perish? Certainly not! His will is that none should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). But God wants us to develop true faith and true faith must necessarily be tested. Those tests may involve suffering and other challenges to our priorities in life.

The first test is – do we care at all about spiritual things? Do we want to learn? Do we even realize we have a problem with sin and need to change? If we don't care less about spiritual things the Devil has an easy job. He just picks up the seed of the Word from our hearts and minds and flies away with it. Its gone, never to bother us again.

The second test is – do we really believe that God is good even when life is bad? Is our faith precious to us? This is the test of persecution and hard times which come because of the Word. If we throw away our faith when life becomes difficult then we never really valued it in the first place.

The third test is – do we value God enough to make Him first and foremost, even above our worldly concerns and daily priorities? And do we believe that He is sufficient for every need – or will we try and do everything in our own strength? This is the test of 'the cares of this world' – of anxieties and worldly pursuits. If we are God absorbed we can get the eternal perspective and focus on the Kingdom and on His righteousness, but if we are self-absorbed then we cannot focus on such things or bear much fruit at all.

These three are the tests of our priorities and of our true faith. God wants real saints who depend on Him for all things and who have godly priorities. The quality of our souls is proved by the quantity of our testing.

Jesus allowed Peter to be severely tested:

Luke 22:31-32 MKJV *And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has desired you, that he may sift you as wheat. (32) But I have prayed for you, that your faith fail not. And when you are converted, strengthen your brothers.*

The testing broke Peter completely so that he wept bitterly, yet after he had been restored by Jesus (meeting Him on the shores of Lake Galilee) Peter became a much greater and more gracious servant of the Lord.

It seems that there is more to it than just testing. The testing can produce change in the nature of the soil. It can deepen it like a plow does when it breaks open a new field of ground. Many a person has said "I used to be a shallow Christian until I was broken and now I have a much deeper and more real Christian faith".

This helps us to answer the third question – can the nature of the soil be changed or is it fixed and hopeless? As one who has battled with shallow topsoil and lots of clay in his own small garden I can tell you that soil can be changed! You create lots of compost and dig it in. Eventually even totally useless soil can grow a productive fruit tree. The farmers of Israel knew this as well. They knew the soil of their lives could change – it just takes a lot of work.

This leads to our fourth question – *what does it mean to bear much fruit?* The first place to go is to Galatians:

Galatians 5:22-23 MKJV *But the fruit of the Spirit is: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, (23) meekness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*

The most important fruit of Christ within us is Christ-like character. If we are so busy in ministry that we are impatient, unkind, unloving, restless, peace-less and unable to suffer the slightest inconvenience at all – then we are out of God's will. We need to slow down, take Sabbaths, spend time in prayer and get back our godliness.

Perhaps this is related to what Jesus meant when he addressed some with powerful ministries of exorcism and prophecy and said to them 'Depart from me ye workers of iniquity for I never knew you'. They seem to have gone off track ethically and in their character and in their doctrine (Matthew 7:16-23). Quantity cannot replace quality.

That is also why Paul says that working in precious things of quality (gold, silver, precious stones) is more important than having low quality structures made out of wood, hay and stubble which will be burned up on Judgment Day (1 Cor 3:10-15).

A lesser known verse is: **Ephesians 5:9 MKJV** *(for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth),*

Here the ethical aspects are emphasized – goodness and righteousness and truth. The fruitful person is the truthful person. See also Hebrews 12:11 and James 3:18 which talk about 'the fruit of righteousness'. The righteous and good life is the fruitful life.

Similarly Romans talks about 'bearing fruit to holiness' : **Romans 6:22 MKJV** *But now, being made free from sin, and having become slaves to God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end everlasting life.*

The fruit of your life is primarily found in the quality of your character.

The final question is: How can some bear *thirty-fold, sixty-fold and a hundred-fold*? A good character produces abundant good works, just as a gentle person does many gentle deeds of kindness and a patient loving person makes many feel accepted by God and by man. The good works flow from the good character like oranges from an orange tree.

A wise person of good character does more good works than an unwise person of the same good character because he or she thinks carefully about how to do things best. This is what Paul means when he writes:

Ephesians 5:15-17 MKJV *See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, (16) redeeming the time, because the days are evil. (17) Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.*

Goodness finds its maximum fruitfulness when wisdom is added to the mixture.

Jesus tells us that prayer is part of producing the abundant and fruitful life:

John 15:7-8 MKJV *If you abide in Me, and My Words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done to you. (8) In this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, so you shall be My disciples.*

If the Christian is of good character and abides in God's will and commandments then prayer becomes a multiplying factor. It enables the obedient saint to 'ask whatever you will' for the glory of God.

So the fruit God seeks is the fruit of a good character, doing good works in all wisdom, and prayerfully asking God for even more fruit for the glory of God the Father. That is the 'hundredfold' life!

83: Seeking The Specific Goodness of God

Matthew 7:7-11 MKJV *Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you. (8) For each one who asks receives; and he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, it shall be opened. (9) Or what man is there of you, if his son asks a loaf, will he give him a stone? (10) Or if he asks a fish, will he give him a snake? (11) If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father in Heaven give good things to those who ask Him?*

Our goals and problems in life are specific to our personal situations. The needs of one person can be entirely different from the needs of another. Different factors such as our callings, personalities, ministry situations, relationships and physical constitutions all mean that we are unique in the particular good things we need from God each day.

A good Father knows each of His children and gives them different gifts. One child may get a chess set, another a football and another a dollhouse and each would be delighted with what they received. But mix them up and see what happens! Now if earthly fathers know what gifts to give each of their very different children in order to please them, then how much does our Father in Heaven know these things? God wants us to enjoy life and to delight in His Creation, yet being aware it is not Mammon or earning ability that supplies the good things in life - but rather it is God Himself:

1 Timothy 6:17 ESV *As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.*

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 ESV *(18) Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. (19) Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil--this is the gift of God. (20) For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.*

Now how do you get your earthly father to give you an electronics set instead of a football (or vice-versa)? You ask, you seek and you knock! And you do so specifically, in a targeted way. For instance: "I want a red road bike for Christmas with ten-speed gears, and with size 26 inch wheels". And you believe that because your earthly father is good and kind and gracious that he will give you the desires of your heart!

In some ways our prayer life need be little different from a grown-up version of our child-like requests at Christmas time and can contain very specific items such as: "Lord I need wisdom on how to handle the Williams contract, please show me if they are telling the truth and lead me to the right pricing structure and time for delivery"

If that is the wisdom you need for that day, then that is the wisdom you should ask God for! In Hebrew thinking wisdom and knowledge were not abstract but were tied to practical outcomes. When God revealed wisdom to Joseph or Daniel it was specific knowledge that was made known in order to solve specific problems that were brought to them by the King:

Daniel 2:20-23 ESV *Daniel answered and said: "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. (21) He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; (22) he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. (23) To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and might, and have now made known to me what we asked of you, for you have made known to us the king's matter."*

Our trust is not to be in our own wisdom, riches, might and power but in God who guides us and provides all good things for us, both spiritual and material. We have specific needs for wisdom, provision, deliverance, healing and many other things and we should be bold and ask God for what we need:

Hebrews 4:16 ESV *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

1 John 5:14-15 ESV *And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. (15) And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.*

And not just what we need but that which will bring delight to us. God is not stingy or mean. God wants His children to be happy as long as they continue to be faithful to Him:

Psalms 20:4-7 ESV *May he grant you your heart's desire and fulfill all your plans! (5) May we shout for joy over your salvation, and in the name of our God set up our banners! May the LORD fulfill all your petitions! (6) Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand. (7) Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.*

Psalms 37:3-6 ESV *Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. (4) Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. (5) Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act. (6) He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.*

We should seek all our good from the hand of God. We should look to Him for all we need! Yes we may still have to work, but He will provide the work and we will delight in our tasks. We will know the joy of life and the joy of success in what we do because our God will be with us in all things.

Many Christians lack confidence in God's goodness or they dismiss it as 'the prosperity gospel'. But the goodness of God is a major theme of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation and was part of Paul's preaching at Lystra:

Acts 14:17 ESV *Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."*

and Jesus contrasts His goodness with the destructive work of Satan:

John 10:10 ESV *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*

Here are some of the good things that you might want to ask God for: salvation of yourself, your friends or your family members; joy, hope, increased faith, daily bread, increased ministry results, favor with God and man, particular items of provision, a specific job, wisdom concerning a relationship, wisdom in work or business transactions, the ability to be a peacemaker, increased patience and forbearance, understanding of God's Word, understanding of life situations, negotiating skill, greater delight in worship, a good bible study to join, physical healing, growth in grace for your children, academic success for your children, and so on and so forth.

These are all good and legitimate things to ask for. Bring them before the Lord in detail and ask for them passionately and specifically, promising to give God the glory when the prayer is answered. Prayer that is limp, vague, overly general (so that it is 'safe') and half-hearted is powerless. But fervent, specific, commanding and righteous prayer is powerful:

James 5:16-18 MKJV *Confess faults to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous one avails much. (17) Elijah was a man of like passion as we are. And he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for the time of three years and six months. (18) And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth caused its fruit to sprout.*

When you pray you should ask, seek and knock being confident of the goodness of God, waiting and persisting (Luke 11:5-13), with all godly patience and fear of the Lord, never doubting or wavering in faith. This is what Abraham did when he specifically asked for a son and heir in his old age:

Romans 4:18-22 MKJV *(19) And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body already dead (being about a hundred years old) or the deadening of Sarah's womb. (20) He did not stagger at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God, (21) and being fully persuaded that what God had promised, He was also able to perform. (22) And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness.*

Do not be discouraged. God has not forgotten you. He simply wants you to ask Him for the good things that you need and to truly believe that you will receive it from Him.

Mark 11:24 EMTV *For this reason I say to you, all things whatsoever you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive them, and they will be yours.*

84: Being Astonished By God

Mark 7:37 ESV *And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."*

Luke 4:32 ESV *and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority.*

Luke 5:9 ESV *For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken,*

Luke 9:42-43 ESV *... But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. (43) And all were astonished at the majesty of God. ...*

Something has gone wrong if we are no longer astonished by God! His thoughts are higher than our thoughts and His ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:8,9) and our minds cannot comprehend or understand Him (Romans 11:33-36). So His actions should leave us staggered with awe and wonder! A God who simply meets expectations is hardly God at all.

The ministry of Jesus is full of people who were surprised by what Jesus said, did or taught or by the miracles He performed or by the new ideas He brought to them. For instance when the paralyzed man on the pallet was healed (the one let down through the roof) people were astounded that Jesus could forgive sins:

Luke 5:24-26 EMTV *But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"--He said to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." (25) Immediately he rose up before them, taking up the bed which he had been lying on, he went off to his own house, glorifying God. (26) And amazement gripped them all, and they were glorifying God, and they were filled with fear, saying, "We have seen extraordinary things today!"*

Matthew adds the comment: **Matthew 9:8 EMTV** *Now when the crowds saw, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.*

The gospel accounts are littered with words such as: 'marveled', 'surprised', 'astonished', 'perplexed', 'rejoiced' and 'glorified'. Jesus was never routine! The whole thing was extraordinary!

The Kingdom of God is a place of constant surprises – and they are good surprises! Satan ambushes us with evil but God overtakes us with good!

Deuteronomy 28:2 MKJV *And all these blessings shall come on you and overtake you, if you will listen to the voice of Jehovah your God.*

Isaiah 51:11 MKJV *Therefore the redeemed of Jehovah shall return and come with singing into Zion; and everlasting joy shall be on their head. Gladness and joy shall overtake them; sorrow and mourning shall flee away.*

God is incomprehensibly good! God even blesses sinners and forgives the wicked and covers their iniquities justifying the ungodly without them doing any works:

Romans 4:5-8 MKJV *But to him not working, but believing on Him justifying the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. (6) Even as David also says of the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness without works, (7) saying, "Blessed are those whose lawlessnesses are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; (8) blessed is the man to whom the Lord will in no way impute sin."*

God wants to astonish the angels and other heavenly beings by the sheer magnitude of His grace and forgiveness towards us who were once dead in our trespasses and sins:

Ephesians 2:4-7 ASV *but God, being rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, (5) even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace have ye been saved), (6) and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus: (7) that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus:*

God wants to astonish the world with the changes He will make in your life. And God also wants you to be astonished at His grace towards you! Your Christian life is not ordinary, instead it is an extraordinary act of grace! God purchased your salvation at great cost.

If we are bored with God it is our own fault. Like the Israelites in the wilderness we want the presents not the Presence. The mystics are never bored. They may be tormented souls, even agonized souls - but they are not dull souls. The disciples who decided to tag along with Jesus and to find out who He was and who suffered with Him and left all to follow Him – these were precisely the ones who became most delighted with Him and who got to see all the miracles. On the other hand the fickle crowds in John 6 moved elsewhere once they realized that Jesus was not going to give them any more free bread.

Job found God to be dangerous and unpredictable and Job's friends could not figure out what was going on either. Everyone in the book of Job wants an orderly God. But at the end of the book YHWH appears in the whirlwind and forcefully tells Job that He is far beyond human comprehension and will not be neatly contained by anyone's theology. God may not be predictable but He is just and in the end Job is restored double.

The inclusion of the Gentiles in the Kingdom astonished even Christian Jews: **Acts 10:45 ASV** *And they of the circumcision that believed were amazed, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

This astonishment soon turned into a controversy that raged for over thirty years (from AD 38 to AD 70) simply because God had done something that was utterly incomprehensible to one section of the Church.

God does not amaze us for our own entertainment. Entertainment implies a sort of comfortable astonishment that fits our personal likes and dislikes. But God has absolutely no intention of leaving our worldly minds intact! He amazes us so that we may learn and grow and appreciate His glory! Jesus constantly confused His disciples – for their own good! They were bewildered by the Cross, disbelieving of the Resurrection and still hoping for a Jewish revolution when Pentecost arrived.

God still astonishes His people today: A drunkard gets saved, the local atheist repents, the cancer patient on her deathbed is suddenly and gloriously healed, the demon is cast out with a word, a revival breaks out in a most unlikely place.

I am also astonished at God's patience and restraint. How He allows this world to continue doing what it does, is quite beyond me! But it was not beyond the apostle Peter who had personally experienced the grace of His Lord:

2 Peter 3:9 MKJV *The Lord is not slow concerning His promise, as some count slowness, but is long-suffering toward us, not purposing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*

God wants to do astonishing things in you, with you, around you and for you! But this will require great faith. Sarah having a child in her old age was astonishing – but it took faith. As did the parting of the Red Sea, the collapse of the walls of Jericho, and the victories of Gideon, David and Jehoshaphat. God astonishes when we believe. And if we seldom see the astonishing perhaps it is because we seldom believe God for the impossible!

When Peter, James and John reluctantly obeyed Jesus and set out into the deep and threw their just-washed nets back in the water for a catch they were 'astonished at the size of the catch'. This was the obedience of faith leading to the miracle of God!

Similarly it was when the perplexed disciples obeyed and started breaking the loaves and fishes and handing them out that the astonishing feeding of the five thousand took place.

In both cases their initial expectations, based on reason and deduction, were low - "we caught no fish" and "how can we feed so many.." yet they obeyed and God supplied.

God is powerful! God will do far more than we can ask, think or expect! Let us launch out into the deep and cast our nets in faith so that we may be astonished by the catch!

Ephesians 3:20-21 MKJV *Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, (21) to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, forever. Amen.*

85: The Benefits of Complaining (To God)

1 Samuel 1:10 MKJV *And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to Jehovah, and wept sorely.*

Psalms 55:1-3 MKJV *Give ear to my prayer, O God; and hide not Yourself from my cry. (2) Attend to me, and hear me; I wander and I moan in my complaint, (3) from the voice of the enemy, from the oppression of the wicked, for they shake trouble over me, and in wrath they hate me.*

Psalms 77:1-3 MKJV *I cried to God with my voice, to God is my voice; and He gave ear to me. (2) In the day of my trouble I sought Jehovah; my hand was poured in the night, and ceased not; my soul refused to be comforted. (3) I remembered God, and was troubled; I complained, and my spirit fainted. Selah.*

Must Christians always be happy? Must they never complain aloud? Is having a Stoic attitude and a stiff upper lip a great sign of emotional and spiritual maturity? Sometimes not. Sometimes these things can be delusional and can indicate that we are either self-deceived or in denial; or even worse that we do not believe that God will act so we are suffering in silence. While we are to be content with our wages and free from the love of money, we are not to be content with the state of this world. The Bible never tells us to be content with wickedness, injustice, and sin, or with demons or disease.

Great men and women of God such as Hannah, Job, David and Jeremiah brought their complaints before the Lord. They complained because they had faith. They believed that they could ask for changes in their life situations from a God who was good and all-powerful and who had the solutions to all of their problems.

Some of the greatest writing in the Bible (Job, Psalms, the prophets) is seemingly 'negative' and complaining (see Psalm 88 for a powerful example). There are 'laments' and even imprecations. Even in Heaven the souls under the altar complain to the Lord:

Revelation 6:9-11 ISV *When the lamb opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the word of God and the testimony they had given. (10) They cried out in a loud voice, "Holy and true Sovereign, how long will it be before you judge and take revenge on those living on the earth who shed our blood?"*

These section of the Bible arise out of the perception of the vast discrepancy between the goodness of God and the state of this present evil age:

1 John 5:19 ISV *We know that we are from God and that the whole world lies under the control of the evil one.*

Galatians 1:4 ISV *He gave himself for our sins in order to rescue us from this present evil age according to the will of our God and Father.*

This spiritual sense of disparity and discord gives rise to prayers, prophecy, apocalyptic literature, and to the strong desire for God's Kingdom to come, and for His will to be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.

This perception that things are terribly, terribly wrong is even essential to prevailing prayer. If you are content with the way things are then you cannot intercede. If you are content with wickedness in high places you will never pray for it to be removed. There is a proper and holy discontent where people groan and cry out to God and He hears them:

Luke 18:1-8 ISV *Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray all the time and never give up. (2) He said, "In a city there was a judge who didn't fear God or respect people. (3) In that city there was also a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' (4) For a while the judge refused. But later he said to himself, 'I don't fear God or respect people. (5) Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice. Otherwise, she will keep coming and wear me out.'" (6) Then the Lord added, "Listen to what the unrighteous judge says. (7) Won't God grant his chosen people justice when they cry out to him day and night? Is he slow to help them? (8) I tell you, he will give them justice quickly. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

The importunate widow complained so long and so loud and so often that the unjust judge gave in and granted her request. Her complaining was successful. Since God is better than that judge He will speedily avenge His elect! You can go to God's throne for justice and for grace and help in time of need:

Hebrews 4:16 ISV *So let us keep on coming with boldness to the throne of grace, so that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

We should bring our requests to God, and we should 'keep on' doing so, and boldly! This does not mean we should grumble. Grumbling against God or murmuring against His servants is very dangerous spiritually and is grounded in unbelief. Grumblers and murmurers never look to Heaven nor do they go to the throne of grace. They look solely at the situation and go to one another to amplify their miseries.

Neither are we to be anxious:

Philippians 4:6-7 MKJV *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. (7) And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*

Complaining to the Lord is thus distinct from grumbling, murmuring or fretful unbelief. In Psalm 73 David goes through a few stages from a 'brute beast' enraged at the state of things, to an adoring worshiper understanding the justice of the Lord. The turning point was when David went into the Temple and beheld God and laid his complaint before Him there:

Psalms 73:12-24 ESV *Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. (13) All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. (14) For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. (15) If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children. (16) But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, (17) until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. (18) Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. (19) How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! (20) Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord,*

when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms. (21) When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, (22) I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. (23) Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. (24) You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.

Our complaint should be grounded in the biblical facts about God's love and faithfulness. If you truly believe that God loves you and is working all things together for your good and has given you many precious promises then, at some point, you will ask for better than you currently have. You will ask God to improve your lot! You will believe that God can deliver you out of your mess and do good things concerning you. Like the man who was 'full of leprosy' you will cry out "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean".

Luke 5:12-13 MKJV *And it happened, as He was in a certain city, behold, a man full of leprosy! And seeing Jesus, he fell on his face and begged Him, saying, Lord, if You will, You can cleanse me. (13) And stretching out the hand, He touched him, saying, I will! Be clean! And immediately the leprosy departed from him.*

Do not just sit there and take it. Do not accept the bad things in your life as they are! Nor march around with a stiff upper lip in total denial of the facts. Take your terrible situation (and what could be worse than being full of leprosy) to our good God and pour out your heart before Him. God is faithful and kind and he will hear you and He will answer you from Heaven:

1 John 5:14-15 MKJV *And this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. (15) And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him.*

86: The Wheat And The Tares

Matthew 13:24-30, 36- 43 EMTV *Another parable He set before them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man sowing good seed in his field. (25) But while the men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went away. (26) But when the stalk had sprouted and produced fruit, then the tares also appeared. (27) So the servants of the master of the house approached and said to him, 'Sir, was it not good seed you sowed in your field? From where then does it have tares?' (28) "He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Do you wish then that we should go and gather them up?' (29) "But he said, 'No, lest gathering up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. (30) Leave both to grow together until the harvest; and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares, and bind them into bundles to burn them, but gather together the wheat into my barn." '....*

Then having dismissed the crowds, Jesus went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." (37) He answered and said to them: "He that sows the good seed is the Son of Man. (38) And the field is the world, and the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the evil one. (39) The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. (40) Therefore just as the tares are gathered and burned with fire, thus it will be at the end of this age. (41) The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who work iniquity, (42) and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (43) Then the righteous will shine forth like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Jesus tells us that the field is the world – not the Church! This world contains both the sons of the Kingdom and the sons of the Devil. The Church is meant to only contain the sons of the Kingdom (but some children of the Devil sometimes sneak on in!). At the end of the age there will be a separation, in this world, between God's children and the Devil's children. It will be light and dark!

Notice that the angels take the Devil's children (the tares) first. It is the children of the Kingdom that are left behind! Then they reign and rule on the Earth with Jesus for a thousand years. Let's look at what Paul says about the timing of the resurrection, the man of lawlessness and the rapture of the saints to be with Jesus:

2 Thessalonians 2:1-4 EMTV *(1) Now, brothers, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we beseech you, (2) not to be quickly shaken from your mind, nor be disturbed, neither by spirit nor by word nor by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ has come. (3) Let no one deceive you by any means; for that day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is unveiled, the son of perdition, (4) who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God, or every object of worship, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God....(8) And then the lawless one will be unveiled, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth, and will destroy by the brightness of His coming,*

1 Thessalonians 4:15-18 EMTV (15) *For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord shall by no means precede those who are dead. (16) Because the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a word of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first. (17) Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. (18) So then comfort one another with these words.*

- a) The rise of the man of lawlessness and the great apostasy precedes the resurrection of the dead. (2 Thessalonians 2:3 above)
- b) The resurrection of the dead precedes the rapture of those who are alive at the return of Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:15-16)
- c) Paul included himself among 'those who remain alive' as he thought Christ might come in his lifetime. He anticipated being raptured AFTER the resurrection of the dead. (1 Thessalonians 5:17)
- d) Thus Paul did not think he would be raptured before the rise of the man of lawlessness but rather that he would go through this period and still be alive when Christ returned.
- e) The man of lawlessness tries to deceive the elect, but fails and is destroyed by the brightness of the coming of the Lord. (2 Thessalonians 2:7-12)
- f) So Paul anticipated seeing events in this order – the rise of the man of lawlessness, the tribulation, the return of Christ, the slaying of the Anti-Christ, the resurrection of the dead, then he would be raptured among those who were alive and then he would be with Christ.
- g) Paul is very definite that no one who was alive would precede those who were asleep in Christ. "Shall by no means precede" (1 Thessalonians 4:15). So there is definitely no rapture of living saints prior to the resurrection of the dead. And since there is no resurrection of the dead until after the tribulation, then the saints who are alive must pass through the tribulation.
- h) The man of lawlessness is not the Roman general Titus in 70 AD or any historical Roman emperor because he has to fulfill at least three conditions 1) He must be seated in the Jewish temple claiming to be God (2 Thessalonians 2:4) 2) He must perform great miracles signs and wonders (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10) 3) He gets slain at the glorious return of Christ and does not die an ordinary death like Titus or the Roman emperors. (2 Thessalonians 2:8)

Thus the wheat remain until after the tares have been dealt with. The sons of the Kingdom meet Christ in the air and then come with Him in glory (Jude 1:14) to rule and reign on the earth. The saints take over the field – which is this world, while the tares are removed completely from the field and cast into the fire and consumed.

Thus the lesson of the parable of the wheat and the tares is that the sons of the Kingdom will have to share this world (the field) with the sons of the Devil for a long while. In fact right up to the time of the total maturity and perfection of God's people amid the severe testing of the Tribulation.

God will NOT intervene and remove all evil because he wants His Church to grow to full maturity. God wants people of all tribes, nations and tongues to hear and be saved. If sinners are to be saved, then the sinners must be allowed to exist for a while in the first place! The saints also need to have their love and patience tested and strengthened by the trials and tribulations of this life.

So while God is growing and perfecting his Church the tares are allowed to exist.

Some may cry out - "But we are not made for God's wrath!" - and indeed that is so:

1 Thessalonians 5:9 MKJV *(9) For God has not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ,*

Indeed the saints do not experience the wrath of God but they do experience the wrath of the Devil!

Revelation 12:12-17 MKJV *(12) Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and those tabernacling in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and in the sea! For the Devil came down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has but a little time. (13) And when the dragon saw that he was cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who bore the man child . (14) And two wings of a great eagle were given to the woman, so that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the serpent's face. (15) And the serpent cast out of his mouth water like a flood after the woman, so that he might cause her to be carried away by the river. (16) And the earth helped the woman. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the river which the dragon cast out of his mouth. (17) And the dragon was enraged over the woman, and went to make war with the rest of her seed, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.*

The Devil comes down with great wrath and makes war on the saints. The woman is still on the earth when she is persecuted - because the earth helps her! God thus preserves His saints on earth for the first three and a half years of the Tribulation and in the final three and a half years of bitter persecution the saints are slain. Yet the martyrdom of the saints is not to be viewed as a sign of God's wrath. It is in fact the Lord appointing them to a place of great glory!

Revelation 14:13 MKJV *And I heard a voice from Heaven saying to me, Write, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, they shall rest from their labors, and their works follow them.*

Now the saints are yet kept from God's punitive judgments. The severe bowl judgments of Revelation 16 are only poured out on those with the mark of the Beast. This is similar to the plagues in Egypt that only fell on the Egyptians, but spared God's people. The Anti-Christ will be like Pharaoh and God's people will suffer from his cruel persecution but not from God's wrath.

I am aware that this directly contradicts much popular teaching in churches today. But if there was to be a secret pre-tribulation rapture for the holy saints then surely Paul would have qualified for it! But instead Paul sees saints like himself being around until after the return of the Lord, after resurrection of the dead, and after the slaying of the evil one, therefore after the Tribulation.

God does not promise us total comfort at all times. Much of the Church is being severely persecuted today, and that has been the case throughout Church history. As Tertullian said: 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church'.

But persecution is not the wrath of God. It is the wrath of the Devil as he loses ground to the Kingdom of God! It is a sign of the destruction of the wicked and of our ultimate victory and triumph (see v. 28 below)!

Philippians 1:27-30 ESV *(27) Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, (28) and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. (29) For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, (30) engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.*

Verse 29 above tells us that it has been granted to us not only to believe – but also to suffer for His sake. Indeed it is the children of God, the children of the Kingdom, who suffer for the sake of the gospel:

Romans 8:16-17 ESV *The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, (17) and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

So it seems we will have to endure the presence of wickedness until the very end; and then we shall be saved and glorified and become heirs with Christ. We will shine with glory, indeed we will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of the Father!

87: The Parable Of The Dragnet

Matthew 13:47-50 MKJV *Again, the kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was cast into the sea, and gathered some of every kind; (48) which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. (49) So it shall be at the end of the world. The angels shall come out and separate the wicked from among the just, (50) and shall cast them into the furnace of fire. There shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.*

The sea is the world, full of teeming creatures, and in ancient Jewish thought the sea was an evil and chaotic place. Out of the world are gathered 'some of every kind' and when the net is full, when the end of the age has come, there is a great separation as the angels first toss the wicked into the lake of fire then the righteous who are left and remain are kept with God, to rule and reign with Christ.

We see a mixed world now, a chaotic world now, but God will not tolerate it that way forever. God is pure and holy and wickedness is not being given a free pass. One day the wicked will be cast away forever. Paul gives us a few more clues about this separation:

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 MKJV *(5) For this is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you also suffer, (6) since it is a righteous thing with God to repay tribulation to those who trouble you, (7) and to give rest with us to you who are troubled, at the revealing of the Lord Jesus from Heaven with the angels of His power, (8) in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord*

Jesus Christ, (9) who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, (10) when He shall come to be glorified in His saints and to be admired in all those who believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that Day.

We see here that the wicked, those who persecute and trouble the saints, are dealt with when God returns with His holy and powerful angels (v.7) this will be a time of absolute revenge, of flaming fire and everlasting destruction (v.8,9) and the wicked shall be cast away from the presence of God (v.9).

Those who are punished are: "those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v.8). On the other hand those who are given rest include Paul, and the Thessalonians (v.7), His saints and "all who believe" (v.10).

There will be an absolute and total separation between the righteous and the wicked. There will be no wicked people left in the Kingdom of Heaven. They will all be in the furnace, suffering punishment and everlasting destruction.

God loves sinners enough to die for them on the cross and to patiently wait for them to repent. But those who do not repent are utterly doomed! The wrath of God abides on them:

John 3:36 MKJV *He who believes on the Son has everlasting life, and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides upon him.*

Romans 2:5-8 ESV *But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. (6) He will render to each one according to his works: (7) to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; (8) but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.*

Colossians 3:5-6 MKJV *Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness (which is idolatry), (6) on account of which things' sake the wrath of God is coming on the sons of disobedience,*

Now the wrath of God is a severe topic. We frequently shrink from mentioning it lest we be termed fanatics. Would a loving God send people to Hell forever? If God is righteous and just then the wicked must be separated from the righteous. They simply cannot dwell together. The wicked will always persecute the righteous. That is their nature, they create misery everywhere they go.

Galatians 4:29 MKJV *But then even as he born according to flesh persecuted him born according to the Spirit, so it is also now.*

1 John 3:12-13 MKJV *not as Cain who was of the evil one, and killed his brother. And for what did he kill him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's things were righteous. (13) Do not marvel, my brothers, if the world hates you.*

The wicked hate the righteous and cannot long dwell with them in peace. So the wicked must be separated out from among the righteous and given a place of their own.

I imagine the final judgment as perhaps being in four phases: Firstly there will be the judgment of Truth when God will say 'become what you really are' and when the wicked will be revealed to be wicked and abominable sons of the Devil and the righteous will be revealed to be glorious sons of God.

Then God will issue the judgment of Likeness and say "Gather together with your own likeness and your own kind" and this will group the wicked on the left hand of God and the righteous on the right hand of God.

Then God will assign territory and say "Go to the place assigned to you for all eternity" and the wicked will be cast into the Hell of fire and the righteous will receive the Kingdom.

Finally I imagine the judgment of Recompense and Reward where God says "Receive the recompense for your deeds whether good or evil". The wicked will then be punished with eternal torment and the righteous will receive eternal life.

Hell is not merely a place of passive confinement, it is a place of eternal destruction:

Revelation 14:9-11 MKJV (9) *And a third angel followed them, saying with a great voice, If anyone worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark in his forehead or in his hand, (10) he also will drink of the wine of the anger of God, having been mixed undiluted in the cup of His wrath. And he will be tormented by fire and brimstone before the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb. (11) And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. And they have no rest day or night, those who worship the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.*

Isaiah 66:24 MKJV *And they will go out and see the dead bodies of the men who have sinned against Me; for their worm will not die, nor will their fire be put out; and they will be an object of disgust to all flesh.*

Jesus talks often about the judgment of fire - in fact more than anyone else in Scripture! He tells us that we can end up in the judgment of fire if we are angry with our brother without cause or call him a empty-headed fool (Matthew 5:22); that those who do not bring forth good fruit shall be cut down and cast into the fire (Matthew 7:19); as are those who do not abide in Christ (John 15:6); and that if our eye or our hand or our foot causes us to stumble we should cut them off rather than be cast into the Hell of fire (Matthew 18:8,9).

Jesus also describes the kind of selfish lifestyle that leads to Hell:

Matthew 25:41-46 MKJV *Then He also shall say to those on the left hand, Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the Devil and his angels. (42) For I was hungry, and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty, and you gave Me no drink; (43) I was a stranger and you did not take Me in; I was naked, and you did not clothe Me; I was sick, and in prison, and you did not visit me. (44) Then they will also answer Him, saying, Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister to You?*

(45) Then He shall answer them, saying, Truly I say to you, Inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me. (46) And these shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into everlasting life.

At the end of the age there will only be two groups of people. One group shall be in everlasting punishment and the other group shall have everlasting life.

Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Are you obeying His gospel, bearing fruit to righteousness and abiding in Christ? Are you loving, open, kind and generous? Do you feed the hungry, clothe the needy and visit those in distress? If you are simply living for yourself in unbelief, then you must change your ways, straighten up your life, and believe and obey the gospel of Jesus Christ!

If you are saved – are you warning those who do not yet believe? This is not just a parable, it is the Truth. It is what will happen. Let's share the gospel with others while it is still Day!

88: Sudden Disaster

Luke 13:1-5 MKJV *And some were present at the same time reporting to Him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. (2) And answering, Jesus said to them, Do you suppose that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans because they suffered such things? (3) I tell you, No. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. (4) Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were sinners above all men who lived in Jerusalem? (5) I tell you, No. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*

Ecclesiastes 9:12 MKJV *For man also does not know his time; as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly on them.*

Sudden disaster can come upon anyone at any time, just as it came upon the Galileans who were killed by Pilate as they were sacrificing in the Temple and upon the eighteen upon whom the Tower of Siloam fell. These were not especially wicked people. They were average, normal people suffering the common fate of mankind.

The Fall means, among other things, that we cannot control our lives. Life is slippery and uncertain, and all the power or riches in the world cannot make your life predictable. Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon, the richest and most powerful person in the ancient world. But Daniel 4 tells of the day it all left him, the day Nebuchadnezzar came to sudden ruin, and how a severe and terrible judgment came upon him because of his pride:

Daniel 4:29-37 ESV *At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, (30) and the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" (31) While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, (32) and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will."*

This mighty king was driven from his palace and lived in the field like a wild animal for seven years until he acknowledged God and his mind returned to him.

Nebuchadnezzar thought he had everything under control – then it was all gone! We are not God, nor do we have things under control. We exist by grace alone. If God removes his hand we are soon overtaken by evil and disaster. Our natural unsaved spiritual state is one of decay. The Bible calls it perishing:

John 3:16 ESV *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

1 Corinthians 1:18 ESV *For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

2 Corinthians 2:15-16 ESV *(15) For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, (16) to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?*

2 Corinthians 4:3-4 ESV *(3) And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. (4) In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

Jesus told his audience: *But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.* Life 'as usual' will not do. It will end in sudden disaster sooner or later. Death will come and with it the challenge of giving an account to a holy God. If we are not ready, we will perish as surely as those who Pilate murdered.

You cannot just cruise through life hoping to make it to Heaven. You are on the Hell-Bound Train and you have to get off! You are going in the wrong direction, you are headed off the cliff and into the Lake of Fire. You must repent and you must repent now!

The cure for spiritual disaster is Christ. It is as we embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior that we will find eternal life. It is those who believe in the Son that God sent into the world that receive everlasting life!

The Christian life is difficult, sometimes exceedingly so. We may have to lose everything in this world in order to follow Jesus - but we will have eternal life in the age to come and great glory with it. But without Christ, all the possessions of this world are like a sinking life-raft which we cling to desperately, but in vain:

Mark 8:34-37 ESV *And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (35) For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. (36) For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? (37) For what can a man give in return for his soul?"*

Jesus said: *Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it.* Your life is not yours to save. You simply cannot save it, its impossible. It will slip away from you. It will vanish like smoke.

You are not in control. Though you hoard and save and insure and take every precaution under the sun, there will come a day when your life will be taken from you.

Jesus also said: *But whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.* You have to toss this life away for God. Forget about your agenda and your own will and ambitions. Ask God what His agenda is for you and what His will and ambitions are for your life. Your plan must go out the window. Lose it now.

Don't grasp at this life, don't cling to it or fight for it. Its not about you, its about God. Its not about you getting money, possessions and power but about God getting all the glory. And as you give God the glory, he will glorify you in return - not with a temporary earthly glory but with a true and eternal glory:

Romans 8:16-17 ESV *The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, (17) and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

Romans 8:28-30 ESV *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (29) For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (30) And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

There is no sudden disaster that can completely overtake us and ruin us if we are in Christ:

Romans 8:35-39 ESV *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? (36) As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." (37) No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (38) For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, (39) nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

In Christ we are safe, He is the only true shelter from the storm, the only one who can say "Peace, be still"; the only one who can stop us from perishing along with this world. Tomorrow is not certain for any of us (at least in terms of this earthly life) and we can easily be overtaken by evil times. But no evil can penetrate to the core of those who dwell in Christ and who have Christ dwelling in them:

1 John 5:18-20 ESV *We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. (19) We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. (20) And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*

Find out: **How To Become A Christian**

89: The Fruitless Fig Tree

Luke 13:6-9 ESV *And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. (7) And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' (8) And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. (9) Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"*

This is a parable of impending and devastating judgment. The "man" who owns the vineyard and seeks its fruit is God Almighty; the fig-tree is national Israel; the vineyard in which the fig-tree is planted is the land of Israel and particularly Judea; and fruit that is sought is righteousness, mercy, humility and truth. In John 15 the vine-dresser is the Father but in this passage it appears to be Christ in His intercessory role. "Cut it down" = give it over to the Romans (Adam Clarke's commentary). The 'one year more' is a limited time for repentance.

Apparently the time was up for national Israel. Even John the Baptist warned that the tree was soon to be chopped down:

Matthew 3:8-10 MKJV *Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance; (9) and do not think to say within yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. (10) And now also, the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bring forth good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire.*

God's patience with the impenitent is long but is nonetheless limited:

Romans 2:4-6 MKJV *Or do you despise the riches of His kindness, and the forbearance and long-suffering, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? (5) But according to your hardness and your impenitent heart, do you treasure up wrath for yourself in a day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, (6) who will render to each according to his works;*

God came three times to Israel expecting fruit - the three years represented in the parable. Three chances had been given, a fourth was sheer grace. The tree was well cared for, it was in the midst of a vineyard, was in good soil, and was taken care of by a vine-dresser. It was not a wild tree by the wayside. Fruit was a reasonable expectation. One more chance would be given, the next Divine visit would be for judgment:

Luke 12:48 MKJV *For to whomever much is given, of him much shall be required. And to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.*

In another parable Jesus indicates that the rejection of the Messiah, the Son of God, would be the last straw, the final act that would mark Israel as a fruitless nation:

Matthew 21:33-43 MKJV *Hear another parable. There was a certain housemaster who planted a vineyard and hedged it round about, and dug a winepress in it, and built a tower, and rented it to vinedressers, and went into a far country. (34) And when the season of the fruits drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers to receive its fruits. (35) And the vinedressers took his servants, and beat one, and killed another,*

and stoned another. (36) Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did the same to them. (37) But last of all he sent his son to them, saying, They will respect my son. (38) But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and get hold of his inheritance. (39) And taking him, they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. (40) Therefore when the lord of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers? (41) They said to Him, Bad men! He will miserably destroy them and will rent out his vineyard to other vinedressers who will give him the fruits in their seasons. (42) Jesus said to them, Did you never read in the Scriptures, "The stone which the builders rejected, this One has become the head of the corner; this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?" (43) Therefore I say to you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you and given to a nation bringing out its fruits.

What is plain from these parables and others like them is that God expects 'fruit' from His people. He is not content with lip-service, rituals, empty religion or with fake faith that does not produce any good works. Getting baptized by John was not enough, there had to be a lifestyle change, a bearing of fruit in keeping with repentance.

No fruit is different from bad fruit. Bad fruit (such as thorns and brambles) indicate that you have entirely the wrong species in your garden:

Matthew 7:16-17 MKJV *You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles? (17) Even so every good tree brings forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit.*

Bad fruit comes from unbelievers such as false prophets, hypocrites and so on. It is the toxic fruit of false religion. Those who produce bad fruit show they are not even Christians in the first place, they are the wrong spiritual species. They are the heretics who have ceased abiding in Christ and thus are gathered up and cast into the fire.

John 15:6 MKJV *If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered. And they gather and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.*

While the parable refers to Israel I believe it is of much wider application. Nations and empires come to and end when they cease to bear fruit for God. The Roman, British and Russian Empires all eventually collapsed once they decisively turned away from God. I fear that the post-Christian West (England, Europe, Australia, Canada, some parts of the USA etc) is in great danger of being 'cut down' unless it soon repents and bears fruit.

The need to bear fruit also applies to the Church and to Christian leaders such as the apostles who are expected to 'bear much fruit':

John 15:5 EMTV *I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; because apart from Me you can do nothing.*

Christians in general are expected to 'bear fruit':

Colossians 1:10 EMTV *that you should walk worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit and increasing in the full knowledge of God;*

Now this creates a theological quandary for some people. If God expects us to bear fruit – is that salvation by works? And will God sent unfruitful Christians to Hell?

The first and most basic fruit is faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. If we have true faith then we are acceptable to God and do not pass into judgment:

John 5:24 MKJV *Truly, truly, I say to you, He who hears My Word and believes on Him who sent Me has everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation, but has passed from death to life.*

Romans 8:1 MKJV *There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

The Spirit-led believer is not condemned, and is not cast into Hell. They are saved by faith alone! Yet though saved by faith, they are expected to do good works, in fact Christians are created to do good works!

Ephesians 2:8-10 MKJV *For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, (9) not of works, lest anyone should boast. (10) For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them.*

So while we are not saved by good works, we are saved in order to do good works. The outcome of our faith should be a constructive life (James 2:14-26). What happens then to the believer who produces little or no fruit? They go to Heaven but have no reward:

1 Corinthians 3:15 MKJV *(15) If anyone's work shall be burned up, he shall suffer loss. But he shall be saved, yet so as by fire.*

Do not be too casual about your Christianity. Do not sit there like the unproductive fig tree thinking you have a right to your 'place' in the ministry vineyard. If you are unfruitful God may remove you from your ministry (but not from the Book of Life). Abide in Christ and make the decision to walk in holiness and to bear fruit for God. This does not mean you have to be frantic and over-zealous. But it does mean that you should pay attention to your spiritual life so that you produce love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23).

90: The Woman Bent Double

Luke 13:10-17 EMTV *Now He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. (11) And behold, there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and she was bent over and was not able to straighten herself up. (12) And seeing her, Jesus called her to Him and said, "Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity." (13) And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and was glorifying God. (14) But the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the crowd, "There are six days in which one should work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day." (15) The Lord then answered him and said, "Hypocrites! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? (16) So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound, lo, these eighteen years, should she not be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?" (17) And when He said these things, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the crowd was rejoicing over all the glorious things which were done by Him.*

What does the woman do in order to be healed? Nothing. She is just an ordinary person with no special qualities that are mentioned in Scripture, not even faith. The only thing that Scripture mentions is her need. Her long-suffering, her pain and humiliation, her spiritual affliction at the hands of the Devil! Jesus sees the need and He has compassion!

God is good to us, not because we are good, or because we have great faith, or because we have done a special good deed, or "sown a seed" in an offering plate - but because He is good. No one who was healed by Jesus had to first give an offering. We cannot buy God, impress God or deserve God. God loves us first and is good to us first.

Goodness comes from God because He is compassionate, merciful, kind and faithful. Your miracle is already in God's heart. God fills our emptiness and blesses our neediness. He gives faith to the poor. The meek inherit the earth. Those who mourn are comforted.

Miracles are not 'deserved'. You cannot earn a miracle. Miracles are God's gracious initiative that come from His love. This includes the miracle of salvation:

1 John 4:9-10 MKJV *In this the love of God was revealed in us, because God sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might live through Him. (10) In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation concerning our sins.*

1 John 4:19 MKJV *We love Him because He first loved us.*

Lazarus did nothing to deserve resurrection except to lie wrapped in cloths in the grave! The demoniac of Gadara was in a terrible state of multiple possession. Legion had no faith, no virtue and no sanity - yet Jesus delivered him! And the Israelites in Egypt were not delivered because of their greatness for they were the least of all peoples (Deut. 7:7,8) nor because of their goodness - for they were "stiff-necked people" (Deut. 9:6). The Israelites were delivered because of their groaning and great bondage and because of God's faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Ex. 3:6-9).

Our need is the point at which God's grace meets our life. In fact we only receive as much grace as we think we need! In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector in Luke 18, the Pharisee who thinks he needs nothing receives nothing, while the humble and needy tax collector who knows he needs everything goes home justified before God! The woman bent double turned up at the synagogue because she knew that she needed God! And God met her need! Miracles come to those who know they need them!

Hebrews 4:16 MKJV *Therefore let us come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

The unconditional love of God infuriates the ruler of the synagogue. Instead of rejoicing at grace, he argues with grace. Like the 'elder brother' in the parable of the Prodigal Son he is annoyed at God's goodness to another and explodes in rage - picking the Sabbath issue as his point of complaint.

Spiritual pride and religious envy is everywhere. God's grace, we think, should be rationed out to those who most deserve it. We can be envious of God's blessing on another servant of God – so we find fault with their dress or their doctrine or their level of income or the style of their church building. Or we can wonder why the new Christian got the healing, while we lack a miracle, and so we find some occasion to 'put them in their place'. This is plain wrong; God is huge and His grace is infinite. There is plenty for all and we should not be jealous of His goodness to another. In the parable of the vineyard owner the first laborers are paid the same denarius as the last and the owner (God) replies:

Matthew 20:15-16 MKJV *Is it not lawful for me to do what I want with my own? Is your eye evil because I am good? (16) So the last shall be first, and the first last, for many are called, but few are chosen.*

Jesus deals with the Sabbath issue swiftly by pointing out that if we release an ox from its bondage and water it on the Sabbath, then how much more should the woman be able to be released from her long bondage and given living water on the Sabbath.

The bondage was Satanic. It was a 'spirit of infirmity', a bondage from Satan that held her for eighteen years. It was not her fate, or her cross, or her instrument for teaching and growth. It was devilish, crippling, painful, humiliating and demonic. Jesus got rid of it because it was an evil thing. God does not want anyone to be 'bent over' and held in bondage. God wants you free. God wants you to stand straight and tall. No matter what your bondage is, Jesus wants you to be released from that bondage into His image!

Jesus told her that she was free – and she was! Jesus laid hands upon her and she was healed!

(12) And seeing her, Jesus called her to Him and said, "Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity." (13) And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and was glorifying God.

God speaks to you, God touches you and you are free and you rejoice and glorify Him!

The woman rejoices, and the crowds rejoice (v17) *and all the crowd was rejoicing over all the glorious things which were done by Him.* But those who oppose grace are put to shame! *And when He said these things, all His adversaries were put to shame;*

If you are on the side of grace you will rejoice as others are set free. If you are opposed to grace you will weep and wail at the wisdom of God! You will envy His goodness and snarl at His mercy. You will say 'but she was not worthy!' But grace is NOT about worthiness. Grace is a gift. A free gift, given by God, as He wills and as He chooses:

Romans 9:15-16 MKJV *For He said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." (16) So then it is not of the one willing, nor of the one running, but of God, the One showing mercy.*

Romans 11:6 ESV *But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.*

Ephesians 2:8-9 MKJV *For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, (9) not of works, lest anyone should boast.*

Do not despair – if you are saved you are one of those that God has chosen to have mercy and compassion on - and with Christ He will give you all good things:

Romans 8:31-34 MKJV *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? (32) Truly He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? (33) Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God who justifies. (34) Who is he condemning? It is Christ who has died, but rather also who is raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.*

If you feel like the woman bent double, if you feel that your life is being lived at a level far below what it should be, and that you are in bondage to Satan in your mind, in your body, in your spirit, or in the habits and patterns of your life - then now is the time for deliverance!

You must believe that God loves you, that He wants to set you free and that He will deliver you just as you are, in the very state that you are in now, without having to improve at all. Just like the Israelites in Egypt or Lazarus in the tomb, or Legion among the graves, or the woman bent double the word of God and the touch of Jesus can set you free right now, just as you are, while you read these very words.

91: The Narrow Gate

Luke 13:23-30 EMTV *Then one said to Him, "Lord, are there few who are saved?" And He said to them, (24) Strive to enter through the narrow gate, because many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. (25) When once the Master of the house has risen up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and answering He will say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from.' (26) Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.' (27) But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' (28) There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being cast out. (29) And they will come from the east and the west, and the north and the south, and will recline to eat in the kingdom of God. (30) And behold, there are last who shall be first, and there are first who shall be last."*

Matthew 7:13-14 EMTV *"Enter in through the narrow gate; because wide is the gate, and broad is the way which leads to destruction, and many are those who enter in through it. (14) How narrow the gate, and confined the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it!"*

No one is entitled to the Kingdom of God through ethnicity or association or even through personal knowledge of Jesus Christ. Even people who ate and drank in His presence and heard His teaching can be lost eternally (Luke 13: 26 above).

The only entrance to the Kingdom of God is via faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; a living and active faith that is demonstrated as real through righteous living in obedience to His commandments. You cannot work iniquity and be saved (Luke 13:27 above).

This is a narrow way, through a narrow gate and Jesus says 'there are few who find it' (Matthew 7:14 above). It is the 'few' that are saved, not the many (Luke 13:23). The broad way is the general course of mankind and leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13). It is the way of sin, spiritual lethargy, idolatry and of man-made religion.

This parable of the narrow gate also tells us that time is limited. There comes a moment when the door is closed. Just as the door of Noah's Ark was closed by God, so there is a door of salvation. This door closes one day. When it is shut, no one can enter in.

From the parable of the ten virgins we can deduce that this time of closing is at the end of this age when the Lord returns:

Matthew 25:10-13 EMTV *"But as they went away to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. (11) Afterward the remaining virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' (12) "But he answered and said, 'Assuredly I say to you, I do not know you.' (13) "Watch therefore, for you do not know the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming."*

Mark's version of Jesus' teaching about the second coming also uses the 'door' metaphor:

Mark 13:24-29 EMTV *"But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its radiance; (25) and the stars of heaven shall be falling out, and the powers in the heavens shall be shaken. (26) And then they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. (27) And then He will send His angels, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the extremity of earth to the extremity of heaven. (28) "Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. (29) So also you, when you see these things coming to pass, know that it is near--at the doors!"*

And John's gospel makes it clear that Jesus is the door and the narrow gate:

John 10:7-9 EMTV *Then Jesus said to them again, "Most assuredly I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. (8) All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. (9) I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and go out, and will find pasture.*

There will come a time when salvation through Jesus Christ is no longer possible. A puzzling verse in Romans speaks of the 'fullness of the Gentiles'

Romans 11:25-26 EMTV *For I do not desire you to be ignorant, brothers, of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. (26) And so all Israel shall be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer shall come out of Zion, and He shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob;*

So it seems that, first the complete number of the Gentiles are saved, then all the Jews are saved, then Christ returns and the door is closed forever.

In another sense you have a 'door' in your own heart, an inner room in your soul, where you can commune with God in secret (Matthew 6:6). Or you can hold the door shut – even when Christ is knocking:

Revelation 3:20 EMTV *Behold, I stand at the door and I am knocking. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, then I will come in to him and I will dine with him, and he with Me.*

He who closes the door of his soul against God will find out one day that it can no longer be opened!

When Jesus spoke to His Jewish audience He made it clear that they would be cast out, while Gentiles, from the north, the south, the east and the west would enter the Kingdom. They would see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom, but they themselves would be cast out because of their unbelief.

Jesus tells them to strive to enter through the narrow gate. Salvation is neither easy – for we must strive; nor is it automatic or universal – because the gate is narrow! Salvation is not on our terms. We must enter the narrow gate. It is a restricted space. We must do things God's way and believe in Christ – and not in anyone or anything else.

Acts 4:12 EMTV *Nor is there salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven which has been given among men by which we must be saved."*

John 14:6 EMTV *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*

The striving is not the striving of works but the striving of faith. It takes effort to believe and to keep on in the faith despite life's trials. It takes effort to stay on the narrow path. The broad way always beckons us to our ruin. It takes effort to resist the Devil and to stick with the Truth when all the world around us is full of lies and deceit.

For the Jews the broad path was their traditional religion and its pride and stubbornness. For us it would be things such as worldliness, covetousness and the lure of the New Age.

Jesus tells the Jews that they would be shocked, dismayed and in anguish. There would be astonishment, pleading and anxiety. There would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. They would find themselves "OUT", when they thought that they were 'IN'.

Many assume they are saved - but some of those who are so complacent are actually not saved. They will cry "Lord. Lord.." and not understand how things turned out. They are the ones who take God's grace for granted. Who assume that because of their religious associations, their church attendance and their right doctrines that they will enter Heaven. Yet their lives are little different from the world, there is no obedience of faith, and they are workers of iniquity.

But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.'

Jesus rebukes the whole idea of the existence of a privileged religious aristocracy from good families with wonderful religious connections. Heaven is not so obtained. The first will be last and the last will be first:

And behold, there are last who shall be first, and there are first who shall be last."

God does not care how many conferences you have attended or how many great speakers you have had dinner with or how many wonderful messages you have heard. You must believe for yourself and you must be diligent to press in through the narrow gate in order to inherit the Kingdom!

92: Fifteen Useful Spiritual Principles

The following spiritual principles are ones that I use in my teaching over and over again. These are perspective statements – large over-arching principles that draw many doctrines together into one place. I share them because I think that others in ministry may also find them useful:

1. ***The goal of the Christian life is maturity and godly character*** (Ephesians 3:14-21). We are to end up in the image of God's beloved Son (Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 15:49, 2 Corinthians 3:16-18, Colossians 3:10, 1 John 3:1-3). This is our true inheritance – to be satisfied with His image when we awake (Psalm 17:15). To this end God has given us all the blessings in the heavenly realms so that we might appropriate them in the process of becoming like Christ (Eph 1:3,4).
2. ***The Holy Spirit is God, resident in human personality, with the power to change it*** (a quote from Emil Brunner). Cooperation with the Holy Spirit and obedience to the Word of God, which He inspired, is a great key to Christian growth. It is as we set our mind on the things of the Spirit that we experience life and peace and find power over lusts and temptation (1 Corinthians 6:11,19; 2 Corinthians 3:16-18, Romans 8:4-6, Galatians 5:16-18).
3. ***We need to consciously and deliberately yearn to be like Christ, we need to make Christ our one and only aim.*** We cannot be content with merely human or religious standards. Just because others say we are good, does not mean that we are yet 'good enough'. Even Paul said that he had 'not yet attained the goal'. Every thought, attitude and action should be reflected on in the light of Scripture and brought into captivity to Christ (Philippians 3:10-16, 1 Corinthians 11:28-30, 2 Corinthians 10:5, 13:5)
4. ***We resist the Spirit whenever we refuse to go along with His work of changing us into the image of God.*** This may happen in three ways. Firstly if we refuse to repent and believe in Jesus - so that we do not become Christians at all. Secondly it can also mean quenching the Spirit's supernatural activities (1 Thessalonians 5:18-20) or grieving the Spirit by refusing to cooperate with Him in the process of Christian sanctification - for instance by holding on to rage, anger, grudges, malice and slander (Ephesians 4:30-32). Thirdly we can turn back under the pressure of persecution (Luke 9:57-62, Hebrews 10:32-39) or totally reject the things of the Spirit (Hebrews 6:4-9, 2 Peter 2:20-22). We are not allowed to press "Pause" and stop our spiritual growth as soon as it becomes uncomfortable. Carrying our cross means dying to self daily, rejoicing in persecution and having saintly endurance. These tough things are part of the challenge of the Christian life. Disciples must count the cost. The fact that our flesh objects to work of the Spirit is no reason to stop the process of becoming like Christ. (Mark 8:34-38, Luke 14:26-35)
5. ***We only receive as much grace as we think we need*** (James 4:6,7). God only fills empty vessels. The poor in spirit enter the Kingdom of God. Those who mourn are comforted. Those who are hungry for righteousness are filled (Matthew 5:3-12). But those who think they are rich are sent away empty-handed (Luke 1:53), and those who think they are 'experts' are made into fools (1 Corinthians

3:18-20). The humble publican found righteousness while the proud Pharisee received nothing. Every single example of grace in the New Testament was toward people who had a need or who expressed a need. The members of the church of Laodecia, who thought they needed nothing, were in danger of being 'spat out' by Jesus. (Matthew 5:1-12, Luke 18:9-14, Revelation 3:14-22)

6. ***Grace is given so that we might become holy.*** Grace is not a free pass to sin, a sort of "Get Out of Hell Free" card. Grace is given as an enabling unto righteousness (Romans 5:21). Grace is given so that we might have the opportunity and the power to "get back on the bicycle" and become the image of God in Christ. (Romans 6:1-11)

7. ***The Christian life is not just interior, it is also exterior.*** Over time we must bear fruit. Good must come out of us. Though we are saved by grace through faith that is not the end of the story. As we become like Christ we will do good works as a reflection of our new nature that is created in the image of God and do good works that were created beforehand for us to perform (Ephesians 2:8-10). Faith must lead to a changed character and a truly changed character must lead to a changed lifestyle. (Matthew 5:16, Galatians 6:10, 2 Thessalonians 2:17, Titus 2:14, 3:8)

8. ***Doctrinal knowledge alone does not save.*** The Devil has a knowledge of good doctrine, he just does not obey it! (James 2:19) The Pharisees believed in God, the Bible, the Ten commandments, angels, prophecy, the resurrection and the final judgment, kept the Sabbath and tithed regularly- but were locked out of the Kingdom of God. (Matthew 8:10-12, 23:23-28, James 2:14-26)

9. ***If our lifestyle is worse than that of an unbeliever then we have denied the faith*** (1 Timothy 5:8). While this principle originally applies to supporting one's family it also implies we are to be better than the world around us. We are not to share their materialistic anxieties about food and drink and clothing instead we are to trust God. We are not just to love those who love us – but also we should love our enemies. We are not just to lend to those who can give a return but also to those who cannot repay. If we don't live better than those without the Spirit how can it be said that we have the Spirit? We are to be in the image of God not the image of the world. The love of the Father must be in us (1 John 2:15-17, 3:10-18).

10. ***The spiritual life flows from a sensitive and Spirit-filled conscience*** which sees and hears the things of God and which is tuned into the love, the will and the wisdom of God. God teaches us through the Spirit. We learn first from God, in an interior way. We can only teach the spiritual man for the person without the Spirit cannot comprehend the things of God. We are to minister, preach and teach with this in view. (1 Corinthians 2:9-16, John 14:26, 1 John 2:20,27)

11. ***A lifestyle of being 'in a hurry' is a quick path to Hell.*** When we are in a hurry we lose our patience with others and with it our kindness, our peace, our joy, our love and our self-control. All the fruits of the Spirit fall off the tree. Without spiritual fruit we are thrown aside and cast into the fire (John 15:1-8). As Martin Luther said "Hurry is not of the Devil, it IS the Devil." Thus we should limit our activity level to that which we can pursue while still being a fruitful, godly and spiritual Christian of good conscience, morals and character (Matthew 7:16-23).
12. ***If we continually hate our bother we will end up in spiritual darkness*** (1 John 2:9-11) and cannot progress in the spiritual life. Rage blinds us. Sin and folly surely follow. The anger of man does not result in the righteousness of God. Anger must be for a specific purpose and for a very limited time (Ephesians 4:26,27). Unless we forgive, we will not be forgiven. The heart of vendetta and of murderous rage, like the heart of Cain, does not inherit eternal life (1 John 3:10-15).
13. ***There are two kinds of judgment in the New Testament.*** The first is "krino" judgment, which is judgment of the whole person, judgment like an angry magistrate passing a death sentence. This is not permitted to Christians. The other kind of judgment is dokimazo judgment which is partial in nature, like a performance review, and is gracious and thoughtful and examines attribute by single attribute, action by single action. Rebuke for a certain sin or a particular action may be necessary, but the entire person is never to be judged. Where possible the sin is to be corrected and got rid of and the person restored and blessed. The aim is to help the person become all that they should be in Christ. (Galatians 6:1-5, 2 Timothy 3:16,17, Matthew 7:1-5, Luke 6;37, Hebrews 5:14)
14. ***There is nothing less important than being important.*** Our sense of importance can cause us to treat other people with disdain. A habit of prideful scorning and rejecting of others is a direct contradiction to the Spirit of Christ. Self-importance can cause us to disobey the commandments of God (for instance through treating the poor with contempt, being critical, judging and excluding others, lashing out in anger at minor irritations etc.) When we do this we are effectively making 'self' into an idol; choosing to obey the demands of our ego rather than the demands of God! We should be humble, gracious, lowly servants instead and wash the feet of one another. It is the last who become first. It is those who become as the least among the brethren who become the greatest of all. (Matthew 20:25-28, 23:11,12 Mark 9:33-37, Luke 22:24-27, John 13:1-17)
15. ***As a general rule of thumb, God will treat us as we have treated others.*** This especially applies to those we have power over such as orphans, widows, the poor, our wives, our children and our employees. Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy (Matthew 5:7). Those who do not judge, are not judged, those who do not condemn are not condemned, and those who forgive are forgiven and the generous receive a great reward, pressed down and running over (Luke 6:38). Those who give a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple are remembered in Heaven (Matthew 10:42). God is patient with those who are patient with others – even those who irritate and abuse them (Luke 6:27-35) - in fact great is their reward in Heaven! Those who were kind to 'these the least of my brethren' are remembered as those who did a good deed for Christ Himself!

(Matthew 25:32-40) But those who judge will be judged with the same measure they have used on others (Matthew 7:1-5, James 2:12,13). The proud will be humbled (James 4:6). The harsh husband who does not listen with understanding to the needs of his wife, will in turn not have his prayers unanswered by God (1Peter 3:7). God is merciful to the merciful, upright to the upright, and pure with the pure but He is also shrewd with the shrewd and outwits the craftiness of men (Psalm 18:25,26). The poor are always among us (Mark 14:7) and how we treat them is vital. The rich man who ignored the evident needs of Lazarus the beggar ends up in eternal torment (Luke 6:19-31). The rich farmers who refused to pay their laborers will find their gold and silver burning their flesh in Hell (James 5:1-5). And those who ignored the needs of the 'least of my brethren' and whose lives were ruled by unconscious and habitual selfishness are seen as hateful unto Christ (Matthew 25:41-46). We are not saved by our works, we are saved by our faith (Ephesians 2:8-10). However our reward, happiness and progress toward the image of God depends a great deal on treating others well and loving our neighbors as ourselves. This is the great commandment that fulfills the whole Law (Romans 13:8-10)

93: True Faith Vs. False Faith

Can a person who truly thinks they are a Christian and perhaps is even in the ministry end up hearing God say "Depart from Me, I never knew you?" What are some of the signs of a true Christian? And how can true and false faith be distinguished? In the final section of Sermon On The Mount (Matthew 7:12-27) Jesus spends some time discussing the nature of true Christianity and how it can be distinguished from false faith:

Matthew 7:12 *Therefore all things, whatever you desire that men should do to you, do even so to them; for this is the Law and the Prophets.*

The Golden Rule tells us that what the Christian wants done for them – they are also to do for others. This is the Law and the Prophets. The Golden Rule is the whole cloth, all the commandments tightly woven into one ethical principle. It is what God wants from us, because when we act like this we reflect the image of God and glorify His Name. So we see that the first and truest sign of a Christian is loving action based on deep empathy.

If the Christian wants respect, they are to respect others, if the Christian wants mercy, they are to be merciful to others. Since no one wants to be treated rudely, dishonestly, deceitfully or with discourtesy the Christian is to never be rude, dishonest, deceitful or discourteous to others. The true Christian feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, visits the sick and cares for orphans and widows in their distress as they are able (James 1:27) - because that is what they would want done for them if they were in the same circumstances. If our saving faith is genuine, it will result in love, not just in word and tongue - but in deed and truth (1 John 3:16-18).

Please note that I am not advocating salvation by works. Salvation is by grace through faith yet if it is real and genuine it will result in good works done from a renewed nature (Ephesians 2: 8-10). In 1 John the four tests of faith are: belief in Christ accompanied by correct doctrine, love, a righteous lifestyle and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus then immediately continues:

(13) Go in through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there are who go in through it. (14) Because narrow is the gate and constricted is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

The narrow gate is faith in Christ and obedience to His commandments. The person who follows the Golden Rule of verse 12 is entering via the narrow gate. They are disciplining their life so that it follows the path that Christ wants them to follow. The narrow gate is the holy life of love and righteousness while the broad road to destruction is the selfish and worldly life that rejoices in wickedness. Jesus says quite plainly that there are 'few' that find the narrow gate. Many people have a form of religion but few discipline their lives unto righteousness, love and godliness and live unstained by the world.

Simply saying you are a Christian does not mean that you are a Christian any more than saying you are a hamburger makes you a hamburger. Many people say they are Christians but are not on the 'narrow path' at all. Their lifestyle, morals and attitudes are just the same as those of the world. When George Barna measures statistics about Christians he uses 'those who call themselves Christians' as the identifier – and the results are very discouraging. Those who just call themselves believers are just the same as everyone else!! Just thinking you are a Christian changes nothing.

But when the same things (e.g. divorce rates) and measured by actual Christian behaviors instead - then things change! Couples who discipline their lives according to the gospel (regularly attend church together, regularly pray together and regularly read the bible together) have a much better lifestyle and much less dysfunction than the population in general. The obedient believers are noticeably different in all aspects.

Those who actually and intentionally build their lives upon the rock of Christ are strong! There is a vast difference between those who just casually think that they are Christians and those who go about obeying Christ's commandments in a deliberate fashion. Being saved by faith is not the same as being saved by religious self-delusion! True faith truly believes the gospel and lives out a Sermon On The Mount gospel lifestyle.

Jesus continues teaching about the difference between true believers and false believers by using the example of deceptive false prophets:

(15) Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. (16) You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles? (17) Even so every good tree brings forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit. (18) A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruits, nor can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. (19) Every tree that does not bring forth good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (20) Therefore by their fruits you shall know them.

The false believer has a greedy and ravenous appetite, an inner life that only seeks to accumulate. Their hope is entirely in this world. Elsewhere in the NT we find out that the false prophet also seduces, flatters and destroys. On the other hand the righteous person has their hope in Christ and is wise and good and edifies, blesses and speaks truthfully.

The true Christian brings forth good fruit. Primarily these are the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control along with righteousness, holiness and godly wisdom. If these things are in our life we

are producing good fruit. When people come to us they are refreshed and find a blessing. Fruit is not necessarily 'ministry results' because that would give an unfair advantage to those in ministry. There are gifts or mercy, teaching, pastoring, administration and helps among others. Whatever gift we have it should be exercised in love and produce joy and peace. Then we can know we are producing good fruit.

The bad fruit folk have the opposite effect. A person comes expecting figs and just gets thorns, another comes expecting juicy grapes and gets brambles instead. The person who produces bad fruit is rude and unloving, egotistical and pompous, unmerciful and greedy. You feel 'stabbed' by them rather than blessed by them and you never want to run into them again – any more than you would want to run into a thorn bush again!

Jesus continues with another major principle of discernment:

(21) Not everyone who says to Me, Lord! Lord! shall enter the kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in Heaven.

Calling Jesus Lord is insufficient. That is like an unrepentant thief calling the judge "Your Honor" and expecting that to be sufficient to get away with his crime! Even the Devil will call Jesus Lord one day (Philippians 2:9-11)! It is not our lips but our life that counts.

The true Christian goes out and does God's will and obeys His commandments. They 'walk the talk'. The true Christian seeks to live a righteous, holy and obedient life in reverence and awe (1 Timothy 2:2, Hebrews 12:28). The true Christian actually 'does the will of My Father in heaven'. And if they do sin, they confess their sin, seek grace and forgiveness and get back to the task of living in the light and being obedient to God's will (1 John 1:5-10).

Jesus continues by telling us that there will be many self-deluded people, who genuinely believe they are Christians, and who even believe they have a powerful and spiritual ministry - yet they will be cast out of Heaven on Judgment Day:

(22) Many will say to Me in that day, Lord! Lord! Did we not prophesy in Your name, and through Your name throw out demons, and through Your name do many wonderful works? (23) And then I will say to them I never knew you! Depart from Me, those working lawlessness!

Even though they believed they had a ministry of prophecy, deliverance and miracles, they were not saved! For they ignored Christ's commandments while preaching His Name! They worked lawlessness! Perhaps they flattered and stole and took big offerings from widows, the poor and the lonely. Perhaps they were immoral. Whatever they did, they chose the broad road. They did not discipline themselves to go through the narrow gate. They refused humility, and chose arrogance (we can tell that from their response to God). They became proud and fell into the condemnation (judgment) of the Devil (1 Timothy 3:6); and how was the Devil judged – by being cast out of heaven into the Pit!

Genuine Christianity is an obedient lifestyle that makes the person more and more into the image of God so that God recognizes Christ in them and "knows them". Those who have nothing of Christ in their character are unrecognizable by God. He does not and has never, known them!

Jesus finishes His discourse in Matthew 7 by telling us how we can have a strong and stable and genuine Christian life:

(24) Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on a rock. (25) And the rain came down, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house. And it did not fall, for it was founded on a rock. (26) And everyone who hears these sayings of Mine and does not do them shall be compared to a foolish man who built his house on the sand. (27) And the rain came down, and the floods came, and the wind blew and beat on that house. And it fell, and great was its fall.

The person who consciously and deliberately lives out Christ's commandments by obeying the Golden Rule, who loves their neighbor as themselves, who is kind and good and patient and gracious and who abides in righteousness; this person will be "built upon the Rock".

These are those who receive the word of Christ and obey it with a good heart and produce fruit, thirty, sixty and a hundredfold. These are those who are better than the world, who turn the other cheek, who love their enemies and who pray for those who persecute them. These genuine Christians are full of kindness toward the weak and mercy toward the struggling. They abide in Christ and show forth the character of Christ in their lifestyle. They are built upon the Rock and are sure. They are the true wheat and are taken into God's storehouse. While the disobedient ones are built upon the sand and are swept away. The disobedient ones are the tares and the chaff and they are gathered, burned up and destroyed.

94: Assurance of Salvation

There are two extreme views about the assurance of salvation. One is the "I once prayed a prayer so I am saved forever no matter what I do, or how I live" extreme. This approach does not take the righteous requirements of the gospel seriously enough. It is just lawlessness "baptized" with a quick prayer. The other extreme is "you are only as saved as your last act of obedience". That is salvation by works and is establishing your own righteousness (Romans 10:1-3). It has people saved one minute and unsaved the next. One preacher is noted for saying "I kicked my toe on a rock and nearly lost my salvation". That view runs against the entire teaching of the NT especially John, Romans and Galatians.

John 10:27-29 EMTV *My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. (28) And I give to them eternal life, and they shall never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. (29) My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand.*

Assurance of salvation is not an emotion or an inner experience. How do we know that? From the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee was totally sure of his salvation ("I thank you Lord that I am not like other men..)- but was not justified, whereas the desperate publican who had great feelings of insecurity and unworthiness ("unable to lift up his eyes toward heaven") was the one who was justified before God. Their personal feelings were the OPPOSITE of the actual spiritual reality.

Also great Christians with melancholic personalities such as John Bunyan and Charles Spurgeon have struggled with 'feeling saved' while some glib televangelists are absolutely positive about a salvation that few other people believe that they possess!

Assurance of salvation is also not cognitive e.g. "since you believe these four bible verses you are now saved forever" . Being able to check off a list of doctrines assures us of nothing! The Devil believes that God is One, and that Jesus is Lord, and Satan knows all too well that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of mankind, was raised from the dead and will return in glory one day. But that doesn't make Satan saved.

1 John is the epistle that is most devoted to the idea of the assurance of salvation. John keeps using terms such as "know", "assure", "confidence" and "abide". The apostle is telling us that we can know and be fully assured about our salvation. It is not something we have to be constantly in doubt about. First read the seven passages below - then I will draw out the main points:

1 John 2:3-6 EMTV *Now by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. (4) He who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (5) But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. (6) He who claims to abide in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.*

1 John 2:28-29 EMTV *And now, little children, abide in Him, in order that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed due to Him at His coming. (29) If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of Him.*

1 John 3:14 EMTV *We know that we have passed over from death to life, because we love the brothers. He who does not love his brother abides in death.*

1 John 3:16-24 EMTV *By this we have come to know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives in behalf of our brothers. (17) But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother having need, and shuts off his compassion towards him, how does the love of God abide in him? (18) My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. (19) And in this we know that we are from the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. (20) Because if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and He knows all things. (21) Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. (22) And whatever we should ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and we do the things pleasing before Him. (23) And this is His commandment: that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and should love one another, just as He gave commandment. (24) And the one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, from the Spirit whom He gave us.*

1 John 4:7-8 EMTV *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; and everyone that loves has been born of God and knows God.*

1Jn 4:13 *(By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.)*

1 John 4:16-17 EMTV *And we have come to know and believe the love which God has in us. God is love, and he that abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. (17) By this love has been perfected with us: that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because just as He is, we also are in this world.*

1 John 5:11-15 EMTV *And this is the testimony: that God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. (12) He that has the Son has life; he that does not have the Son of God does not have life. (13) These things I write to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may believe in the name of the Son of God. (14) And this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we should ask anything according to His will, He hears us. (15) And if we know that He hears us, whatever we may ask, we know that we have the requests that we have requested from Him.*

The basis of being sure of your salvation is:

a) That you believe in Jesus Christ (1 John 3:23) and that you 'have the Son'. He who has the Son has life (1 John 5:12).

b) That you walk in love (1 John 3:14, 4:7-8, 16-17). This involves demonstrating generous, sacrificial, practical love for the brethren (1 John 3:16-19) which proves that God's love abides in you and that you are a new creation with a new nature in Christ. Your loving behavior is a true sign that God, who is love, is resident in your personality.

c) That you obey to Christ's commandments (1 John 2:3-6), keeping His Word (1 John 2:5) and adopting the Jesus lifestyle ("walking as He walked" 1 John 2:6).

You know you are of the truth if your lifestyle matches up with the commandments of God; which are to believe in the name of Jesus Christ and to love one another (1 John 3:23).

d) That you practice righteousness (1 John 2:28,29). Righteousness is God's nature and is part of His image. If we are to be like Christ, then we will be righteous and our righteousness will give us confidence on the day of judgment so that we need not be ashamed because God will recognize the presence of Christ in us.

e) Answers to prayer (1 John 3: 22). If our prayers are being answered we know that God is hearing us (1 John 5:14,15) because we are obeying His commandments and asking in His will.

f) Having the Holy Spirit dwelling in us (1 John 3:24, 4:13 see also Romans 8:9). The presence of the Holy Spirit, which is evident in the fruit of the Spirit (such as love, joy and peace), and in the revealing of Christ to us via the anointing (1 John 2:20,27) and in the confession of Christ as Lord who has come in the flesh (1 John 4:1-3) is a sign of God's indwelling and of our salvation.

g) A clear conscience – 'a heart that does not condemn us' (1 John 3:21). Now John tells us that this is a tricky question and that some people feel condemned even if they are guiltless (perhaps because of the work of the Accuser of the Brethren). In this case we have to look to God, not to our heart, because God is greater than our heart and knows all things (1 John 3:20). The apostle John tells us that the way we can reassure our heart if we have doubts is to check our obedience and our love (1 John 3:16-19). The objective factor – how we are living, is much surer than the subjective – how we are feeling.

h) Abiding in Christ (1 John 2:28)– that is 'keeping our relationship with God pure and holy'. As we obey His commandments we abide in God and God abides in us (1 John 3:24) - that is the relationship between the Christian and God deepens. The signs that we are abiding in Christ are righteousness (1 John 2;29), the Spirit (1 John 4:13) and godly love (1 John 4:16).

To sum up the signs that we are saved are: faith in Christ, obedience to His commandments, practical agape love, righteousness, answered prayer, the indwelling Holy Spirit, a clear conscience and a pure and holy relationship with God. Satan cannot show agape love, obey God, or walk in righteousness. The Devil and his servants cannot pass these eight tests. Only the sons of God can!

The first five of these are externally measurable and testable. You can check to see if you have faith in Christ, are living in agape love, obeying His commandments and walking in righteousness. It is also easy to see if your prayers are being answered. That last three (the Holy Spirit, a clear conscience and abiding in Christ) are tested by the first five. For instance, love is a sign of the Spirit, and is also a sign that we are abiding in Christ.

At no point do we have to depend on our feelings, our experiences or on a theological checklist (which is all too easy to fake). Assurance of salvation is measurable, testable, and has external proofs. The indicators of salvation are clearly evident attitudes, behaviors and lifestyle choices that we make on a consistent basis. We should be people who daily seek to be loving, righteous and holy. The Greek tenses here mean that we are tested by our general disposition, by how we live out Christ in the long-term.

No one-off experience of spiritual elation can assure us of salvation and no one-off spiritual catastrophe of anger, rage or unloving behavior means that we have lost our salvation.

Do these eight signs (love, righteousness etc) mean that if we occasionally accidentally sin that we lose our salvation? Not at all! Sins and slip-ups occur with even the best of believers. We should confess them and move on confident of the cleansing of the blood of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:7-9). We need to move past our sinful mistake and resume being righteous, loving, gracious, Spirit-filled and obedient to Christ. This is not performance based Christianity. It is fruitful living that is the outworking of deep and abundant grace. God took the initiative to save us. God is love and we love because He first loved us. God holds you in the palm of His hand and will keep you in His love!

For more teaching on this topic including a PowerPoint that you can download and freely use for non-profit teaching purposes go to: <http://www.globalchristians.org/articles/assurance.htm>

95: Fulfilling the Law

What fulfills God's expectations for our lives? How does a Christian leader fulfill their ministry? What commandments are top priority and get highest billing in the Christian life? There are a group of related commandments that 'fulfill the whole Law':

- a) Loving thy neighbor fulfills the Law (Romans 13:8-10, Galatians 5:14, James 2:8), the example given for doing this is that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).
- b) Loving God with all your heart and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself fulfills the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).
- c) Doing unto others as you would have them do unto you fulfills the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12).
- d) The bearing of one another's burdens fulfills the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).
- e) Showing practical Christian love to those in need, especially widows and orphans in their distress (1 John 3:14-24, James 1:27) fulfills the Royal Law
- f) We fulfill the Law by the Spirit (Romans 8:1-4) and not by the letter (Romans 7:6, 2 Corinthians 3:6)

We fulfill God's expectations by being good, kind, loving, generous Christians. We see a need and meet it, we see a burden and bear it. We treat others well. In fact we treat them so well that we would like to be treated that way ourselves! True Christianity and true Christian leadership is gracious, kind and practical and makes people feel as if they have been blessed. It builds people up, puts them on their feet and helps them become like Jesus.

On the other hand if we don't have love we are nothing – even if we prophesy, move mountains by faith, speak in tongues and make huge sacrifices for the gospel (1 Corinthians 13:1-4). Religious deeds do not fulfill the Law unless they are accompanied by love!

The Pharisees did not fulfill the Law – even though they prayed, tithed, fasted, gave alms, observed the Sabbath and went regularly to the Temple. They were even keen Bible students:

John 5:39-40 MKJV *You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life. And they are the ones witnessing of Me, (40) and you will not come to Me that you might have life.*

Despite all of this religious zeal the Pharisees failed to fulfill the Law because they were harsh, unloving and judgmental. They did not bear other folk's burdens – instead they added to them! In Matthew 23 Jesus points out why the Pharisees were not saved and why their 'religiosity' was a violation, not an observance of the Law. Some of His main points were:

a) Their complete lack of practical compassion for burdened people:

Matthew 23:4 MKJV *For they bind heavy and hard-to-carry burdens and lay them on men's shoulders. But they will not move them with one of their fingers.*

b) The Pharisees did not enter themselves and even prevented others from entering:

Matthew 23:13 MKJV *But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of Heaven against men. For you neither go in, nor do you allow those entering to go in.*

c) And they even made their converts into "children of Hell":

Matthew 23:15 MKJV *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you compass sea and the dry land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, you make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.*

d) In fact they missed the main points of the Torah:

Matthew 23:23 MKJV *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and dill and cummin, and you have left undone the weightier matters of the Law, judgment, mercy, and faith. You ought to have done these and not to leave the other undone.*

e) And instead of being caring, kind and righteous they even exploited the vulnerable:

Matthew 23:14 MKJV *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and pray at length as a pretense. Therefore you shall receive the greater condemnation.*

To sum up: Treating others as you would wish to be treated fulfills the whole Law, and treating others badly violates the whole Law (no matter how many religious activities you undertake). The apostle James, the brother of Jesus, and a leader of the early church makes this point by using an illustration about the sin of favoritism or partiality. Please read the following long passage carefully:

James 2:1-13 ISV *My brothers, do not practice your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ by showing partiality. (2) Suppose a man wearing gold rings and fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor man in dirty clothes also comes in. (3) If you give special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Please take this seat," but you say to the poor man, "Stand over there" or "Sit on the floor at my feet," (4) you have made false distinctions among yourselves and have become judges with evil motives, haven't you? (5) Listen, my dear brothers! God has chosen the poor in the world to become rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him, has he not? (6) But you have humiliated the man who is poor. Are not rich people the ones who oppress you and drag you into court? (7) Are not they the ones who blaspheme the excellent name by which you have been called? (8) Nevertheless, you are doing the right thing if you obey the royal law in keeping with the Scripture, "You must love your neighbor as yourself." (9) But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and will be convicted by the law as violators. (10) For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point is guilty of breaking all of it. (11) For the one who said, "Never commit adultery," also said, "Never murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but you murder, you become a violator of the law. (12) You must make it your habit to speak and act like people who are going to be judged by the law of liberty. (13) For merciless judgment will come to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

His points are:

1. Partiality humiliates the poor man
2. Partiality is thus a gross sin against the Royal Law: "You must love your neighbor as yourself". If you wouldn't want to be humiliated - then don't humiliate others.
3. This sin or partiality does not break 'just one small law' it breaks all of the Law. It even makes the person a violator of the Law. Violating people, violates God's Law.
4. We will be treated as we treat others. Merciless judgment shall be shown to those who show no mercy (e.g. by deliberately humiliating others). On the other hand if we are merciful we will not be judged because mercy triumphs over judgment.

Therefore we see that: treating others as we would like to be treated ourselves fulfills the whole Law - and spares us from judgment. On the other hand treating others badly violates the whole Law and brings merciless judgment on our heads. Rude Christianity is a contradiction in terms. The good Christian is gracious, gentle, and displays great courtesy. Christians should think about how other people are feeling and seek to treat them kindly and well. The gracious, kind, thoughtful, well-mannered person will also be treated graciously on the Day of Judgment. And it is only righteous that it should be so!

Yes, we are saved by grace through faith and not by works (Ephesians 2:8,9). Indeed we are justified by faith and not through keeping the 613 laws of Moses! But once we are saved we are to be righteous, loving, kind, meek, gentle, thoughtful and good. The whole of Christianity is summed up in loving our neighbors as ourselves and doing unto others what we would want done to us.

We cannot escape this just because we are justified by faith. We are justified in order that we may be sanctified and sanctified in love by the Holy Spirit who enables us to fulfill the Law (Romans 8:4). We are made for good works that God has prepared beforehand for us to perform (Ephesians 2:10). No matter how spiritually gifted we are, without love we are nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-4).

Christian leadership is about humility, servanthood, thoughtfulness, love and grace. It is not about ecclesiastical dominance (Matthew 20:25-28, John 13:1-17, Philippians 2:5-11). Jesus even washed the feet of Judas! Good Christians love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. Christians respect everyone, viewing them as those for whom Christ has died. Love is the fulfilling of the Law (Romans 13:8-10).

96: Our Key Leadership Differences

What are some of the key spiritual differences in leadership between a godly Christian leader and a successful but worldly executive such as Donald Trump?

Some that immediately come to mind (in fairly random order) include: Prayer, a pure heart, clean lips, worship, graciousness, kindness, treating people as precious individuals for whom Christ died and not just as means to an end, washing the feet of the saints, going the extra mile, turning the other cheek, taking up one's cross daily, separation from the world and its lusts, loving God, reverence for the Scriptures and for holy things, marital faithfulness, contentment, simplicity, humility, lowliness, obedience, peace, joy, treating others as we wish to be treated ourselves, and being loving, gentle, patient, easy to be entreated and meek.

The things listed above are the differences that make the Church the Church! They shall know we are Christians by our love:

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

One passage recently stood out to me as highlighting some key leadership differences:

Matthew 11:28-30 ESV *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (29) Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (30) For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

Look what Jesus is promising! Rest for our souls flowing from His gentle, lowly and meek leadership style. He promises not to overload us - for His yoke is easy and His burden is light! Jesus is a leader who allows His followers rest and recreation and who does not stress them out or overwork them but instead treats them with great gentleness and respect! The apostle John even tells thus that following Jesus' commandments is not hard:

1 John 5:2-3 MKJV *By this we know that we love the children of God, whenever we love God and keep His commandments. (3) For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments, and His commandments are not burdensome.*

Good Christian leaders do not put their followers on a treadmill. Instead they take heavily burdened people and give them rest! One of the keys to this is teaching people to walk in the Holy Spirit so that they can have God's strength for each and every day so that they can fulfill all the commandments of God (Romans 8:4, Galatians 5:16).

Sometimes we can over-schedule our staff or our volunteers. We see a great goal to be accomplished and we drive everyone hard until it is fulfilled, forgetting that they have family and obligations and a life to live. This is nearly always wrong. The people must come before the project. If the project is too big for the people it clearly should be scaled back a bit.

God gave the Jews three large holiday feasts each year of about ten days each, plus a day off each week and an entire year off every seven years. These were to be times without work. Times to just rest and be refreshed. God does not want you to be working a 70 hour week. And God does not want you to drive your staff so hard that they have to work 70 hour weeks! Fruitfulness is far more important than production and you simply cannot be spiritual, gracious, kind, patient and loving if you are stressed-out, over-tired, and irritable from lack of sleep!

Are your people better or bitter? Are they blessed or burdened? Fruitful or frustrated? Cults burden people, but Christ gives them rest.

The primary concern of a godly Christian leader is not the size of the organization but the quality of the fruit. The key question we need to ask ourselves is: Are our people developing into the image of God's beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Savior?

Christ-like spiritual quality was Paul's primary prayer concern:

Ephesians 3:14-19 MKJV *For this cause I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, (15) of whom the whole family in Heaven and earth is named, (16) that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man; (17) that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, (18) may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, (19) and to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge, that you might be filled with all the fullness of God.*

As well as his vision for the role of the entire five-fold ministry:

Ephesians 4:11-13 ISV *And it is he who gifted some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, and still others to be pastors and teachers, (12) to perfect the saints, to do the work of ministry, and to build up the body of Christ (13) until all of us are united in the faith and in the full knowledge of God's Son, and until we attain mature adulthood and the full standard of development in Christ.*

Christian leadership is not about the execution of organizational goals but is instead about the growth of the people within the organization and the blessedness of those whom they minister to. At the end of our ministry we should be able to look at our people and see that they are becoming more and more like Jesus each day!

Funding has become very closely tied to numerical measures and to leaders who are able to present 'business plans' to large foundations and donors. This in turn drives a culture of frantic achievement and a marginalization of (seemingly) time-consuming spiritual practices and values. The task tends to come before things such as worship and relationships and even prayer tends to focus on what needs to be done rather than on the people who are doing it.

In extreme cases some "Christian" organizations are just worldly corporations pursuing religious goals with a Bible in one hand and a calculator in the other. They are just like any big business and they are even proud to say so. In such cases they have lost the Spirit of Christ and are run by the spirit of this present evil age.

The problem with slowing down and paying attention to people, relationships, prayer, worship, the poor and broken and so on is that "the numbers look bad". What man sees on the outside is not as impressive. But God looks on the heart! He beholds our quality not our quantity:

1 Samuel 16:7 ESV *But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."*

Indeed when Jesus comments on each of the seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three He ONLY mentions "quality issues" - primarily of love, endurance, faith and sanctification.

Corporate leadership may be glamorous but it is not spiritual. It does not produce people made in the image of God's beloved Son. Unless God can see and know Himself in our fruit He will say "I never knew you! Depart from Me you workers of iniquity!". If our ministries just produce worldly people who know a few bible verses and can say a few prayers but who are devoid of higher spiritual values such as agape love then we have failed completely. We have become "workers of iniquity" for we have kept them in their sins.

Our leadership goals and leadership styles are to be vastly different from those of the world. We are to be as the least among them, we are to serve, we are to be gentle and lowly and meek and we are to give people rest for their souls.

The leadership style of Christian organizations should be saturated with holiness and with agape love. Our organizations should be filled with solid deep prayerful friendships among brothers and sisters in the Lord. No one should feel marginalized, left out or at the bottom of a church or mission "pecking order". Everyone should feel that they are loved, accepted and being built up in the Lord and in their faith. No one should feel that they are just there to do a job. Everyone should feel that they are part of a living fellowship of divine grace.

Why not spend ten minutes, right now, thinking about how you lead and how you minister?

What do you need to change if the people you lead are to be built up in Christ?

97: Three Good Reasons To Pray

1 John 4:16-19 MKJV *And we have known and believed the love that God has in us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. (17) In this is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment, that as He is, so also we are in this world. (18) There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, because fear has torment. He who fears has not been perfected in love. (19) We love Him because He first loved us.*

The content, passion and power of our prayers will be affected by the reason that we pray. For instance if we love a sick child we will pray very purposefully and passionately for the healing of that child. Our love will make our prayers powerful. In life, our reasons and motivations drive our actions – including prayer. Love is the greatest of all motivations and lies at the very heart of the spiritual life and the prayer life.

On the other hand, praying for the wrong reasons can make our prayers ineffective:

James 4:3 MKJV *You ask and receive not, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it upon your lusts.*

There are at least three very good reasons to pray and they are:

1. Because you love God, His glory, His Kingdom and His will. You want to see God glorified and obeyed on earth as He is in Heaven.
2. Because you love your neighbor as yourself and you want their spiritual, physical and emotional needs to be met by God. You pray for others just as you would like to be prayed for. Because you pray for others passionately you can then also pray for your own needs as well.
3. Because you need God's love to dwell in you powerfully transforming your heart, mind and relationships into His perfect image.

Lets look at these three reasons for prayer in a bit more detail. The driving force of godly prayer is love. God is love and those who pray must pray in love if they are to pray in the Spirit. God is also truth and those who pray must pray in truth, according to God's will and God's Word. God cannot be convinced by lies or be requested to sin.

Things like love, gratitude, faith and thankfulness lie at the very heart of prayer. We are to pray with a pure heart. We are to be a bold and unintimidated people coming before the throne of grace as strong saints with hearts full of love. We are not to be anxious and fearful – for as we saw in 1 John 4:18 (above) perfect love casts out fear!

If we really love God then we will want Him to be honored on every possible occasion, and by every person on the planet. So we will pray that this will occur. We will pray “Hallowed be Thy Name” with all seriousness. His glory will be our passion.

Similarly we will pray: “Thy will be done, Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in Heaven” because our love of God will also make us love God's will and to desire His desires and to want what He wants to happen on this earth.

Because we love our neighbors as ourselves we will pray for daily bread, forgiveness of sins and deliverance from evil. Our prayers will be soft and forgiving not harsh and hateful, and we will forgive others as we also would like to be forgiven. We will plead for the lost, pray for the sick, ask wisdom for the government and peace for Jerusalem.

Just saying this much instantly makes most of us (including yours truly) realize that we lack the love that we need in order to pray well. We need to pray for love to fill our hearts and the hearts of others. The apostle Paul has given us a profound prayer that models how to pray for transforming love:

Ephesians 3:14-21 MKJV *For this cause I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, (15) of whom the whole family in Heaven and earth is named, (16) that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man; (17) that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, (18) may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, (19) and to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge, that you might be filled with all the fullness of God. (20) Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, (21) to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, forever. Amen.*

Paul prayed this prayer because he believed that God would answer it and fill the Ephesians with love. And Paul wrote it into his epistle to the Ephesians so that they (and us centuries later) would pray it ourselves. We are to pray for an abundance of the Holy Spirit so that we will be filled with love and become like Jesus. We are to pray this for ourselves and for the Church. Revival will come when this prayer is prayed and answered.

Spiritual coldness and selfishness lie at the heart of apostasy and fervent praying love lies at the heart of revival. We have to stop praying for our lusts and start praying for our loves.

We have to rethink our prayer lives. I suggest that you get a piece of paper and rule it up into three columns headed Love of God, Love of People, Love Itself respectively and then write your main prayer points into those columns. As you do this you will be reminded of the three good reasons why you are praying. Fill your prayer life with love and your prayers will grow and mature and your prayer life will become all that it should be.

98: The Prayer of Mercy

First I will describe mercy, why we need it and how it operates; then I will apply it to the spiritual life - especially the life of prayer. First, there are two sides to mercy:

- a) Mercy is the removal of judgment, it is not punishing, not finding fault, it is choosing to ignore the wrong and instead be kind to someone when you have the right to punish forcefully. Mercy is closely related to forgiveness, compassion and kindness.
- b) Mercy is also a spiritual power for healing and restoration as when Jesus had mercy on the blind men and healed them (Matthew 9:27, 20:30) or upon the daughter of the Syrophenician woman whom he delivered from a demon (Matthew 15:22), the healing of the epileptic boy (Matthew 17:15), Legion (Mark 5:19) or the mercy shown by the Good Samaritan who showed great kindness to the man beaten by robbers (Luke 10:37).

We desperately need mercy. Without God's mercy we are lost. Time and time again Paul emphasizes God's mercy in his own life:

1 Timothy 1:12-16 MKJV *And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who strengthened me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry-- (13) the one who before was a blasphemer and a persecutor and insolent. But I obtained mercy, because being ignorant, I did it in unbelief. (14) And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. (15) Faithful is the Word and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. (16) But for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering, as a pattern to those being about to believe on Him to life everlasting.*

Indeed we are saved, not by our own righteousness but by God's mercy:

Titus 3:3-7 MKJV *For we ourselves also were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, slaving for various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. (4) But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, (5) not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, (6) whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, (7) that being justified by His grace, we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*

And we continue to require Jesus' priestly intercessory mercy long after our salvation:

Hebrews 2:17-18 ISV *Thus he had to become like his brothers in every way, so that he could be a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God and could atone for the people's sins.*

Hebrews 4:15-16 MKJV *For we do not have a high priest who cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted just as we are, yet without sin. (16) Therefore let us come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

This sense of standing in desperate need of the mercy and grace of God has almost vanished from modern evangelical prayers. It is instead associated with so-called "worm theology". We have become bumptiously over-confident and think that we have nothing to fear, that we are OK, and that no mercy is required. Some even seem to think that we are owed Heaven as a right! Yet we must remember that God is fierce in His love. He is holy - and in the Scriptures God is often referred to as a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24, 9:3, 32:22, Hebrews 10:27, 12:29).

The fact that God, in all His glory and holiness, is working in our lives, should cause us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling:

Philippians 2:12-13 MKJV (12) *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, cultivate your own salvation with fear and trembling. (13) For it is God who works in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.*

So how does this apply to our prayer life? In three ways:

Firstly we should always be asking for God's mercy from the throne of grace whenever we have a need (Luke 18:38, Hebrews 4:16). God is gracious and responds mercifully remembering that we are dust. He is merciful to repentant sinners and needy saints alike. Mercy means we can stand before God and we are not consumed (Lamentations 3:2 KJV) indeed they are new every morning – great is Thy faithfulness!

Secondly we should be demonstrating mercy to others and our prayers should be cries for God to have mercy on His people just as the apostle often prayed for 'grace, mercy and peace' to be with the churches he wrote to (1 Timothy 1:2, 2 Timothy 1:2, Titus 1:4). For we shall only be blessed with mercy when we are merciful ourselves and that includes in our prayers (Matthew 5:7, 18;21-35, Luke 6:35-37, James 2:13).

Thirdly we should seek to develop mercy as part of our outlook on the world, as part of our Spirit-given wisdom and renewed mind (James 3:17, Colossians 3:12,13).

The tax-gatherer at the temple cried out "God, have mercy on me a sinner". This led very quickly to a prayer that became common in the early church and among the desert fathers. It is known as the Jesus Prayer: "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner.*" The first part of the prayer acknowledges Jesus as Lord, Christ and God. The second phrase calls on Him to have mercy on the one praying. In many ways this is similar to the "salvation prayer" at evangelical crusades except that the Jesus Prayer is prayed on a daily basis so as to show that that God's mercy is always needed.

If we are to receive mercy we must show mercy. In the Sermon On the Mount Jesus exclaims: "*Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy!*" Mercy is one of God's top priorities for the spiritual life. Jesus often quotes Hosea 6:6 saying: "*I desire mercy and not sacrifice*" meaning that a merciful heart is far more important than rituals.

Indeed our prayers will not be answered if we are not understanding, kind and merciful: **1 Peter 3:7 ISV** *In a similar way, you husbands must live with your wives in an understanding manner, as with a most delicate vessel. Honor them as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing may interfere with your prayers.*

If we are to show mercy we must think mercifully. Our mind must not be full of critical and judgmental thoughts. Our inner nature and our wisdom must be changed by God:

Colossians 3:12-13 MKJV *(12) Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender feelings of mercy, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering, (13) forbearing one another and forgiving yourselves, if anyone has a complaint against any. As Christ forgave you, so also you do.*

James 3:17 MKJV *But the wisdom that is from above is first truly pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.*

There is a great temptation to think that because we know the Scriptures that we are free to judge others and to take upon ourselves a "I am right and you are wrong" attitude. Instead the believer is to realize that the Scriptures show clearly that each of us is sinful and that we all have many faults and need great grace and mercy each day. We are to have humility of mind, gentleness and great forbearance.

Galatians 6:1-3 MKJV *Brothers, if a man is overtaken in a fault, you the spiritual ones restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering yourself, lest you also be tempted. (2) Bear one another's burdens, and so you will fulfill the Law of Christ. (3) For if anyone thinks himself to be something, being nothing, he deceives himself.*

We are to stand before God in fear and trembling, filled with the desire to be merciful to others, with a humble and lowly mind that seeks to bless, restore and heal those around us.

Our outlook is to be the outlook of grace. Our prayers are to be prayers of kindness and of healing. We are to love the broken and foolish and to pray for their restoration. It is our merciful heart that shows that we are godly (that is, like God who is merciful) and which makes room for us before God, and bringing blessing into our lives:

Luke 6:35-38 MKJV *But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return. And your reward shall be great, and you shall be the sons of the Highest. For He is kind to the unthankful and to the evil. (36) Therefore be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. (37) Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you shall be forgiven.*

99: God, Mammon & Eternity

Luke 16:13-15 MKJV *No servant can serve two masters. For either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (14) And being money-lovers, all the Pharisees also heard all these things. And they derided Him. (15) And He said to them, You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.*

Luke 16 is a chapter which is largely about the effect that money has on our eternal life. There are two lengthy parables wrapped around a central principle "you cannot serve both God and Mammon". The first parable is that of the corrupt steward and the second is the parable about the rich man and the beggar Lazarus who sat at the rich man's gate.

In the first parable the corrupt steward realizes that he is about to be fired. So he cooks the financial books in favor of his master's debtors so that they will be nice to him and perhaps give him a job after the steward is dismissed.

Jesus' commentary on this corrupt behavior is highly sarcastic but contains some important spiritual principles:

Luke 16:8-12 MKJV *And the unjust steward's lord commended him because he had done wisely. For the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. (9) And I say to you, Make friends by the mammon of unrighteousness for yourselves, so that when you fail, they may receive you into everlasting dwellings. (10) He who is faithful in the least is also faithful in much. And he who is unjust in the least is also unjust in much. (11) Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you? (12) And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who shall give you that which is your own?*

- 1) Money is 'the mammon of unrighteousness'. Mammon attempts to corrupt by becoming "the ultimate bottom line" instead of obedience to God's commandments. (v.9.)
- 2) Success in corruption is even commended by the corrupt - wickedness reigns. (v.8)
- 3) There are everlasting dwellings in Hades into which the wicked receive their own (v.9)
- 4) Corruption in a small matter (money) will turn into dishonesty in all matters (v.10)
- 5) If we are dishonest with our finances God will not entrust spiritual riches to us (v.11)
- 6) If you are not faithful in that which is another's (for the silver and gold belong to God - Haggai 2:8) how will God give you riches for eternity – riches that are truly your own?

Financial dishonesty, greed, covetousness and corruption are not small things spiritually (as the covetous Pharisees thought). Indeed they are almost matters of salvation! For the riches of heaven will be denied to those who cannot rightly handle the riches of earth.

Satan was cast out of Heaven was because of corruption in his trading practices (Ezekiel 28:18). Judas was doomed by his pilfering (Jn 12:6) and Ananias and Sapphira lost their lives when they lied to the Holy Spirit about their deceit and corruption (Acts 5:1-11). In Revelation 13 we find that the final choice will be between being able to trade (buy and sell) by accepting the Mark of the Beast or to have eternal life by refusing it. The last spiritual choice that humanity will have to make will be between God and Mammon.

In verses 13-15 of Luke 16 Jesus adds two further principles:

7) You cannot serve two masters faithfully – you cannot serve both God and Mammon

8) That which is highly esteemed among men (wealth and riches resulting from trade) is an abomination in the sight of God.

These two principles spell the spiritual death-knell for unbridled free-market capitalism. God, and not the market, should rule the life of the Christian. In the end times the free market called Babylon will be world-dominating and everything will have a price - even slaves and the souls of men. God will judge and destroy this wicked system:

Revelation 18:11-13 MKJV *(11) And the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her, for no one buys their cargo any more; (12) the cargo of gold, and silver, and precious stones, and of pearls, and fine linen, and purple, and silk, and scarlet, and all thyine wood, and every ivory vessel, and every vessel of very precious wood, and of bronze, and of iron, and of marble, (13) and cinnamon, and incenses, and ointment, and frankincense, and wine, and oil, and fine flour and wheat, and beasts, and sheep, and horses, and chariots, and slaves, and souls of men.*

Money is a useful servant but a terrible master and we must not serve it nor allow ourselves to be priced by it and valued by it. Our net worth is not found in dollars and cents but in how we reflect the image of God in love and good deeds.

The second parable (Luke 16:19-31) is that of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man has no compassion on the beggar at his gate but drives by each day without giving Lazarus as much as a crumb to eat. Eventually they both die. Lazarus goes to a place of comfort in Abraham's bosom while the rich man is tormented in Hell. The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus with some water but Abraham refuses the rich man's request just as the rich man refused the beggars pleas.

Again the rich man pleads for mercy on his brothers by sending them Lazarus from the dead. Abraham refuses this request also saying that if his brothers were not able to listen to Moses and the prophets then they would not even listen to someone who rose from the dead!

This dramatic parable about the after-life is full of good and fascinating theology about consciousness after death, places of comfort and places of torment and so on - however I want to focus on the financial aspects in keeping with this study on God and Mammon.

We find Jesus stating a few more spiritual principles:

9) Our money is one of the things which we can use to show mercy or selfishness. What we spend our money on reveals our true spiritual priorities. In this case that the rich man did not care for or love his neighbor. The rich man only loved himself.

10) The manner in which we spend our money will matter on the Day of Judgment. God treats us in the same manner that we treat others. God shows no mercy to those who have no mercy. We should stop being selfish and instead we should use our money for good, kind, compassionate and loving purposes.

11) That wealth in this life does not necessarily equate with favor and blessing from God. Though the rich man was very wealthy he was not actually in favor with God. In fact ultimately his soul was damned, cursed and tormented.

12) That poverty, rejection, hardship and disease in this life does not necessarily indicate that a person is hated by God. Lazarus was in fact loved by God and he was blessed and comforted by God for all eternity.

13) That the rich have no special spiritual privileges before God, that money is of no use in the after-life and that wealth cannot purchase salvation.

14) That the poor are among us as a test of our hearts and of our obedience to God's law of love.

15) That money and wealth can blind the conscience so that people ignore the Law and the prophets in the belief that they "must be OK" because they are receiving good things in this life. This quiet, slow but sure loss of moral conscience can become so profound that they would not listen if someone rose from the dead.

The Bible does not support any of the materialistic political solutions to life (Communism, capitalism, socialism etc). In all of these political philosophies it is only power and money that rule. For these philosophies only matter matters, the spiritual is totally absent from consideration. However God's Kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36) and all the things of God are free gifts received by grace without financial cost (Isaiah 55:1-3, Matthew 10:8, Luke 7:42, Romans 3:24, 5:15,16; 6:23, 8:32, 11:29, Ephesians 1:3).

What matters to God is how we treat other people and what we are like in our character! Have we become dishonest and corrupt, cruel and selfish? Has materialism warped us beyond measure? Do we no longer care about the poor? Is money all that matters to us so that it spoils all of our relationships:

Proverbs 23:6-8 ESV *Do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy; do not desire his delicacies, (7) for he is like one who is inwardly calculating. "Eat and drink!" he says to you, but his heart is not with you. (8) You will vomit up the morsels that you have eaten, and waste your pleasant words.*

The important thing about money is that it is a very accurate indicator of who we are deep down inside. How we spend our money says a lot about our heart, our priorities and even our spirituality. The check book tells us now what the Book of Life will tell us later.

100: A New Commandment

John 13:34-35 MKJV *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. As I have loved you, you should also love one another. (35) By this all shall know that you are My disciples, if you have love toward one another.*

The new commandment is that Christians should love ("agape") one another. This is a higher love than the social requirement to love your neighbor as yourself (though it is certainly related). The Good Samaritan fulfilled the requirement to love his neighbor yet there is no indication of a permanent ongoing relationship being established. There was no reciprocity over time (which is what the "one another" concept implies). In Christian community we both give and receive, we love and are loved, we encourage one another and are encouraged, pray for one another and are prayed for. Things go back and forth between us.

Generally agape love in the gospels and epistles implies a continuing relationship such as that between Jesus and his disciples, Christ and the Church, or the love between a married couple. Agape love assumes the other is a more or less permanent part of one's life. The relationship is unconditional, ongoing and intentional. There is definite clear commitment to the welfare of the other person over time. Its a lot more than a handshake and a smile. In fact new commandment love is to be a reflection of Christ's love for the Church. It is to be "as I have loved you" - with all the sacrifice that implies:

1 John 3:16-18 ISV *This is how we have come to know love: Christ gave his life for us. We, too, ought to give our lives for our brothers. (17) Whoever has earthly possessions and notices a brother in need and yet withholds his compassion from him, how can the love of God remain in him? (18) Little children, we must stop loving in word and in tongue, but instead love in action and in truth.*

This "one another" love is to be a life of active sacrifice for the blessing of the saints!

The "brother" here is the fellow Christian that you are in relationship with. It is quite impossible to have fervent love for every person on earth (though we should do good to them as we have the power and opportunity to do so).

Galatians 6:10 ISV *So then, whenever we have the opportunity, let us practice doing good to everyone, especially to the family of faith.*

The "love one another" command (in contrast to the more general "love thy neighbor" command) is especially for the Christian community. It is only addressed to a group of people who know each other well such as the disciples (John 13:34,35, 15:12, 15;17) or to a church (Romans 13:8, Galatians 5:13, 1 Peter 1:22, 1 John 3:11,14,23; 4:7,11,12).

Thus it is a new commandment because it creates a new community. Love one another creates an intense local community of Christian believers and disciples who follow the commandments of Jesus- the church!

1 Peter 1:22 ISV *Now that you have obeyed the truth and have purified your souls to love your brothers sincerely, you must love one another intensely and with a pure heart.*

So now we do not merely love "as you love yourself" - but rather we go up a notch and we love others as Christ has loved us - "as I have loved you". This "as I have loved you" is the new light that shines into our hearts and elevates our love to new levels:

1 John 2:7-8 ISV *Dear friends, I am not writing to you a new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning. This old commandment is the word you have heard. (8) On the other hand, I am writing to you a new commandment that is true in him and in you. For the darkness is fading away, and the true light is already shining.*

This new kind of love follows the example of Christ and His commandments:

2 John 1:5-6 MKJV *And now I beseech you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another. (6) And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, as you heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it.*

Such love cannot be attained in the flesh but absolutely requires the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (which is why it is part of this Walking In The Spirit series). The supreme achievement of the Spirit-filled life is not miraculous power but is agape love:

1 Corinthians 13:2 ISV *If I have the gift of prophecy and can understand all secrets and every form of knowledge, and if I have absolute faith so as to move mountains but have no love, I am nothing.*

The new commandment calls us to love the saints as Christ loved us - and died for us. Ephesians 5 makes it plain that Christ loves the Church in this way and that husbands are to love their wives in such a manner. And the passage in 1 John 3;16-18 makes it clear that we are to love "the brethren" even to the extent that we are to give our lives (including this world's goods) for them.

Thus the church is meant to be a lot more than a lecture theatre where we go to listen to a great preacher perform , take a few notes and then go home. We are not just to love and admire the preacher, we are to love the assembled brothers and sisters in Christ as well! There are over 50 verses in the NT that speak concerning our "one another" obligations (accept one another, encourage one another etc). So this "one another" part of church is a huge part of what we are actually there for!

Our "one another" agape love in Christian community is not some kind of vague sentimental mush. It is reverent, it is righteous and it is regulated: *And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments.*

It is reverent in that is focused on Jesus and on holy obedience to His commandments. It is righteous in that it addresses our behavior, that is it requires that we "walk" in a godly path. It is regulated in that we walk according to His commandments - and not according to our own whims, wishes or philosophy. We love God by taking Him seriously and doing what He has told us to do.

The new commandment calls us to live by a heavenly standard of perfection in love. We are to be perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:44-48) and to be holy as He is holy (1 Peter 1:15,16) and to even become partakers of the Divine nature:

2 Peter 1:3-8 MKJV *according as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who has called us to glory and virtue, (4) through which He has given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, so that by these you might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. (5) But also in this very thing, bringing in all diligence, filling out your faith with virtue, and with virtue, knowledge; (6) and with knowledge self-control, and with self-control, patience, and with patience, godliness, (7) and with godliness, brotherly kindness, and with brotherly kindness, love. (8) For if these things are in you and abound, they make you to be neither idle nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

We are called to follow a new commandment and to aspire to a high and holy life lived in fervent love as part of a living vital Christian community. The great and marvelous challenge is just how can we do this? The answer is: One commandment at a time, one person at a time and one church at a time. That will be the focus of my next teaching series: Walking In The Commandments of Jesus Christ!

Review Questions

1. How is a mustard-seed like the Kingdom of God?
2. What is "mustard-seed" faith?
3. How is the Kingdom of God like leaven?
4. List the "the steps to a miracle" shown in the story of the loaves and the fishes:
5. How is Jesus Christ "the mustard-seed" of the Kingdom?
6. List at least three ways in which God is our primary resource in ministry?
7. What sorts of things are we NOT to depend on as our power in ministry?
8. Why are 'the small things' often very important in Christian work?

9. What are at least three of the lessons from the parable of the sower?

10. Why does God sow the seed of the gospel even when the ground is hard?

11. How can we seek the specific goodness of God?

12. Why should we often be astonished by God?

13. Name four people who complained to the Lord and whose prayers were heard?

14. What is the difference between complaining to the Lord and complaining about the Lord?

15. What is the main point of the parable of the wheat and the tares?

16. What does the parable of the dragnet teach us about God's judgment?

17. What is the main point of Jesus' teaching about sudden disaster coming on people?

18. What does the unfruitful fig-tree represent?

19. What is important about living a "fruitful" Christian life?

20. What are three significant things about the healing of the woman bent double?

21. What are the key points about Jesus' teaching on the Narrow Gate?

22. List five of the Fifteen Useful Principles that meant the most to you and say why.

23. What is the difference between true faith and false faith?

24. Name at least six of the tests in 1 John regarding Assurance of Salvation.

25. How do Christians fulfill the Law?

26. What is the importance of the Golden Rule in fulfilling the Law?

27. Explain some of the key differences between worldly leaders and godly leaders.

28. What are the Three Good Reasons to Pray?

29. What are the two types of mercy in the Bible?

30. How can we pray for mercy?

31. How can money influence our spiritual choices and our spiritual life?

32. What does how we spend our money say about our inner spiritual life?

33. What is the New Commandment that was given by Jesus Christ?