

JOHN HENDEE

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIP



DEEPENING AND STRENGTHENING OUR WALK IN THE LIGHT

By John Hendee

**LIVING IN THE LIGHT WHILE
PASSING THROUGH THIS DARKNESS
SERIES: BOOK 3**

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DEDICATION

I've put a compilation of some of the most valuable lessons I have learned over my life as a Christian in this book. I pray that they will be of help to you in your walk.

I dedicate this book to the one who has loved me, forgiven me, and will take me to heaven to spend eternity with Him, Jesus.

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RELATIONSHIP VS RELIGION

It is a relationship. It is a commitment. All relationships take effort and energy to keep them alive and healthy.

God wants a personal relationship with each of us. This book is about the importance of that personal relationship with God. My hope is that it will encourage each of us to make our relationship with God the number-one priority in our life! I know that is what He wants.

It is a journey. It takes a lot of effort, but it is not in vain. There is everything to gain in making it our first priority and much to lose by taking it for granted or ignoring it.

I want to start by pointing out the commonality of marriage and becoming a follower of Jesus. Both are COVENANT relationships. A covenant is an agreement entered into by two parties where both promise to advance the best interests of the other party.

That is different than a contract. A contract is entered into with the idea that both parties are protecting themselves from the other in case of future failure of some kind on the part of the other. The idea there is that if the other fails, I bail. A contract gives me legal support in how to get out of the relationship and possibly recoup any losses.

That idea doesn't exist in a covenant. In a covenant we are only thinking of the other and how we can do what is best for them. If both do that, it will be an incredible relationship.

The depth and quality of a covenant relationship will be determined by whether both parties keep their word or promises to the other, seek to do what is best for them, and put their best effort into the growth of the relationship. That must be done during the fun rewarding times as well as the boring, painful, frustrating, and difficult times. If both don't keep putting their best into it, or if one starts to back off, the relationship will suffer.

A personal relationship with God and a marriage relationship are different in a significant way. The depth and quality of our ongoing relationship with Christ depends on us. WHY? Because there is NO doubt that God will keep his word and fulfill his promises. While we can't promise any bride or groom in a wedding that their mate will keep their word or promises, we CAN assure one and all that God WILL keep his promises with us.

God will do his part. Now it depends on us doing our part.

There are those who believe that marriage doesn't work. They think it is antiquated and not relevant. The truth is: marriage works. It's people who don't work. We don't do what it takes to make marriage work. We make promises we don't keep. Many enter marriage with a contract mentality rather than a covenant mind set.

If one isn't willing to do what it takes for the relationship to work, they shouldn't get married. They will be extremely disappointed if they do and will probably end up blaming their mate

when anything or everything goes wrong and use that as an excuse to withdraw and discontinue being and doing loving things for them.

Just as marriage won't work if I don't put into it what it takes, the same is true of my relationship with God. It will only grow IF I make and keep the relationship important.

Otherwise it can turn into a meaningless, cold, religious routine, which I will most likely walk away from.

Sadly, that has happened throughout God's history of relationships with man. Some of the earliest Christians had that problem. God spoke to them in the book of Revelation 2:4,5 *But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first. Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first.*

They had failed in the two greatest things God had asked of them: loving God with all their heart, soul, and mind, and loving their neighbor as themselves.

Their love had cooled off. He wasn't talking about emotions. He was talking about commitment to the relationship and the actions, trust and obedience, which show that the commitment is real. They did not love God like they did at first. It showed.

Do you see that God starts talking about the most important thing? It all rests on this.

He didn't comment that they didn't have as many people in church last week, they hadn't read many Christian books lately, they weren't spending enough time at church the offerings were suffering, or that their morals were questionable. He said they had FALLEN.

What did he mean? They had fallen out of love with God. It had cooled. They were distracted. That was the worst thing that could happen. Nothing else matters. If that relationship suffers, everything suffers. It is like dominos falling in a chain reaction.

We can use the analogy of a rose bush. To have a healthy rose bush that produces beautiful flowers, you must take care it. You need to prune it, water it, feed it, and protect it from insects. If you take care of your rose bushes, they will give you years of beautiful roses. If you neglect the rose bush, it will suffer, not produce a rose, and in the end it will die. It is the same with any relationship. Give it the attention it needs, and it will flourish. Ignore it, and it will suffer. This also applies to our relationship with God.

Many years back, I wrote a book about marriage that touches on this subject. Actually I lost the manuscript (or floppy disk) somewhere between moving from the U.S. to Chile and moving back to the U.S. Oh, well. It was 300+ pages long, but the title is worth the price of what the book would have cost.

Three Words That Will Make or Break a Marriage.

The three words are "You are important." The message of the book was simple. As long as we mutually show our mate that they are truly and sincerely important to us, the relationship will be good. That is to say that we make the relationship more important than the kids, house, job, sports, hobbies, friends, relatives, gym, money, vacations, and TV.

After all, a great relationship is what most people are looking for and think they have found when they marry: a person who thinks they are important, who wants to be with them, to share and celebrate life together, who will stand with them even in bad times, who will sacrifice for them and love them till they die.

That is what most say to each other while trying to persuade the other to marry. "I can't live without you. I want to be with you, forever loving you."

That sounds like you have become the most important thing in the other's life.

It is the same with Jesus. We can fall out of love with Jesus. When we start living to please ourselves rather than Jesus, we are in trouble.

When we try and make other things the source of our significance, being, love, and purpose in life in place of Jesus, we start falling out of love with God. The Bible actually talks about how we end up making those things our idols. We worship them and seek to find our purpose and meaning for life from them. We lose because anything short of God can't provide real love, acceptance, or meaning in life. We are deceived into thinking that something or someone else can give us what only God can.

I could actually title this book: Three Words That Will Make or Break Your Relationship with God (You Are Important).

God has already shown how important we are to him, and he will continue to do so. Are we going to put God first and show him how important he is to us?

We already know that Jesus put our best interest first in His life when he suffered and died for us.

In Revelation, John wrote that those who had lost their love needed to *return to the things they did in the beginning*. That would restore their love for God.

If we keep doing what we did at the beginning of our relationship with God, we are less likely to fall out of love with Him. What do most new Christians do fervently? They pray like never before, read the Bible, seek to avoid sin, do honest self-examination, seek out fellowship with other Christians, and tell others about their new and surprisingly great experience with Jesus.

What are some examples of what you COULD AND SHOULD DO to show God that he is the most important one in your life?

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What are some examples of what you need to stop doing to show God how much you love him and how important he is to you?

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What are you doing that is damaging or destroying your relationship with God?

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WHAT CAN DAMAGE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

Our own neglect of the relationship.

Taking Jesus for granted.

Rebellion. Wanting to do things my way and ignoring God's ways.

Not being faithful to my word with God and others.

Trying to earn my salvation rather than understanding God's grace.

Being deceived by Satan like Eve was.

Blaming God for suffering or evil things that happen in life.

Just taking, not giving.

Becoming selfish, self-centered, whining, complaining.

Trying to live life in Christ while continuing to pursue evil pleasures.

Falling in love with other gods. Replacing God with other gods (idols).

IT'S A RELATIONSHIP THAT WILL GIVE US ALL THAT WE NEED

We humans do some pretty strange things trying to get what we think we need.

When we come to Christ, we find the ONE who can give us all we need.

Speaking of those who come to him, Jesus said, *My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.* John 10:10 NLB

Matthew 6:33 Jesus said it. *Put him first and his kingdom and he will give us everything we need.* Jesus gives us genuine, sincere love, a sense of belonging, acceptance, peace, purpose, value, fulfillment, and self-worth.

This relationship will change our life and give us everything we need.

Here are a few of the reasons how and why:

1. This relationship shows us **we were chosen** because we are loved, and it proves we were not an accident.

We were chosen by God because He wanted us. We are not a product of evolution, an accident, or a hap-hazard birth or unwanted baby. Even if our blood parents wanted us, which is wonderful, we were wanted by God before they ever thought about having kids. He thought about us, created us, and is interested in us. He wants us in his family. He wants to call each one of us "Son," or "Daughter." God chose us and He formed us. Psalms 139:7-17

2. Our **self-worth and value comes from God loving us**. It doesn't come from other people's acceptance or rejection, from our achievements or lack thereof, from our religious activity or lack thereof, from our wealth, beauty, titles, athleticism, talents, etc.

3. This relationship gives us a great **motivation for living**. Being a child of God gives us a cause and purpose. We are called to a relationship. We are called to the task of being God's agent of love. First we love him and then we love others. He calls us to love everyone we meet along the way for Him. No one can rob me of this relationship.

Phil 3:12-14

2 Cor 5:14,15, -18

Ephesians 1:4-6

4. This relationship calls us to **maturity**. To be mature or whole is to be like Jesus. He is our model for life. God is committed to help us mature and develop.

Philippians 1:6 *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Maturity is rewarding in and of itself. Immaturity is discouraging, disappointing, embarrassing, and debilitating. God is with us helping us mature. That is the Good Work. He will finish it when we end this life. He will be working toward that goal every day of our life here on earth. We need to cooperate with Him in that process. Knowing this will give us confidence and it will change our life. He is with us working in our life.

5. God **uses all that happens in our life** for His cause.

While God doesn't cause all that happens in our life, he can use it all for his purpose, good or bad.

Romans 8:28 *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

Paul says several important things here:

WE KNOW - He had no doubts about it.

IN ALL THINGS - the good, bad, and indifferent.

GOD WORKS - God is not on vacation, sleeping or too busy. He is working in our life.

FOR THE GOOD - He doesn't say for the prosperity, health, advancement but the GOOD. The good is explained in the next verse (8:29). *To be conformed to the image of his son. **He will use everything that happens to help us become more like Jesus. To become more like Jesus is a good thing for us.***

FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM - This is not a promise for unbelievers.

WHO HAVE BEEN CALLED ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE - Not my life goals.

We need to be careful to not think that evil things that happen to us such as abuse, betrayals, injustice, abandonment, accidents, or illnesses are a sign that God doesn't love us or that those evil things come from God. Most of those things come from Satan (who is trying to destroy our faith in our Heavenly Father) or from people who aren't living in accordance with God's will. Many evil things come from the actions of sinful people. Many unfortunate things happen as natural consequences of our poor decisions and actions.

We also must not think that God says evil in our life is GOOD and that he smiles when he sees us suffering due to some injustice or evil event. That is sick. That is not what it says. But no matter what happens, God can use it for the GOOD (becoming more like Jesus) in our life. Jesus suffered. It grieved God. Jesus became stronger even through his sufferings.

Nor does it say that God will take an isolated BAD thing and turn IT into good like making whip cream out of milk. That is to miss the point of what he promises here.

6. This relationship calls us to a **mission** in life.

We are called to be Ambassadors of Christ, seeking to bring others into relationships with Christ. We have a great calling to live out. God needs us to help with his mission. This mission has eternal consequences and benefits. What I'm involved in is a heavenly cause that has eternal results. I'm needed.

II Cor 5:18-20 ¹⁸ *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*

Do you see that? *And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.* We have a job to do for Him and he is counting on us. We are his representatives. ²⁰ *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors.*

He is working through us, *as though God was making his appeal through us.*

We need to prepare our minds for this mission.

We need to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to this mission.

We need to stay close to Jesus to carry this out.

We need to learn how to effectively carry out the mission.

1 Peter 3:15 ¹⁵ *But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*

7. This relationship frees us from **having to be religious** or believing that we can earn God's love through religious activities. Christ frees us to live life as God intended as healthy children of God. We need to be very careful to not get caught up in manmade religion. God warns us many times about this in the New Testament. Jesus confronted a lot of religious people who were far from God.

8. This relationship is for **eternity**.

Not only does God want us in his family now, but he wants this relationship to last forever.

Revelation 21: ³ *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

Another important thought is that ETERNITY HAS ALREADY BEGUN FOR US in Christ. One day our physical bodies will drop off, or die, but we will continue to live on with Christ in a new body given us by God. Our life will continue on. I Corinthians 15

9. This relationship gives us **confidence** in our relationship with God. We can go before his throne anytime for any reason with confidence.

Hebrews 4:16 *Let us then approach God’s **throne** of grace **with confidence**, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

He is there for us.

We also need to understand that judgment day is not to decide if we are going to heaven or hell. It is the time when Christians receive their gift of salvation from God. And it is when God will reward us for our faithful service to him in helping build His Kingdom by bringing others into it.

I Corinthians 3:10 *By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. ¹⁴ If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.*

Our life is built on the foundation of Christ. On THE DAY God will reveal what our motives were throughout our life with him. We will be rewarded for faithful service, for all we did in obedience for Christ to help bring others into the Kingdom. He will sift through what was real, genuine and sincere or what was done with impure motives. Remember our salvation is free, but we will be rewarded for what we did in service and obedience seeking to obey Him and build His Kingdom. If little survives that test, we will suffer loss but we will still be saved.

Hosea 6:6 *For I **desire mercy**, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.*

God wants a good relationship with us, not religious activities and rituals.

If there is not a good relationship with God, the sacrifices, service, and activities are empty and meaningless. Years back, while living in Chile, I wrote a book with a really long title: ***The Incredibly Tragic Error of Becoming a Religious Person Instead of Getting Close to God.*** Incredibly, that is what happens to many. They become religious or churchy rather than getting close to God.

That is not what God wants.

We can see his emphasis on relationships in the following passage:

I Corinthians 13 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

He is saying, if I can speak in miraculous tongues, have the gift of preaching, understand everything, have faith greater than all others, am so generous that I give all I have to the poor, give my body as a sacrifice but I don't have love, then I don't have a genuine relationship with God. Then all the doing and giving means nothing.

It is a big ZERO. God cares about the fruit of a good relationship - love, character, and maturity, not religiosity.

Many think they have to go to church, do religious service, do nice things for others, stop doing bad things, participate in religious activities, cross ourselves at certain moments, become a religious leader, talk with a religious tone or language, be serious all the time, never enjoy life IN ORDER TO EARN GOD'S LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE AND SALVATION.

In all manmade religions, one has to earn their way into a relationship with their god in order to be accepted and go to their concept of what heaven is.

It doesn't work that way with Jesus.

God already loves us.

We can't earn it.

We can't do anything to deserve it.

There is NOTHING we can do to make him love us any more than he already does.

After all, Christ died for us while we were sinners who ignored Him, shut Him out, and turned our backs on Him.

We just need to accept Him, give ourselves to Him, and let HIM and his love work in our lives.

Ephesians 2:3-5 ³ *All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.* ⁴ *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,* ⁵ *made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions —it is by grace you have been saved.*

God didn't wait for us to become good or religious and then love us. He loved us as we were, in a mess, and he hoped we would accept his generous love and life.

God wants a loving family not a clan or group of religious fanatics or odd balls.

I have used the following story. I thought of it one day talking with a doctor attempting to show what a strange concept many have about what one has to do to gain God's approval and love.

HIS 10th BIRTHDAY

His 10th birthday was coming. This birthday was about to get really weird. Unlike previous years, no one in the family had said anything about the approaching day. He was the oldest of three kids in the family, the first to reach 10 years of age.

He was mystified. As the days passed and the big day approached, his feelings went from mystified, to amazed, to saddened, to depression as he realized they must have forgotten his birthday. "How can you forget your oldest son's birthday?" he thought. He was distraught.

The night before his birthday he lay awake in bed pondering the whole issue. He could hardly sleep. How could they forget? Morning brought no relief as he got up, went to the kitchen and no one said anything other than the normal good morning. He walked slowly to school. He couldn't concentrate all day long. He dreaded the last bell. That meant he had to go home to the family that had forgotten him! He took longer than normal going home.

Halfway there it hit him. ***It had to be a surprise party.*** There was no other explanation. He repented of all the mean things he had thought about his family. Now he was more nervous than ever. He picked up his pace. He approached the front door and entered prepared for people to jump out from their hidden places yelling "Surprise."

It didn't happen. Nothing! A deeper depression returned and hit him even harder. "Oh, they must be in the kitchen." He laid down his backpack and said out loud (as if to warn them), "I guess I'll go to the kitchen for some cookies and milk." No one was there. Auuggghhh. How could it be? He gave up.

He went back to the living room to throw himself on the couch and just then he saw his dad coming down the steps from his bedroom with two packages in his arms.

“Hi, son, welcome home. Come sit with me on the couch.” They sat down. The boy is encouraged to see the wrapped gifts. “Son, happy birthday. I’m sure you’ve been wondering what was happening.” The son sat silently having no clue what was about to happen.

“Son, you are the first of the kids in our family to turn 10. Ten is a very special year in our family, and you are the first to arrive.”

He handed his son the first package and asked him to open it. He did. Whooppeeee. A book.

The title was *The Book of Life* by Dad

The father explained. “Son, this is now the most important book in your life. You must start reading it and studying it today. We will have regular lessons on it. You must learn it quickly. It will tell you how to live. Now if you can learn and do what this book tells you to do, without failing, when you turn 65 you will be fully acknowledged and accepted as my son and you will receive your inheritance from me even if I’ve already passed on.”

The son sat in stunned silence trying to figure out exactly what his father was saying. It made no sense.

Without giving his son time to develop a response, the father handed him the second package, a big soft one.

The son slowly opened it, not knowing what to expect and found a large folded piece of soft material. He tried holding it up. He had to stand up in order to hold it up in the air, reaching up high above his head. It was some kind of robe or something. It was black with dark blue trim. It was a tunic!

The father responded to his sons puzzled looking face by saying, “You’ll grow into, it son. It has to last you all your life. It is a “talking” robe. From now on, any time you want to talk to me you need to put on this robe, go to the bottom of the stairs going up to your mom’s and my bedroom, and oh, by the way, from today on you CANNOT go upstairs anymore to be with us. OK, now once you get to the bottom of the steps you need to kneel down and call my name “Father on the Second Floor,” and if I am available I will come to top of the stairs and we can have a conversation from there.

“Now, in the back of the book there is a CD that you need to listen to. It will teach you how to chant/talk with me in the future. It sort of goes like ‘My Father who is on the second floor, may I please speak to you?’”, the father said with sort of a chanting tone of voice.

“Son, you need to practice this style of speech and when you start getting it right, the tone, inflection, variations, etc. I’ll come and listen.

“NOW, if somewhere along the line you screw up at school, with work, with the police or something, don’t tell me! I don’t want to hear about it. You go tell your uncle Fred. And Fred will tell me about it.

“OK, son. Happy birthday. Do you understand it all? Any questions?”

End of story.

Now, here is something for YOU to think about.

What do you think this son would think about his dad and the family he was born into at this moment seated in the living room?

I’ve heard many different responses to that question. The most common is something like “Weird.” And I agree.

And here is the point. While we would consider such conditions weird in a family relationship with our blood father, we have been duped into thinking that it is OK to believe in something like this when we’re talking about a personal relationship with our Heavenly Father. Some have been led to believe that it is normal in that realm!

It’s weird there, too. It is a form of what I call RELIGIOSITY. All manmade religions have their own religious forms that must be performed throughout ones’ life in order to earn god’s love and salvation.

That is not what God of the Bible is like.

There is NO grace or free gift in manmade religions. You basically save yourself. Paul warns those thinking this way that they are nullifying Christ’s death on the cross and He died in vain.

It’s not what the God of the Bible wants or has asked for. Many men with their religious ideas or philosophies have messed it all up, and it is pathetic.

Let's get this straight. It is important to get close to God, not become a religious person.

WHAT DOES A HEALTHY PARENT WANT FOR THEIR CHILD?

Most parents want the best for their children. They want them to have good health, be free from suffering and be happy in life. They want them to grow up and be responsible at school, their job, and with their family. They want to see them contribute to society. They hope they will be people of character and integrity. They hope they will be mature and wise. They hope and pray their kids will have a long, good life. It would be nice if they would help care for their parents in their old age, too!

Unfortunately, there are children in the world who must try and earn their parents love every day of their life often without any returns for their efforts. They live in fear, anxiety, frustration, sadness, doubt, disillusionment, and discouragement. That is sad and pathetic.

God is not that kind of a Father. God is the creator of all. He is the father of those who accept his love and choose to be adopted into his family. God wants to bless all mankind and help us find our purpose and fulfillment in life. He will do that through Jesus.

It says in Ephesians that God has given us all the spiritual blessings of heaven itself. He says he has abundantly poured these blessings upon us.

Ephesians 1 ³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us.

He wants the best for us and has sacrificed in order to give it to us. He is active in our lives to fulfill his promises to us. He goes above and beyond to give us everything we need in life and to help us mature and become complete people.

To receive the best, we must trust him and live life as he teaches us. He created us, and he knows best how life works.

Before I became a Christian, I thought God was a kill joy. I thought he wanted to rob us of anything that was enjoyable, fun, and pleasurable in life.

Boy, did I ever have it wrong.

God wants the best for us.

I had to learn what that BEST was.

I had to learn that when God warned me about sin, he was warning me about what would damage and destroy the most important things in life, beginning with my relationship with Him and then others.

The worst sin was shutting Him out and rejecting Him as my Creator, Savior, and Heavenly Father. In the end, I would be destroying myself.

When a father warns his son not to put his hand in the fire, not to drive too fast, not to take drugs, abuse girls, steal, cheat, or lie, he is not being a kill joy. Now some sons might question that and have to learn the hard way. A father's warnings to his son are a sign of love. He wants to protect him from dangers and teach him the right way to live.

It becomes a matter of trust for the son. Some get it, and some don't.

While our earthly fathers can be mistaken in some cases regarding what they warn us about, God will never be wrong.

It is a matter of trusting him and his word. God is not a kill joy but He is trying to be our protector from what will kill our real joy in life, sin.

Let's look at the story told by Jesus about the Prodigal Son.

Luke 15:11-32 (NIV)

The Parable of the Lost Son ¹¹ Jesus continued: There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf

because he has him back safe and sound.”²⁸ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”
³¹ “My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

Somewhere along the line the younger son heard what life was like in the city. It sounded very interesting to him and it apparently made life on the farm seem pretty boring. He made a choice. He certainly knew that it was against all his father had taught him but he didn’t care. He wasn’t going to miss out and be denied the adventures that many others were experiencing seemingly without negative consequences.

He rejected the life he had, the way he had been raised, and took off for the city with a pocket full of money.

And life in the city was really good, for a while. As long as he had money he had women, wine, friends, fun, and pleasure. I suppose he would have been a good candidate for a reality TV show today.

But then he ran out of money. Then he ran out of parties, women, and friends.

It all fell apart.

He had chosen immature selfishness over trusting his father.

We need to study the New Testament in order to learn about the exciting life God truly wants for us. What He wants is what is best for us. What He wants for us is living a mature life in Christ.

Ephesians 3:9 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 4:13,14 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

The New Testament is chock full of passages describing and teaching us what the mature life is. It is living like Christ. We need to study the Life of Christ and the New Testament to educate ourselves in what that is.

A while back, I was surfing for a TV program I wanted to watch. As I changed channels, I was captured by an interesting scene. An adult man was standing in front of a kitchen sink watching a woman prepare his meal in a blender. All he was wearing were DIAPERS. We were later told that he was 37 years old.

When she finished, they went over to his WHITE HIGH CHAIR. It was an adult-sized high chair. It looked like a white throne. He climbed up into it. She raised the tray from behind and it came down in front of him. She put his BIB on him, and she began feeding him his BLENDED BABY FOOD. He opened his mouth and she put the spoon in. She scraped the corners of his mouth with the spoon where there was excess food. When he was done eating, they went to his bedroom. He crawled up into an adult-sized CRIB. It was white. The lady pulled the side rail up, gave him his BLANKIE and a BABY BOTTLE filled with milk and talked gently to him.

I could only watch this for about three minutes. I couldn't take it any longer. I was just really glad they didn't show him getting his diapers changed. I'm praying this doesn't become a reality show.

Oh, it was weird.

In a brief interview the man said he was an adult baby. This was a new one for me. He lives his entire life this way. He and the woman both live on welfare checks. They get paid by the government to live this way. He said this is his way to deal with life's stress. He said he does this instead of taking drugs or drinking in excess.

Living as an adult baby had become a normal lifestyle for him. He was comfortable with it. This man and woman had a website with 1600 other adult baby members.

After changing channels, I could not stop thinking about this man. I wondered what his blood parents thought about him and the job they had done raising him. I wondered if they would be proud of him or embarrassed and feel like failures as parents.

This was certainly not a normal situation.

This whole scenario later led me to wonder if there is any connection to those of us who are disciples of Christ. I wonder how many of us could be considered spiritual adult babies? I guess there is a possibility for all of us to fall into that category at times. And I'm sure some can become accustomed to it and justify it so well that it becomes a lifestyle and it starts to feel normal.

That would not be a pleasing scenario to our heavenly Father.

Let's think a little about the differences between a baby and an adult.

A baby's world revolves around himself. When I talk about this with groups, I often ask what the most important thing is in a baby's life. I often get the answer, his mother. Errrrrrggggg. Wrong.

It is the baby himself. He is the center of his universe. He always thinks about himself and his needs. While that may be normal for a baby, that certainly needs to change as one grows into adulthood.

When a baby is hungry, he cries.

When he doesn't like his food, he cries.

When a baby is thirsty, she cries.

When a baby is tired, he cries.

When a baby wants to get up, she cries.

When a baby wants her pacifier, she cries.

When a baby wants his blankie, he cries.

When a baby has dirty diapers, she cries.

When a baby doesn't like being held by a certain person, he cries.

When a baby wants to be put down to crawl, she cries.

When a baby wants his toy, he cries.

When a baby is scared, he cries.

When a baby is uncomfortable, he cries.

Everyone else in his life exists to attend to his every need.

There are adults who live and act like babies, too.

While their body grows, their maturity doesn't keep pace.

They believe everyone else in their world is there to serve their needs.

If they don't get what they want they cry, pout, throw tantrums, yell, go silent, attack, blame, threaten, punish, etc. Pity the person who marries an adult baby.

What is going on when a child reaches what is commonly called the terrible twos? Well, they discover they aren't the CENTER of the universe anymore. Mom and Dad have other interests, kids, pets, jobs, duties, interests, and responsibilities, and this is terrible for the 2 year old.

A child needs to learn how to give if they are going to become a mature adult and experience the fulfillment of true love and giving.

Adult babies are always thinking GIMME, GIMME:

Attention

Priority

Power

Pleasure

Freedom

or:

I'll stop talking to you

I'll hit you

I'll leave you

I'll call you names

I'll run you down

I'll quit

I'll throw a tantrum

I'll pout

I'll get even with you

I'll seek revenge

I'll withhold from you

I'll gossip about you

I'll find someone else who will give me what I want.

I'll act cold toward you, throw, scream, yell, threaten, etc.

In the Christian world, the adult baby's life is characterized as "GIMME," "Do it my way," or:

I'll leave your church

I'll quit helping

I'll stop giving

I'll drop out of your group

I'll run you down

I'll kick you out

I'll gather a band of followers around me

I'll become a rebel

I'll turn others against you

I'll gossip

I'll steal your people

I'll cause havoc

I'm not getting FED so I'll look for another family or meal table to sit at.

Adult spiritual babies never learn how to take care of themselves spiritually. They show up on Sunday and open their mouths and shout out to the preacher, "FEED ME or I'll cry. It better be good."

They don't eat during the week so you can imagine how hungry they are on Sunday. It better be bland, soft and easy to swallow. If not, they will cry, complain, whine, criticize, demand, and throw adult kind of tantrums.

Adult babies feel it's the responsibility of their mate, parent, friend, church, government, boss, pastor, or priest to supply all they need. "Feed me. Serve me! Take care of me."

Paul wrote of his concern in the early days of Christianity that many were living like adult babies in the spiritual realm.

Hebrews 5:12 ¹² *In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. **You need milk, not solid food!***

1 Corinthians 3 *Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly —mere infants in Christ. ² I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³ You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?*

Paul voiced God's concern that the early Christians grow up in Christ and become mature.

Ephesians 4:13-15 *until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and **become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.**"¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, **we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.***

Colossians 4:12 ¹² *Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.*

Colossians 1:28 *He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.*

James 1:4 ⁴ ***Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.***

I thought it would be interesting to do a study of the differences between a mature, growing Christian and an immature Christian.

I'll start it. You can add to it in the years ahead as you read the Bible.

It will make for an interesting life study.

MATURE CHRISTIAN	VS.	IMMATURE CHRISTIAN
Committed to love and obey Jesus at all times.		Committed when it is convenient; when it serves my interests

Grateful		Ungrateful; take for granted; always demanding; whiner, complainer
Surrender/slave		Surrender to satan; self, old man; vs. ?
Serving God and his cause		Seeking my kingdom first
Loving others; Kind, gentle, forgiving		Loving self; those who love me. Holding grudges, gossiping
Good ambassador; sharing the Gospel		Hidden, silent, unprepared
Self-controlled		Out of control; controlled by others
Persevering		Give us easy
Pure; holy (set aside)		Not so pure or Holy
Willing to suffer for the cause of Christ		Avoid suffering at all cost; want only comfort
Seeking wisdom/discernment		Confidence in my own wisdom
Studying Word		Too busy. Have important things to do: TV, movies, video games, eating, sleeping, etc.
	What would you add to the list?	
Willing to share from their possessions with those in need		Selfish. Keep all for self. Not generous. Unsympathetic

It takes special effort, openness, and honesty to be sure we are maturing and not living the life of an adult spiritual baby.

WHY AND HOW GOD DISCIPLINES US

Discipline is an essential part of the relationship.

A relationship without discipline between parent and child is a bad relationship.

A parent's responsibility is to love their kids and that includes teaching them.

Discipline means teaching.

Learning is not always fun.

There are a lot of ways we learn, from books, classes, lectures, seminars, conversations, movies, TV, Internet, life experiences, parents, teachers, politicians, friends, strangers, enemies, and from other believers.

We can learn from God's word and our conscience. Learning requires listening.

We can learn from our failures, bad choices, and mistakes. Maybe I should say some can.

We don't like being taught, corrected, or criticized.

It hurts our pride. We think we know everything, but we don't.

Proverbs 5:12 tells it like it was/is like for most of us. *You will say, "How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction!"*

God is committed to teaching us how to live. He wants to disciple us or discipline us.

Jesus said he is the way, the truth, and the life. He has so much to teach us and is eager to see us learn and mature.

He teaches or disciplines us through the Bible.

He teaches us through his Holy Spirit and our biblically educated conscience.

He teaches us through preachers, teachers, family members, and friends.

Paul told others to follow his example and the teachings from God.

Hebrews 12:6-12 says the following about God's disciplining us.

⁶ *because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.*

⁷ *Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?* ⁸ *If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline —*

then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰ They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. ¹² Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.

What can we learn from this passage?

God disciplines us for our own good.

It proves he loves us.

Discipline can be:

Exciting

Rewarding

Fulfilling

And it can be:

Disheartening, humbling

A rebuke, chastening, correcting

A hardship

Not pleasant at times

Painful

BUT it can result in our living the right kind of life with most others and that will bring us peace, contentment, freedom from unnecessary suffering, and genuine love.

Earlier we read the story of the Prodigal Son. **Luke 15:11-32**

I think there are some lessons we can learn from it about how God disciplines or teaches us. This is a parable about God and his people. It is a story about you and me. The younger son represents those who run off to the city and leave their Father as they pursue the good life.

Now, we can assume that during his growing up years, the father had taught the son by word and example. We can be sure he taught his son the scriptures and how to worship God and how to pray and in their case, keep the law. He taught and modeled morals and basic manners for

life. So the son knew the lifestyle of the father and what was right and wrong in his father's eyes.

But the allure of the city life was too much for him. He cut and run with a pocket full of money, which made the good life available to him, for a while.

What did the father do? How did he discipline or teach his son at that moment?

At the point the son left home, the father let him go. He had taught him for years. He had raised his son in a good environment in a good family, teaching him values, work ethics, morals, courtesy, etc. He loved his son. He taught him how to make his own decisions, and as an adult he respected those decisions even if he didn't agree with them. I'm sure the prodigal's father didn't agree with the decision (or the reasons) to go to the city. I'm sure he warned him, but he let him go.

His education (discipline) was about to enter a new level of intensity.

There is no indication that the father ever went to the city to seek out his son and plead with him to come home. He had already done his job of teaching while the son was growing up. Now it was time to see if the son had learned anything and appreciated what he had been taught. His education was about to take on a new look. Actually he failed the first test by making the decision to leave home for the new lifestyle. Now we would see how long the rebellion against his father's teachings would last.

Too often when we experience the consequences that result from our own mistakes, we want God to rush in and fix things. But most of the time he won't and can't. He would be violating our free will and robbing us of a learning opportunity. **He lets us face the consequences of our choices.** He'll stand by our side, be with us, and love us, but we'll have to suffer the consequences and do all we need to in to get back to normalcy.

I've learned from first-hand experience, observing others' lives and reading the Bible what I believe is God's most common form of discipline for his children, when they get off track and sin. **He often does nothing** but lets nature or natural consequences run their course. They are tough and at times brutal teachers, but they are excellent teachers, and the lessons are most often unforgettable.

Sometimes the best teacher, when we are stubborn, is to let us suffer the consequences of doing things our way. It seems cruel to us at the moment, but it is the best way for us to learn the lessons about how to live.

Alcoholics Anonymous has a saying "You get what you got when you do what you did."

That is a statement about reality and negative consequences teaching us. The obvious point is that if you don't like what happened as a result of your actions or decisions, then change them and stop doing what you did. You don't like what you got? Stop doing what you did!

At times, parents rob their kids of the learning opportunity when they get themselves in trouble by rushing in and saving their "baby" from the consequences of their actions. It is often a mistake. Let them learn that there are consequences for their actions. Be by their side, but let them learn. Don't ROB them of life's natural and powerful teaching moments. There are obvious exceptions to this. So your kid is drowning in a place you told him not to swim? Well, save him! But don't be so quick to bail him out with the school principal or the police or their boss IF what they did was irresponsible and wrong. Stand with them. Suffer with them. Be there with them. But let them learn. And your suffering is part of the consequences they need to learn come about by their bad actions and attitudes.

So the father of the prodigal hoped and waited for his son to come to his senses.

When he did and it was clear the son HAD SINCERELY AND HUMBLY learned his lesson, the father welcomed his son back with a celebration, not condemnation. It was a great day. It was well worth the sleepless nights and the lost money. He had his son back. More than his son, he had a more mature, repentant son.

Do you see this? The father didn't berate, embarrass, belittle, condemn, criticize, scold, or chastise his son for all the stupid things he did. The son had lost his fortune and left a terrible name for his family in the city. The son learned. He repented. He was willing to be a farm hand if need be. To be with his father was worth more than all the city life had to offer.

Often times we return after failing and want to start back where we were before we failed. That is not realistic in many cases. It shows we haven't learned anything. That is taking advantage of the situation and others. It can show a lack of gratitude for the forgiveness of others. We often need to regain our previous status as we prove that the change is deeper than just our words.

While we don't know what position the son ended up with, he returned being willing to be the lowest farm hand. He understood it. He got it. He humbled himself.

The younger son thought he wouldn't be accepted because he failed.

He believed he didn't deserve his father's love.

He knew he had failed his father.

He hadn't lived up to what he knew his father wanted.

But his father's love was always there.

The father never stopped loving the son. The father never stopped disciplining or teaching his son. The son had just changed classrooms.

The father was grateful that the son had learned a lesson. He was maturing. Teaching his son in the past paid off in the present.

Maybe the greatest lesson he had taught the son wasn't about the son's morals but about the nature of his father. He was forgiving. He gave second chances. He was full of mercy and grace.

The older son got mad with the response of the father because he thought he deserved more. He felt he had earned his father's love and blessings. He hadn't failed and made a mockery of his father and his life style. He hadn't embarrassed his father. He deserved more than his failure of a brother did.

Maybe he was trying to gain his fathers favor by comparing himself to the worthless younger brother. Maybe he was jealous. Maybe he had some serious challenges in his own life, too, like a competitive spirit, selfishness, tendency to gossip, arrogance, ingratitude, acting like the victim, accusing, running down, judging, and blaming. Maybe he thought he had earned his father's love because he was a good son.

In any case he was wrong. He hadn't earned his father's love. I'm sure he had gained his father's appreciation, gratitude and respect but not his love. The father's love wasn't based on his excellent performance. He loved him because he was his son. The father was certainly grateful for and pleased with the older son's life and lifestyle, and the son was blessed every day for that, but the father's love was based on something deeper.

The older son's education or discipline continued through all this also.

God is on our side, but he can't force us to love and obey him.

He can only seek to persuade us to trust and obey him.

His spirit prays for us.

He gave us a conscience that is like an alarm system. It warns us inside when we are going in the wrong direction.

He gives us free will and trusts that we'll live responsibly.

He will give us wisdom if we ask for it, but then we have to apply it.

He won't allow us to be tested beyond what we can handle, but we have to accept His help.

He will help us defeat the temptations of the evil one if we really want to win.

He gave us His Word to guide us, but we must use it and live it.

He sends messages warning and offering help to us through people, words, pictures, signs, and stories. Are we listening?

He lets us learn from our mistakes. Are we learning?

We learn through suffering, but do we see suffering as a teacher?

We learn through hurt feelings. They often show us we wanted the wrong thing.

Are you in a situation where you need to come to your senses?

Do you need to repent and return to your Father?

Do you need to confess your sins?

Do you need to humble yourself and be willing to work as a servant?

Your Father will always be waiting.

He knows what you think and feel.

You can't fool him. He knows you too well.

He gives us up or leaves us to our chosen evil ways to let the pain of those choices teach us.

That is what God was doing in **Romans 1:24,26,28**.

It says that "God gave them up to their evil ways" three times.

That's what you want? Then that is what you'll get. I warned you about that.

I'll be here waiting when you see it isn't all it's cracked up to be.

He calls to us.

He touches our conscience.

He sends others to talk to us.

He sends messages through any numbers of avenues.

He lets us suffer the consequences.

Romans 2:4 (NLT) *Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?*

He loves us and wants to see us mature, living in his presence and enjoying him.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE GET BORED OR IMPATIENT WITH GOD

All relationships are vulnerable to it.

Anyone can become bored with their marriage if they aren't careful.

The key to not letting that happen is to be sure that one keeps their word no matter what comes along. At a wedding, the couple pledges to be faithful to each other for life.

That means they have made a decision. They have chosen. They have found the ONE with whom they choose to spend their life. They don't need to keep searching anymore. If they keep that promise, if they are a person of their word, then this pledge will protect them and guide them in the future when their marriage seems boring or difficult. That pledge will keep them from seeking excitement in other places and with other people. That pledge will keep them coming back and seeking to make their marriage better.

It is a relationship, and we must protect and work at it and invest in it for it to grow.

I said earlier that many people think marriage doesn't work. That is not true.

Marriage works wonderfully. The problem is that we don't keep our word.

We don't work at the marriage. We don't work.

How is it that half of the marriages end in divorce when most all of them start with such apparent love, passion, commitment, zeal, and enthusiasm?

It happens so easily. After the wedding and/or honeymoon, we get busy and distracted. Conflicts arise and we have problems with family, each other, our own inner self, work, neighborhood, finances, health, etc. These are bound to happen.

And we can become angry, disillusioned, frustrated, and stressed out.

Chasms appear and grow.

Maybe we just let other things take over.

We stop writing notes, giving cards, and special gifts.

We stop calling and talking as much.

We let stress get in the way.

We don't go out as much.

We don't spend time together like before. There is less romance and physical contact, hugging, touching, kissing, and sexual relations.

We start to get irritated with things that annoy us about the other.

We start complaining, whining, pouting, and withdrawing into a private thought life.

We stop sharing like in the past. Maybe we learn that we really never shared that much to start with.

We stop listening.

We stop caring.

We focus on all their faults, shortcomings, errors, inconsistencies, and blemishes, and that leads to withdrawal and kinds of retaliation.

More distance is created.

We start to feel sorry for ourselves.

We might start to question our decision about this person and our marrying them.

We start to pour time into other things that give us fulfillment, work, kids, sports, hobbies, friends, etc.

We start to look for something elsewhere, outside of the relationship to replace the excitement, fun, and pleasure we seem to have lost.

We might find something or someone new, alluring, attracting, exciting, and maybe sensual in life and we have to have it.

Now all of a sudden the marriage relationship and partner are interfering with me having "it." I want "it" more than I want what I currently have.

Recovering what we wanted or thought we once had seems impossible, undesirable, takes too much effort, and seems to be unachievable.

SO WE NEGLECT, REJECT, OR IGNORE THE RELATIONSHIP AND IT SUFFERS.

It becomes boring. We become impatient with any hopes of things getting better.

Some begin to think that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. Years ago as I reflected about the issue of greener grass, I realized that under all green grass is dirt and manure. There is some dirt in all of our life situations, and it won't be any different once we get

to the other side of the fence to greener grass. After munching on the grass on the other side of the fence, we will find out that there IS dirt under it, too.

When you apply that to marriage, it is interesting to see the fact that second marriage divorce rates are higher than in first marriages, and third marriage divorce rates are higher than in the second marriage. Most of the time people take their problems from previous relationships with them into the new one while being blind to the problems that may already exist in the new one.

Some take the route of just moving in together without getting married, thinking they will avoid the pitfalls of marriage. The experts tell us those couples have a higher rate of breakup than couples who marry. That is no escape. That is just trying to get the benefits of a relationship (companionship, sex) without having to make a commitment.

The routine daily events of life and marriage are not always exciting. At times, they can become laborious. We will face stress, poor attitude and treatment, gossip, negativity, illnesses, financial problems, betrayal, and many other things. Even success, or the pursuit of it, can create problems for the relationship.

So while we can say that any relationship has the potential to be riddled with challenges, it can also be said that any relationship can only become boring if we both let it.

Granted, the other person's not participating in the relationship can change things and make it difficult or impossible.

Even then you can keep being the best person possible and being loving and respectful toward them even if they aren't with you. While it may limit what can happen in the relationship, it doesn't have to limit the kind of person you can choose to be.

Now let's apply this to our relationship with God. "How can you get bored with God?" you ask.

OK, I get bored with some sermons and classes, but we are talking about God, the creator of the universe. He is the one who made all the beautiful birds, tropical fish, beautiful flowers, and oh yeah, us!

Can our relationship with God fall or decline into the abyss of what we would call boring?

Without a doubt. Yes.

So how do we keep the relationship with Jesus active and alive? How do we keep it from becoming cool and dying? It depends on us.

How can our relationship with Jesus become boring?

Stop putting into the relationship.

Forget our promise to him.

Forget or take for granted all his promises to us.

Become dissatisfied with what he gives us.

Think we are missing out.

Long for the things the world offers us.

Forget there is an enemy wanting our love.

How do we stop that from happening?

Here are some ideas.

It all starts with Jesus.

Hebrews 12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus,

We need to get rid of the STUFF that is getting in the way of our relationship with Jesus.

We need to reject sin and its empty promises.

We need to run, (it takes some effort) with perseverance (we can't give up).

The race is marked out for us. We have a course and a destiny.

To keep our love alive with Jesus means we do some basic routine things in our relationship with him.

We need to understand that this is a relationship of FAITH and trust, and it doesn't always run on unrealistic, highly charged emotions. That is maturity.

Now here is the KEY:

FIXING OUR EYES ON JESUS!

Keeping our eyes, our attention, our hearts focused on Jesus and His love for us, His promises for us, and the future He has planned for us is the key. Don't let your eyes stray.

Remember Peter when he tried walking out to Jesus on the water?

Matthew 14 ²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. ²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." ²⁸ "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, began to sink,

We tend to do the same thing as Peter. He started out with a lot of zeal. He was amazed that he was walking on water. He took his eyes off Jesus, questioned what he was doing, and saw the dangers around him. He was afraid and began to sink. We all begin to sink in fear when we take our eyes off Jesus. It might be fear of getting hurt, suffering, or maybe losing out on something in life by following Jesus. I'm guessing Peter thought, "What am I doing following Jesus? This won't work; I can't walk on water!"

What do our eyes fall on at times that distract us from Jesus? Other people. Leaders. Faults and failures of others. Being too busy doing stuff that really doesn't matter. Seeking popularity, acceptance, fame, following, or fortune. Looking for pleasure in the wrong places with the wrong people.

Keep YOUR EYES ON JESUS.

Before you get up out of bed in the morning, spend some time with Jesus, talking with Him, praying to Him. You can talk to Him throughout the day anytime and anyplace whether it be for one minute or one hour.

I developed a little acrostic years ago that can serve as a guide for this time.

ACTSM sounds like Axe 'em, but with a different meaning.

Adoration: start with praising God for who He is and for His love.

I have found that the alphabet method helps. Start with the letter A and praise God for things that start with A. He is Awesome, He is Available, He gives the Abundant life, etc. Then move on to B and then C. You may not get through the whole alphabet each time, but it is a good way to think of His great attributes. Some days start in the middle of the alphabet, with O, for example, and move on from there.

Psalm 18:46 *The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be God my Savior!*

Confession: Confess that you need Jesus and want Him to be with you throughout the day. Confess any sins you are aware of that you have committed. Thank Him for His forgiveness. Change your ways. Don't keep doing what you confessed.

1 John 1:9 *If we **confess** our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

Thanksgiving: Thank God for all he has done, is doing, and will do for you. This is a great way to avoid taking simple as well as important things in life for granted. I recently read an interesting thought. “What if you found out that today you only had what you thanked God for yesterday?” Interesting.

I found that using the Alphabet system is helpful here too.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 ***give thanks** in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.*

Supplication: that is praying for others’ needs. Pray for your government leaders as we are told to do, for your family members, your friends, your church leaders, missionaries around the world, people you work or study with, those suffering, etc. Pray for wisdom as you live your life, for courage as you reach out to the lost. Pray for those you will meet throughout the day, that you will be conscious of them and being God’s ambassador to them.

Philippians 4:6 *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by **prayer** and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

Worship instead of worry.

Colossians 1:3 *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we **pray** for you.*

Who do you need to pray for?

Colossians 1:9 *For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped **praying** for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives,*

Colossians 4:2 *Devote yourselves to **prayer**, being watchful and thankful.*

Colossians 4:3 *And **pray** for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.*

Mission: Tell God: I'm going to be your ambassador

your agent

your servant

your son or daughter, to carry out your will...

at home, work, school, practice, club, while I'm shopping, paying bills, eating out, etc.

See **your family** as a mission, as people to love and be patient and kind to. See **your place of work** not as just a place to work but as your world or sphere of influence, as your laboratory to practice your life in Christ, loving others, showing the fruit of the spirit, being a son of God in action.

See **your school** not just as a place to study but as a place to care for others.

See **your community** not just as a place to live but as a place to share the love of God.

See **your world** not just as the planet where you are but as part of God's mission to reach all mankind with the Gospel of Christ.

See **your church** not just as a filling station but as a place to care for and love your brothers and sisters.

See **your club or team** not just as doing something fun in life but an arena in which to model Christ likeness and reach out in love.

See **your enemies** as those with whom you can humble yourself and seek to be loving to them.

Besides prayer, we need to spend time reading and studying the Word of God.

The Bible is our book of directions, our life manual, our play book. For Christians, the New Testament is our book of instructions and our guide as to how to live like Jesus and carry out his mission. We must spend time reading and learning it. Many like to memorize passages each week. You can follow a Bible reading program. A great place to get a number of Bible reading programs is at [www. BibleGateway.com](http://www.BibleGateway.com). You can get verses, chapters, or whatever you want sent to your computer every day. You can find a read through the Bible or New Testament in a year guide online or at a Bible bookstore.

Thinking we can get by spiritually and stay close to Jesus with just listening to ONE sermon a WEEK will leave us WEAK. What if you just had one meal a week? What if you just saw your family one hour a week? It would be tough on your body and your relationship with the family. We need to nourish ourselves and keep our eyes on Jesus by reading the Bible every day when possible. We need to make it a priority. I know many who get up early to read it before they take off for the day.

Some find it helpful to have a monthly chart to help insure they have a plan on how to read the Bible every day.

You need to decide how much you want to read a day. A chapter a day is always a good challenge.

I recommend reaching one of the four gospels with another writing in the New Testament in between. Make your own chart and then check it each day after you have read your portion of scripture.

Don't be afraid to mark special verses or ideas that have a special impact for you.

You can also use some of these passage as guides for your prayer, praying to God about your living out what is written.

Each time you re-read one of the gospels, look for a theme. One time read through specifically looking for subjects such as:

How did people treat Jesus?

How did Jesus treat people?

What were the miracles Jesus performed?

What did Jesus say to the religious leaders?

How did Jesus react to people's sins?

How did Jesus react to suffering?

What are the greatest teachings of Jesus?

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday

IT IS SO SIMPLE! ALL WE NEED IS JESUS

When we take our eyes off Jesus, they will fall on something else.

Humans are drawn to the spectacular. They always have been. Satan likes to use our desire for the spectacular to tempt us. We are all vulnerable to the temptations that barrage us every day. If we don't stay focused on the relationship, our love for Jesus is more vulnerable to cooling off.

Many years ago someone wrote a book titled *A Miracle a Day*. I never liked what they proposed. In my mind, God doesn't have to perform a miracle every day in our life for us to be motivated and fulfilled and keep our eyes on Jesus!

We don't have to have a miracle a day to have meaningful days. We don't need a miracle a day, but we can make every day a day of MISSION, and that will keep our life fulfilling and exciting.

We want someone else (God, our mate, kids, parents, teachers, friends, coaches, boyfriend, girlfriend) to MAKE MY DAY a great one. MAKE ME HAPPY is our mental thought. When you stop making me happy, I don't need you anymore!

We need to stop that. That is so immature.

We can make every day a special day as we live to carry out HIS mission in our life and others by our:

Caring for others

Loving others

Serving others

Seeking to share Jesus with others

Helping others

Listening to others

Encouraging others

Supporting others

Warming others

Lifting up others

Being courageous

Avoiding sin in my life, standing up to and rejecting temptations to sin

AND we can do all those things whether we:

Have riches or are poor

Have status or not

Have a job or not

Have a car or not

Have nice clothes or not

Have talent or not

Have good looks or not.

It seems at times like some churches feel like they have to compete with the spectacular things the world can offer to attract and keep people.

When we moved back to the States after living in Chile for 12 years, we were going to a family gathering. We had to stop at the mall on the way to buy something we were supposed to take. It was on a Sunday after we had gone to an early service. When we arrived at the mall, we couldn't find an empty parking space in the three-story parking garage. It was full. I finally had to sit in one place for 15 minutes and wait for someone to leave. As we walked in, I commented to Carla that this was part of the competition the church is up against today in its mission.

We want to reach people and get them into Christ. Our most common way to do that (and I'm not sure it is our best) is to invite people to our services, most of which are on Sunday mornings. I commented to Carla, "It is hard for non-Christians to even think about going to church on Sunday because they understand what it could mean." When invited they know for the most part that the invitee is hoping that the one they have invited will keep going to church. Why would anyone go just once, right? (They don't know Jesus obviously and so they just think of going to church and becoming religious.)

So what does it mean to them? It means giving up what they normally do on Sundays to go listen to a sermon, feel uncomfortable in religious surroundings, etc. There is a huge variety of spectacular things to do and it varies from one part of the country to another, but in San Diego where we lived, the options to name a few are:

Go to the beach

Go to the desert to ride dune buggies

Go to the lakes and rivers fish, boat, water ski, or jet ski

Visit the zoo, animal park, or Sea World

Enjoy a movie

Eat out at restaurants

Watch professional and university sports

Kids sports, soccer, baseball, softball, etc.

Enjoy various music events

Go shopping

Watch TV

There are many tourist attractions

Sleep!!!

And more.

It is pretty hard for CHURCH to compete with those things.

The truth is it can't.

We don't have the funds to match the nature of many of those things.

THE GOOD NEWS IS WE DON'T HAVE TO!

We have something much greater than all those put together, something

more spectacular

more exciting

more fulfilling and rewarding.

And it is free.

The world can't compete with it.

In fact, what the world offers is really shallow, empty, and short lived in comparison to a relationship with Jesus.

WE have Jesus and his Grace and Love.

The church just needs to learn better ways to share with people outside of the church. You might want to read my book *Are You Trying to Sell Church or Are You Training Disciples How to Share Jesus*. You can get it on Kindle. I address this subject in this book.

If and when we learn how to share Jesus with those outside of the Kingdom, they will discover that Jesus is:

He is UNMATCHABLE.

See the list of names he is given in the Bible in the appendix of this book.

When we have Jesus we have:

Love INCOMPARABLE

Hope UNCHANGING

Joy INDESCRIBABLE

Truth UNBRIDLED

Purpose IMMEASURABLE

Eternal life UNENDING

Forgiveness INCOMPREHENSIBLE

We need to be careful. The enemy is smart and clever. He knows how to take advantage of our sense of missing out on something really good.

We want the spectacular. We want the BIG event, the big splash, the attention getter.

It happened to the Israelite leaders.

Once in their history they experienced a time when the days of grand miracles had passed, time such as:

Moses leading the people out of Egypt

the defeat of the Egyptian army

the pillars of smoke and fire leading them

the miraculous provision of food and clothes

water gushing out of the rock when they needed it.

“What happened to the God of those days?” they asked themselves. They longed for the good old days with all the spectacular things God was doing then.

Now it was just normal, common, un-miraculous days.

Their religious ceremonies and traditions were boring.

How many animals can you kill before that loses its importance?

So what did they do? This is amazing. These were people who had loved God and trusted him. They got bored with God. What did they do?

They went underground, undercover and started practicing mysterious things.

Ezekiel 8 In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day, while I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, the hand of the Sovereign LORD came on me there. ² I looked, and I saw a figure like that of a man.^[a] From what appeared to be his waist down he was like fire, and from there up his appearance was as bright as glowing metal. ³ He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood. ⁴ And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain. ⁵ Then he said to me, “Son of man, look toward the north.” So I looked, and in the entrance north of the gate of the altar I saw this idol of jealousy.⁶ And he said to me, “Son of man, do you see what they are doing—the utterly detestable things the Israelites are doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable.” ⁷ Then he brought me to the entrance to the court. I looked, and I saw a hole in the wall. ⁸ He said to me, “Son of man, now dig into the wall.” So I dug into the wall and saw a doorway there. ⁹ And he said to me, “Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here.” ¹⁰ So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and unclean animals and all the idols of Israel. ¹¹ In front of them stood seventy elders of Israel, and Jaazaniah son of Shaphan was standing among them. Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising. ¹² He said to me, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, ‘The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.’” ¹³ Again, he said, “You will see them doing things that are even more detestable.” ¹⁴ Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the LORD, and I saw women sitting there, mourning the god Tammuz. ¹⁵ He said to me, “Do you see this, son of man? You will see things that are even more detestable than this.” ¹⁶ He then

brought me into the inner court of the house of the LORD, and there at the entrance to the temple, between the portico and the altar, were about twenty-five men. With their backs toward the temple of the LORD and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east. ¹⁷ He said to me, "Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the people of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually arouse my anger? Look at them putting the branch to their nose! ¹⁸ Therefore I will deal with them in anger; I will not look on them with pity or spare them. Although they shout in my ears, I will not listen to them."

Seventy of their leaders tried to create their own excitement, their own miraculous and spectacular with their own self-made false gods.

The same thing can happen today.

Many aren't happy with just having God, all he has done for them, all he is doing, and all he has planned for them in the future.

Many want God to pull off the spectacular now, every day. And when He doesn't deliver, they start making their own gods or idols to bring them excitement and pleasure.

The book I mentioned earlier, *A Miracle a Day*, runs the same risk.

Its message seems to be that God has to prove himself to me anew most every day, with a new miracle for me to remain charged, faithful, and committed. Hey, look around. He has given us all we need in Jesus. Jesus died for us, was buried and raised from the dead. What more do we need? That gives us a long list of promises that only God can give us.

The miracle mentality can actually cause a lot of problems when we force things into being miracles that really aren't.

BEWARE OF gods.

We may try to replace God with what will give us what **we want**. We know God won't OK our sinning or approve of us seeking it because it is destructive. So if he won't or can't give me what I WANT, I'll go find it someplace else. "I mean, look at half the world enjoying all the good stuff and here I am missing out on it all."

There is a way that seems right, or fun, or pleasurable, or satisfying, etc., but as the writer of Proverbs says those ways end in death: spiritual, relational, and physical.

It is for that reason that John wrote, *Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your heart. I John 5:21*

Some translations say stay away from idols. An idol is something that I allow to take God's place in my heart.

I really like this passage about Moses in the book of Hebrews, chapter 11:24-27

²⁴ By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵ He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.

Moses knew what was important. He knew all that life for him consisted of what was to come in the future, too. He chose suffering and mistreatment in place of going with the flow and enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin. He knew sin was pleasurable. But it is short lived. It is here today and gone tomorrow. God has provided for eternity, and he didn't want to risk that for what was fleeting.

If we do not seek from God what is readily available from him, what he is eager to lead us in and provide us with, then it is most likely we will seek substitutes. When we do that, we lose.

As I was editing this part one day, I remembered something I had recently said to a group of graduate students. I said, "We need to stop talking about church so much. We need to be talking about Jesus more."

I'll step out and risk saying say it here. I am confident that we can make church and our ministry an IDOL. We can work harder at building up our congregation and all the many services and activities we have. We can worship our growth and successes.

If we do not find our worth, value, and purpose in life in Jesus, we will most likely try to find them in something else. What we find elsewhere won't last. It will be plastic, temporary, disappointing, and shallow.

We all want love.

We all need acceptance.

We all want to belong.

We all want to feel valuable and important.

We all want to be fulfilled and feel like we have a purpose in life.

We all desire recognition.

They are ALL available from God.

He loves us more than we can imagine.

He will give us real worth, value, and purpose in life.

He will give us true acceptance.

He will give us a great sense of belonging.

He will give us a fulfilled life.

He will help us mature and grow.

Jesus said, "I AM, the way, the truth and the life."

And if we don't seek the way, the truth, and the life in Jesus, we will seek them elsewhere and that will lead us down a dangerous and destructive path.

We all know of people who have sought love, acceptance, popularity, worth, importance, power, and fulfillment by joining gangs, committing crimes, entering illicit sexual relationships, abusing people or by controlling people.

Others will seek it through success in family, writing, sports, wealth, politics, business, beauty, intellectualism, or the entertainment world.

We've all known successful people who never found love, acceptance, worth, and lasting fulfillment through the things they achieved.

We all know people who started drinking and taking drugs or getting into damaging relationships in order to be accepted, feel important, and to be loved, only to end up **disappointed!**

I John 5:21 *Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.*

What things in life are more important to you than God?

What things other than God do you believe will bring you true love, a sense of belonging, true self-worth, acceptance, importance, happiness, and everything that is worthwhile? Those are idols in our life, and they will cause damage in the end.

I also know people who have had a horrible upbringing, aren't very talented or good looking, have never had any significant successes in life, lack a good education, have no money, etc. but they have found true love, a sense of belonging, true self-worth, acceptance, and happiness in life through Jesus.

Now I must point out that God created us to have jobs, to have loving relationships with others, to experience fulfillment in our areas of talent, ability, and work but when the success, the job, the perks, and the relationships become our primary source for the lasting things only God can

truly give us, we have begun making them idols and they will disappoint us in the end. Our relationship with God is for eternity. The job will end someday. The others may leave us or die. Money can be lost. God is always there.

GOD'S GREATEST BLESSINGS

Mankind is normally on a search for the best that can be had in life. That is normal and OK. The question becomes what is BEST and where do I find it?

Christians talk a lot about blessings and being blessed by God. How often I hear a Christian say, "God really blessed me (or someone)." He healed me, he gave me a new job, I made the team, we won the championship, I found someone who loves me, we got the house, etc.

Now it is NOT to say that God is against our having a house, a car, a job, a family or that we can't consider them as blessings,

but I believe that when we talk about blessings we unfortunately tend to limit our thinking about them pretty much to physical things. And that is really sad.

Sometimes these blessings can be distractions from what is most important in life, **relationships.**

At times we can get way off track with the subject of God and blessings. I fear at times we see God like a lucky rabbit's foot, or like our sitting on Santa's lap at Christmas! We give him our list of wants hoping he'll come through. I fear at times we see Him as a celestial servant whose number-one task is to give us all we WANT, when we want it, and how we want it so life here on earth will be pleasant, pleasurable, profitable, comfortable, and fun. If we don't get it, we're discouraged, full of doubts about God or ourselves. We wonder about the whole relationship, maybe even doubting His existence or presence in our life.

A common and very short-sighted Christians' prayer could be heard as: "Oh God, please bless me with a beautiful, loving, kind, romantic and giving wife or husband. Then bless us with kids, (cute kids, with straight teeth) smart kids, (who get good grades in school) kids who are star athletes, kids who always obey me and make me proud, and kids who never get in trouble and oh, very talented in something. Then God bless me with a nice house. Now I'm not asking for a mansion, but for a nice house to raise this family in. A couple of cars would really be good, too. Since we will have a lot of things going on and we will have to get around. Oh, oh, and please God I really need a better job with a better salary to take care of the family, the house, the cars and all the costs of life."

If we get those things we feel we need, we tell others how greatly God has blessed us! If we don't get them, we are befuddled, frustrated, and we wonder about God (and why others got those things and I didn't). Maybe worse yet is if we get those things we want and then find out they haven't made us happy. The very worst case scenario would be that we get what we wanted and it becomes more important than our relationship with God.

In **Deuteronomy 8** God warned the Israelites about forgetting Him once they got all the good stuff, the material blessings. He tells them this:

¹⁰ “When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. ¹¹ **Be careful** that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. ¹² Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ¹⁵ He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. ¹⁶ He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. ¹⁷ You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” ¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.

God knew them too well.

In the Old Testament, God’s people were recipients of all kinds of physical things - a promised land, help to defeat their enemies, good crops, water, food, lots of kids, long lives, etc. But they abandoned God more often than not. They made wood, stone, and metal idols to worship and they made things or stuff their god. They wanted men to lead them rather than depending solely on God.

The prodigal son had this problem. He thought blessings were money, women, drink, parties, party friends, and freedom to do what he wanted, when he wanted, and with whom he wanted. It ended in disaster.

Be careful of the preachers of the Prosperity Gospel. They preach that if we are faithful, (and that usually includes giving them a healthy check/donation), we will be blessed by God with good health, success, and prosperity. It is a false message. They are preaching to our vulnerability to wanting a god who will give us STUFF.

There’s a TV show I like to watch. It is interesting, amazing, and sad. It is called American Greed. It tells the stories of people who have swindled many out of all their money through befriending them and then offering them an investment opportunity through which they will earn a lot of money. Most of them are some kind of Ponzi scheme.

The most interesting part is how so many people WANT to believe the possibility of such great promised investments. And many of them are already very wealthy people. They are managers or owners of huge corporations. They are street smart but they get caught up in it. Why do they believe the lies and deceit? Greed. They want more, a lot more, and their desire blinds them. They all say or think at some point “If it is too good to be true, it probably isn’t.” But they plow all their life savings or their company’s funds into it. And lose.

Be careful. Some come in the name of Jesus promising us things Jesus never promised. They can try to impress us with their lifestyle, great words, promises of success, and prosperity in Jesus. They promise that God will bless us financially and in our health. What a deal. This is better than a Ponzi scheme.

Some of the preachers of this line say that giving to them will help insure the double portion or great blessing from God. And people believe them. He promises God will “bless you” for your step of faith. So if you don’t get a return, it is God’s fault or obviously you have failed God in some way. Buyers beware.

In the New Covenant with Christ, God has not promised us financial prosperity, good health, success for our company, team, congregation, mission or family as a result of being faithful to Him.

He has not promised us good kids, freedom from pain, suffering, or abuse, long lives for us and our kids, a great nation with good political leaders or to have honest people around us, etc. While He is not necessarily against our having good things in life and He doesn't prohibit us from those things, he knows we can easily replace Him with our desire and pursuit of them if we aren't careful.

In the Old Testament, he gave most of those things to the Israelites, and more often than not they abandoned him.

What has He promised those who become disciples?

There is a list of all God promises us in the IT’S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIP studies. If you haven’t seen these studies go to www.apeace treatywithGod.com and download them and watch the four video presentations. You will find the list of His promises in Lesson 2.

Here is the point:

God **has** blessed us

God **is** blessing us and

God **will** bless us in the future!

GOD WANTS TO BLESS US ALL THE TIME, but do you know what God’s greatest blessing is?

IT IS GOD!!!

It is a relationship with Him.

IT IS JESUS, GOD IN THE FLESH, WHO IS IN US RIGHT NOW. HE WILL ALSO LITERALLY COME FROM HEAVEN TO TAKE US TO BE WITH HIM FOREVER.

God's greatest blessing to humanity and to each of us isHIMSELF.

It is all about relationship.

We too often miss it.

We want things, stuff, positions, pleasure, power, acceptance, belonging, recognition, fame, success, etc. We believe they will give us what is real, what is important, what will give our life value and meaning.

We sacrifice and kill ourselves trying to get it all.

In the end, most will find out that "it" was not the answer.

All the while the greatest blessing possible is right in front of us and it is free and incredible.

The prodigal son missed that. He eventually learned that the best thing in life was a good relationship with his father.

That is what Adam and Eve had in the beginning, a relationship with God.

They could walk and talk with Him every day!

They were in Paradise but it wasn't enough.

They wanted more.

The prodigal son **wanted more.**

The rich young ruler **wanted more.**

Esau **wanted more.**

Pharaoh **wanted more.**

King David **wanted more.**

Solomon **wanted more.**

The Israelites **wanted more.**

Their 70 leaders **wanted more.**

AND WHAT DID IT GET THEM? They sacrificed their relationship with God for stuff, power, prestige, pleasures and experiences and their ignorance, desires, and pride led them to suffering, shame, pain, damage, and loss.

What about us?

Are we like the unfaithful mate who becomes dissatisfied with their marriage and has to have MORE? They break their vows and go searching for it.

“I want more.” And most of the time we think we deserve more.

Sometimes that desire leads us to do stupid things.

King David longed for God.

Psalm 42:2 *My **soul thirsts** for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?*

And his life was good as long as he sought to quench his thirst in God. When he sought it in sin he lost.

My relationship with God will give me all that is important and eternal.

God wants to be a part of our life.

He wants to bless us with:

Himself

His presence

His grace

His forgiveness

His Spirit

His power

His character

His promises

His future for us.

It is more than enough!

HERE'S THE SECRET TO IT ALL:

Colossians 1:27 (NLT) *For God wanted them to know that the riches and glory of Christ are for you Gentiles, too. And **this is the secret:** Christ lives in you. This gives you assurance of sharing his glory.*

Let's say it again.

We are hammering away at it.

We need to burn it in our brain and in our heart.

It all rises or falls on this.

It's a relationship.

It's all about Jesus.

He is our:

Savior

King

Creator

Sustainer

Eternal life

Way

Truth

Life

Wisdom

Shepherd

Pastor

Teacher

Master

Guide

The relationship is meant to be personal.

This relationship must grow or it will die.

It must be founded on and in Jesus.

We are IN Jesus.

His Spirit is IN us.

We must walk IN his ways.

Read the following verses slowly. Let them sink in. Underline what hits you about Jesus and our relationship with him.

Colossians 2:7(NLT) ⁷ *Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.*

Colossians 3:1 *Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, **set your sights** on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. ² **Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth.** ³ For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory....¹⁶ Let the message about **Christ**, in all its richness, **fill your lives.***

Paul made getting to know Jesus the number-one priority in his life.

Philippians 3: ⁷ *I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. ⁸ Yes, **everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ** ⁹ and become one with Him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. ¹⁰ **I want to know Christ** and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, ¹¹ so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!*

Jesus taught about the importance of this personal relationship in his last sermon with his disciples before his crucifixion. Following is part of that message.

John 15; ⁴ *Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*

⁵ *I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

What does it mean to remain in Jesus?

It means:

Loving him

Trusting His Word and ways

Living to please Him by obeying Him

Keeping my eyes on Him

Keeping my mind on Him and what He wants

Thinking about what I can do to please Him by obeying Him

It means:

Constantly submitting to Him

Trusting Him; rejecting the appeals of Satan with his lies.

Putting Jesus first

Spending time talking with Him, listening to Him, and obeying Him

Being his ambassador to tell his message to those who don't know Him

Serving Him and His cause

Being His agent in loving other people

Being willing to sacrifice for His cause as He did for my cause

It means:

Praying. When I became a Christian I just started talking to Jesus rather than myself. It became a natural part of my life. It is talking all through the day with our best friend.

Bible study. I remember getting a Living Bible as a new Christian. It was so interesting that I would sit and read it for an hour without stopping. We need to study the New Testament to learn all we can about Jesus and the Covenant we are in with Him.

Fellowship/learning. I remember when I was a brand new Christian I didn't want to miss any Bible study offered at the church. I wanted to learn! I needed to be with other Christians. I was shy and quiet, but I knew I needed to learn from and be around other Christians.

Sharing Christ. I remember wanting to tell others about Jesus but I needed some time to get prepared to know what to say. It took me a long time to learn how to be able to do it. The final major step was developing and starting to use The Peace Treaty with God.

Serving Christ. I wanted **to serve** however I could. Serving the Lord means using our gifts, talents, mind, body, time, spirit, and money for Him. It is only logical that we do what we can with what we have to help advance the cause of Christ. There are people investing themselves to advance all kinds of causes on earth such as environmental issues, animal rights, human rights, politics, pleasure, gangs, special needs of others, and on and on. While some of them are good causes, nothing compares to investing ourselves in expanding the Kingdom of God as we are commanded to do.

And if I'm involved in some of the good causes, I need to realize I'm there serving with and participating with the other people there to be a light, a witness for God.

Gene Rogers was my mentor in the ministry. He had a great lesson he often used to show people what **"living surrendered to Jesus"** meant. He would ask people to put their Bible on their lap to represent that their life was built on Jesus. He spoke of a Christian as one who has given everything to Jesus.

He then asked the people to take out their keys and put them on top of the Bible. The keys represented their house and their car. As a Christian they had given their house and car to Jesus.

He then asked them to put their checkbook, credit card, or wallet on the Bible. That represented that their job, income, and money all belong to Jesus.

Then he asked them to put their wedding ring (if they are married and can get it off) on the Bible. That represented that their mate and family belong to Jesus.

He emphasized that everything we have as Christians belongs to Jesus.

Then he asked them to put all the objects away and said, "Jesus has given us all those things to be in our care and charge. It has all been loaned to us. We are called to be good stewards or caretakers of those things. He doesn't need those things, but He trusts us to use our job, house, family, money, our congregation etc. to further Jesus' cause.

He wants to see us use what we have to live and help advance his Kingdom. Now put it all away and go and use it all for God."

That means we don't use our money, possessions, or relationships to do things that will damage our relationship with Jesus. We will use them to take care of our life's needs, to advance God's Kingdom and not make them gods in our lives.

REMEMBER WHAT HE HAS DONE FOR YOU

Jesus is IN us.

Above us

Below us

Behind us

Around us

And in front of us.

We are enveloped in Him.

God:

... is present!

... created us!

... is interested in us and our well being!

...is patient!

... loves us!

... forgives us!

... is merciful!

... is full of grace!

... is thinking of us!

... is hoping for us!

... is praying for us!

... is expecting the best of us!

... is blessing us!

... is planning for us!

... is waiting for us!

... is working in us!

... is pruning us!

... is preparing us!

... is listening to us!

... is answering us!

... is disciplining us!

... is counting on us!

I really like the description of God found in **Psalm 103:8-18**.

⁸ *The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.*

⁹ *He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;*

¹⁰ *he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.*

¹¹ *For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;*

¹² *as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*

¹³ *As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;*

¹⁴ *for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.*

¹⁵ *The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;*

¹⁶ *the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.*

¹⁷ *But from everlasting to everlasting
the LORD's love is with those who fear him,
and his righteousness with their children's children—*

¹⁸ *with those who keep his covenant
and remember to obey his precepts.*

God considers us:

loveable

worthy

important

God wants to:

... include us in his family.

... save us from our stupidity.

... save us for eternity.

... be with us.

... help us grow and mature.

He:

will give us wisdom.

will discipline us for our best interest.

will test us to make us stronger.

will always be with us.

will use even bad things that happen to us to help us grow.

will help us overcome negative things in life.

I recommend you start adding to this list as you read and study the Bible. Add verses to the previous comments.

THIS IS WHAT JESUS PROMISES US!

Satan's list of promises is long.

Remember Satan's promises are all sugar-coated lies.

They are sweet on the outside and bitter on the inside.

They don't last.

Satan promises us:

Unending pleasure (lie)

Importance (false)

Acceptance (phony)

Success (false)

Power (phony)

Significance (shallow)

Belonging (with a horrible outcome)

Etc. but his promises are all phony, short lived, and plastic. They are sugar-coated poison tablets.

YOU HAVE INVITED SOMONE TO LIVE WITH YOU

HE IS OUR GUEST. We have invited to live IN us. We have company!

IT IS A COVENANT RELATIONSHIP

A covenant is an agreement we enter into with another party. In doing so, we promise to only do what is for their best interest and they do the same for us. It is a relationship, a mutual commitment to advance the other's best interest.

Marriage is a covenant relationship. Most start off their marriage excited and full of emotion and passion. We are confident we know everything we need to know about the person we married and the bright future that lies ahead. We don't even have to think about saying or doing romantic things. It all comes so easily.

Then comes the return from the honeymoon and the normal responsibilities of married life, work, school, relatives, friends, house and car repairs, health issues, bills to pay, shopping to do, house cleaning, laundry, cooking, some time for hobbies, TV, church, gym, club, sports, and some day maybe having children and all that adds to life.

If we aren't careful, the relationship can fall into the shadows of all the rest going on in life.

A covenant relationship is a growth relationship. Time and our commitment to it can make it better. Lack of time, effort and commitment to it will result in it cooling off. It depends on what we do.

I did a series of talks years ago titled, "Keep Courting or Count the Cost."

The idea was that for a marriage to grow, we must keep doing the things that will show our mate that they and our relationship with them is important. If we don't do that, we will pay a price, a negative one.

There are many things we do in courtship and the early months of marriage that are driven by emotion. Most of them are important things such as: telling the other how much we love them, buying them gifts, spending time with them, going out of our way to be thoughtful and kind, kissing, touching, looking, smiling, etc. Often the other demands and pressures of life can start pushing those things aside and they occur less and less. We allow our irritations, disappointments and awareness of the other's defects start taking a toll.

To AVOID that one must make conscientious decisions based on doing what we know is good, right, and helpful. We can't rely on pure romantic emotion forever. It runs out of gas for everyone. That emotion-driven motor must be replaced by a decision/commitment-making motor that does what is correct and right not just what feels good.

We must choose and decide to speak lovingly, respect the other, buy the gifts, send or leave the notes, be appreciative, spend time together, share and listen, touch and kiss, etc. When the early days of romantic emotion diminish (and they do for everyone), we must decide to keep doing the things that make our relationship special or it will wither on the vine.

Our becoming a disciple of Christ is through a covenant relationship, and we must plan on making sure that this relationship keeps growing, too.

In Revelation, John wrote to some Christians whose love had cooled!

Revelation 2: ⁴ *Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.* ⁵ *Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.*

Things had changed. Life issues were apparently interfering. There was stress and attraction to other things. He wasn't talking as much about their emotions as he was their actions.

Jesus told a parable that talked about how distractions can ruin one's relationship with Jesus.

Mark 4 (NIV) *Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. ² He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³ "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." ⁹ Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." ¹⁰ When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹ He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables ¹² so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" ¹³ Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴ The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵ Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. ¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²⁰ Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.*

In this parable Jesus was talking about a person's relationship with God not farming. He was talking about US.

He talks about people's different responses when they hear about Jesus and or become His disciple. They all don't stay with their commitment. It is not the fault of Jesus or of those who introduced the people to Jesus.

VS 15. Satan comes to some of them and takes them away.

VS 16. There was no root or depth in the commitment. It lasts a short time, and troubles and persecutions come and they fall away.

VS 18. The worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and desires for other things come and choke out the Word. They kill it. This person is more attracted to those things than they are to the relationship.

VS 20. Then there are those who hear, it takes root, they grow and reproduce. They influence others for Jesus.

So what was John's teaching from God in Revelation to fix things?

He said start doing the things you did at the beginning. He didn't say, "Start feeling what you felt in the beginning." Feelings can't be commanded or forced. God can only command that we DO something. More often than not when we DO the right thing, good feelings will follow.

So, what did we DO in the beginning?

Talked to God

Listened to God

Were learners

Were humbled by it all

Obedied God

Realized our dependency on God

Risked everything for God

We're willing to sacrifice

Changed our priorities

Avoided harmful people, places, and things

Shared everything with God

Praised God

Thanked God

Were grateful

Confessed to God and others

Witnessed to others

Gave to God and others

Met with other Christians to do one another's

Served the Lord with our gifts, abilities, and talents

Have these things slacked off and been pushed aside for other things?

So what do you need to START DOING again to not fall in the cool trap?

Make your list.

Keep the relationship as the number-one priority.

Make time for him.

Abide.

Stay close.

Love.

Pray.

Read and study God's word.

Fellowship with other Christians.

Witness.

Serve.

Becoming a Christian doesn't automatically make us mature.

It means we are wise to accept Christ.

It means we are cooperating with Jesus in transforming us in the way we think and live. It means we have started a long process of becoming like Jesus.

We bring a lot of baggage with us when we come to Christ. If we are willing to allow him, God will spend the rest of our life helping us deal with those issues and mature. God will lead us into maturity if we desire it, are willing to humble ourselves, learn and change.

WE HAVE INVITED SOMEONE INTO OUR LIFE.

When we become a disciple of Christ, we invite him to take up residence in our life and our heart. Someone wrote a pamphlet years ago titled *My Heart, Christ's Home*. They hit it on the head.

The idea is that we have invited Jesus to live in US. We are His home. He takes up residence in our heart. How does He feel there? Does living there make Him feel comfortable or uneasy?

I now belong to Him. He belongs to me. We are ONE. He lives in me.

The relationship is what it is all about.

I now no longer just think of all I WANT, but I start thinking and asking him and myself what HE WANTS and what will He feel comfortable with. Whatever I think, see, listen to and do will be in His presence. He is seated in the chair in my living room watching, taking it all in. He is my guest. How will He react to all I make him watch?

In marriage, most people make adjustments or accommodations for the new person they are living with. They do this out of consideration for what they know is important to the other. We might try and be neater, cleaner, and more helpful. We might ask for the other's opinion as to how they would like things in the house rather than just doing everything the way I WANT IT. The person who doesn't learn how to be considerate and conscientious about the other's feeling and needs will usually be a poor mate.

Does Jesus feel comfortable living with me?

What Jesus asks of me is BEST for me.

He wants to see me mature and grow.

He wants me to avoid unneeded suffering or pain brought on by un-Christ-like living.

In as much as He is my invited guest, I want to constantly think about Him and ask myself whether He will feel comfortable with:

My attitudes

What I think about, dwell on or daydream about

The way I talk

The language I use

The way I act

The music I listen to

The books I read

The movies or TV I watch

The websites I visit on my computer, tablet, iPod, cell phone, etc.

The places I go

What I long to be and do

What I drink eat or consume, or the amount of it

What I put into my body

What I do with my body

Whose lifestyle I admire and seek to copy

How I talk to and treat those in my family

Who I hang out with and why

My morals

How I talk to and treat those I don't like

How I treat my family, friends, employees, etc.

My character flaws

My being responsible at work, school, church, club, etc.

See, it isn't just about me all the time now!

Is what I think, do, and say beneficial or detrimental to others, myself, and my relationship with Jesus? How do my lifestyle and my attitudes affect Jesus? Do they cause him pain, embarrassment, and discomfort?

We need to be careful. Jesus said of the Pharisees, “They are experts at justifying their every inconsistency.” So are we. Let’s be honest.

We need to identify what God wants us to be like and then seek to be and do that.

We need to identify what isn’t pleasing and stop doing it! That is called repentance in the Bible.

All of this will translate into a strong and healthy relationship. It is not about religious ceremonies, traditions, and rules but a strong relationship.

BEING A DISCIPLE IS MOVING FROM SELF-CENTEREDNESS TO JESUS CENTERED:

It is a decision we make in becoming a disciple. Jesus is now KING and LORD.

Do I always think about me and what I want, or do I think about how to please Jesus?

We are warned many times not to follow the patterns or thinking of the world because doing so ruins relationships.

Romans 12 (NIV) *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is —his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

YES, IT IS A HUGE TASK AND IT WILL TAKE THE REST OF OUR LIFE TO MATURE. It is an ongoing process.

Years ago I heard the following statement:

PLEASE BE PATIENT WITH ME; GOD ISN’T FINISHED WITH ME YET.

That isn’t an excuse but a confession.

It is a confession that I’m still sincerely and seriously working on growing in Christ.

God isn’t done with me yet.

Paul said something like this in **Philippians 3:** ¹² *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.* ¹³ *Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I*

do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

SOMEONE ELSE WANTS YOUR LOVE AND LOYALTY TOO

There is a celestial war going on over YOU.

Two parties are in conflict over you.

Each wants to win your heart, love, and allegiance. Both are daily seeking to persuade you to trust them and give yourself to them.

YOU are giving yourself to one or the other every moment of every day.

We know God wants us in his family.

It is also true that Satan is out to deceive us and win us over to his side.

In **Ephesians 2:2** Paul warns the Christians in Ephesus about Satan, *He is at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God.*

In **Acts 5:3** we find this: *Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart....?"*

God and Satan both want our heart. They can both fill our heart. Our heart is filled with the one we give control to.

They both want our allegiance. We can't serve both of them. We will love one and hate the other.

Satan doesn't play fair.

He lies. **John 8:44**

He asks to "sift" people. **Luke 22:31**

He accuses. **Revelation 12:10**

He blames.

He tempts. **Mark 1:13, I Corinthians 7:5**

He cheats, is astute and cleaver. **2 Corinthians 2:11**

He hurts, causes damage, and then tries to blame the other. **I Peter 5:8**

He can block ways. **I Thessalonians 2:18**

He deceives and seeks to lead the whole world astray. **Revelation 12:9**

He wears a mask. He covers up. **2 Corinthians 16:14**

He seeks followers. **1 Timothy 5:15**

He is the god of this age. **2 Corinthians 4:4** (Don't forget our God.)

He is the prince of earth. **John 12:31** (Don't forget who is King.)

He will do whatever it takes to get us on his side.

ONCE someone ends up on Satan's side, they'll eventually find out that every single one of his promises are lies. That is a painful and humiliating moment.

His goal is to gain our submission to him so that he can:

Dominate us

Divide us

Discourage us

Damage us

and destroy us.

Revelation 12: ⁷ *Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. ⁸ But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. ⁹ The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, **who leads the whole world astray**. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.*

He wants to get us to follow him. We will be led astray if we believe him and follow him. We will be led into a future death.

This battle between Jesus and Satan causes tension in people's lives. When we live without Christ, we pretty much do as the enemy wants. He is happy. He has blinded the minds of those who are his. Satan is NOT happy when a person commits his life to Christ. He wants them back!

2 Corinthians 4:4 (NIV) ⁴ *The **god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers**, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

Ephesians 2:3 (NIV) ³ ***All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.***

Satan is after us.

It is a mind game, it's a heart game.

1 Peter 1:13 *Therefore, with **minds** that are alert and fully sober, set **your** hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.*

1 Peter 5:8 *Be alert and of sober **mind**. **Your** enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*

Proverbs 4:23 *Above all else, **guard your heart**, for everything you do flows from it.*

We need to be aware of the enemy and prepare ourselves for battle.

Ephesians 6:10-18 *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.*

As Christians we've chosen Christ.

The issue is who am I going to trust every moment of every day?

Whose side am I going to chose?

What are they promising?

Who can deliver?

How long will it last? Revelation 21:4, 20:10, 12-15, Romans 16:20

Revelation 20:10 This verse speaks of what God will do to Satan.

¹⁰ *And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.*

Revelation 21:4 This verse speaks of what God will do for his people.

⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Who has the best track record of being faithful? God keeps his word and we can read about it through the entire Bible. That gives up hope.

God is faithful.

Romans 15:4 ***⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.***

Satan is a liar. He is the father of all liars.

DON'T FORGET! IT IS A WAR. We Christians have chosen our side.

We must live and enjoy life but NEVER forget that we are living in a WAR ZONE.

2 Timothy 2:3, 4 *Like a good soldier³ Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.
⁴ No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer.*

2 Timothy 4:7 *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*

1 Timothy 6:12 ***Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.***

Galatians 6:9 ***Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.***

Don't be thrown off track by the evil things that happen in your life.

Satan will use any evil, hurtful thing he can to cause you to doubt God's love, interest, and presence in your life.

God does good.

Satan does evil.

Jesus warned us that we would face crises in our life.

John 16:33 *I have told you these things, so that **in** me you may have peace. **In this world** you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the **world**.*

Satan creates chaos and evil to try and ruin people's faith in God.

Satan is an agent of chaos, suffering, illnesses, division, unfaithfulness, and deceit.

Satan deceives.

He promises (what he can't deliver for the long haul).

He lies. His promises are lies.

He enslaves.

He hunts and kills.

He wants to be your god.

And if he can get you to doubt God because of evil things that he causes in your life, he gains ground in the battle to win you back.

Don't forget the following!!!!

1 John 4:4 (NIV) *You, dear children, **are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.***

BEING HAPPY WITH WHAT YOU HAVE; CONTENTMENT

Philippians 4: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!* ⁵ *Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.* ⁶ *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* ⁷ *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

¹⁰ *I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.* ¹¹ *I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.* ¹² *I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.* ¹³ *I can do all this through him who gives me strength.*

Neither Jesus or his first disciples had a car.

Jesus didn't have planes, trains, cabs, or subways to travel around on.

He had no IRA or Social Security.

He had no dental plan.

He had no house/home. (warm showers, nice kitchen, rich foods, warm bed, etc.)

He didn't have a closet full of clothes.

He had no computer.

He didn't have an iPad.

He didn't have phones or cell phones.

He didn't have Internet.

He didn't have a headquarters.

He didn't have an office.

He didn't have an executive secretary.

He didn't have Medicare or health insurance.

He didn't have a wife or children.

He didn't have a regular income.

He didn't have seminars and leadership training programs to attend.

He didn't have a growing library of books to read.

He didn't have TV to watch.

He didn't have cable.

He didn't have theatres, movies, or sporting events to go to.

He didn't play golf or sports.

He didn't have a list of favorite sports teams to follow.

He didn't take vacations (although he did seek out solitary places often to pray.)

He didn't have electronic games.

He didn't have nice restaurants to go out to or even fast food places as we know them.

He didn't have nice facilities where he could meet with his disciples.

He didn't have microphones and projectors.

The amazing point is that we think we are suffering or limited if we don't have most of those things or opportunities.

Jesus did have a mission, a message, and a life full of love and purpose, and He calls us to join Him in that and take up His cause.

He was pursued.

He was persecuted.

He was ridiculed and criticized.

He had a crooked treasurer.

He had a very imperfect team.

He was betrayed.

He was lied about.

He was abandoned.

He was beaten.

He was spit upon.

He was arrested.

He was put in jail.

He was falsely accused.

He was hated.

He was mocked and laughed at.

He was rejected by most.

He had his heart broken more than once.

He had to face temptation and fight against it.

He had to face discouragement and fear and overcome them.

He had to suffer in order to carry out His Mission.

He lost supporters.

He had people lose faith in Him.

IN THE END, HE WAS PUT TO DEATH.

NONE OF THAT STOPPED HIM FROM LOVING US.

Actually it was because of His love for us that He experienced it all.

ALL OF THAT DIDN'T CAUSE HIM TO THROW THE TOWEL IN ON US.

ALL OF THAT DIDN'T LEAD HIM TO QUIT OR GIVE UP ON OTHERS OR HIS CAUSE.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

Here Paul says give thanks **in** all circumstances. He didn't say give thanks **FOR all** circumstances. He says no matter what circumstances we go through, (and we go through a lot of unpleasant circumstances in life), give thanks to God for what he has done.

He is with us, no matter what.

He loves us.

He forgives us.

He works through all for our benefit.

He is coming again.

We will be with him forever.

THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU, GOD.

That doesn't bring an end to tough circumstances in life, but it keeps things in perspective no matter what is happening.

When we were leaving Chile, I went through a hard time dealing with leaving the people we had come to love and work with. One day, someone in the U.S. sent me an email with the following phrase. I printed it out and taped it on our mirrors, doors, etc. as a reminder. It really helped.

"If God Brought You to It, He'll Get You Through It."

How true.

Later I changed the statement to be more Biblically accurate.

IF LIFE BROUGHTCHA' TO IT, GOD'LL GETCHA THROUGH IT.

God doesn't cause everything in our life, BUT he will go through it all with us and help us get through it all.

That is a lot more than we can say for Satan.

I recently read an interesting thought in a magazine at the doctor's office.

IF YOU WANT WHAT YOU HAVE, YOU WILL ALWAYS HAVE WHAT YOU WANT.

Now that is a tricky thought.

If I want what I have:

God's friendship

Salvation

Forgiveness

God's presence

God's promises of the future

God's help in all I go through.

A family in Christ

Gods' Spirit living in me.

Maturity and Christ-like character.

And the list goes on and on....I will never lack anything important because I will ALWAYS have what I want.

Ahhh, now there is the tricky part - what I want.

What I want so often goes way beyond what I have.

I want more friends.

I want more money.

I want more pleasures.

I want a better house.

I want newer cars.

I want more clothes.

I want a better sports team.

I want a better job.

I want more comforts.

I want to be free of pain and suffering.

I want to be free from people who don't support me in my stupid and selfish pursuits.

I want a better body.

I want my mate to have a better body.

I want better food.

I want better toys.

I want kids.

I want more or better kids.

I want better electronics.

I want more time off.

I want more....

Ohhh, good grief, where does the list end?

And where does my dissatisfaction with life start? It starts with ingratitude for what God has already given me.

It is just amazing.

Focus on what I have = happiness.

Focus on what I don't have = unhappiness.

Years ago I read the following thought.

It is about the IF CONDITION.

The writer shared the thought that most of us operate by the IF CONDITION.

I will be happy IF.....

I will be happy IF I can marry.

I will be happy IF I make a lot more money.

I will be happy IF I have the right job.

I will be happy IF I have better health.

I will be kind and loving IF you treat me better.

I will be generous IF I have more to give.

The author suggested that thinking this way puts our happiness in the hands of others and outside situations. The author then asked the questions:

You are married. Does that make you happy?

You have a lot of money. Does that make you happy?

You have a job. Does that make you happy.

You can walk and see. Does that make you happy?

Good point.

His suggestion was this. Don't live by the IF CONDITION but the REGARDLESS.

I will be kind and loving **regardless** of my circumstances.

I will be giving and helpful **regardless** of whether I'm married or single, rich or poor, healthy or ill, working or struggling, etc.

GOD WORKS THROUGH TOUGH TIMES

We all go through rough times in life.

Jesus did.

Paul did.

All the apostles did. All but one of them were put to death for being disciples of Christ.

We all have losses, pains, hurts, and sufferings.

Not being able to see what God is doing daily in our life or in the midst of a crisis doesn't mean he isn't with us or that he has abandoned us. The following story has helped me many times in life. I pray it will help you too in your walk on this earth. I have titled it:

I Can Only Imagine What the Tapestry of My Life Will Look Like

Years ago, I read about an incident in the life of E. Stanley Jones. Stanley was a missionary in India for 40 years, authored over 40 books, and was over 80 when he died, preaching a 30-day revival in Japan.

In one of his many books he told about a tour of a village in India. As they walked along the main street of the village, his guide pointed out a number of women sitting along side the street weaving rugs. The guide pointed out that it took them six-eight months to make one rug. E.S. wrote that he felt so sad as he passed the women and their rugs. The rugs were ugly with no design or pattern. There were loose threads and knots everywhere. He felt pity for the women. What a waste of their time and life making something so ugly.

As they walked further down the street E. S. heard some loud noise and turned to see what it was. As he turned to look for the source of the noise he happened to see the women and their rugs. Again he was shocked at what he saw. He had to go back. When he got there he quickly discovered that earlier as he looked at the rugs he had been looking at the backside of the rugs! Now he saw the front of the rugs. They were amazingly beautiful and detailed. Now he was overwhelmed and asked how they could possibly make something so dramatically beautiful in only six-eight months. The rugs were invaluable, priceless. He had to compliment the women for their incredible artistry.

There is a good life application here. At times, from our perspective, we see a life that seems a bit ugly, without design, full of knots and loose threads. We see all the pains, disappointments, failures, and seemingly meaningless events of life mixed with a scattering of good things and it often doesn't make sense. We wonder, we have doubts, we think about throwing in the towel, and we ask why? That is when we need to be patient and trust God, the one who weaves the tapestry of our lives. One day, when this life is finished, we will look back on all that happened, and we will see something amazing, the product of the Master Weaver working

behind the scenes. We will understand what God was doing in those dark moments and how He was using them to add to the value of the finished product of our life. The design, the pattern, and the colors will overwhelm us. Our mouths will fall open as we fully understand how great God is and how He was with us through all the years faithfully doing His work in our life.

I think about all I've gone through in life - the joys, the victories, the struggles, the sins, the failures, the mistakes, the evil actions of others, and the mysteries I never understood. I also think about the many good blessings in my life: my loving wife, our dear daughters, our grandchildren, dear friends, and the laughter and joy I have experienced with others. I think about my sense of peace and joy in knowing Jesus and realizing that He has forgiven me of my sins. Oh, the lists go on and on.

I am sure that one day my eyes will tear up as God shows me the final tapestry of my life. I believe at that time I will weep uncontrollably with joy, gratitude, and amazement.

I'm sure that the design and colors will be so brilliant that they will make a rainbow appear pale in comparison.

What will the blend of colors be?

For me I'm sure there will be plenty of black representing my failures and my sins.

There will be even more in shades of red representing the blood of Christ by which those sins were forgiven.

There will be plenty of browns representing the the pain and suffering caused by lying, betrayals, short sightedness, selfishness, inaction, disinterest, unfaithfulness, abandonment, abuse, etc.

There will be grays representing the dark days, illnesses, loses, injuries, unexplained suffering, and hurts.

There will be green representing the good I have done, the souls I have led to Jesus, the growth I have experienced, the services rendered, and the maturity I experienced.

There will be light blues representing all the refreshing, encouraging, and fulfilling times that God wove into my life.

Yes, there will be yellows showing the many moments that the sun (or SON) shined in my life.

There will be rich purples representing the majesty of our King in my life.

Oh yes, there will be lots of GOLD illuminating all the riches of God that I experienced day by day, His presence and His overwhelming love. I think next to the reds, gold will have to be the dominant color.

I can only imagine that in the center of my tapestry will be a heart.

Who can love us more than Christ?

Romans 8:35-39 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered 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 convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So in the tough moments of our lives, when we see the loose threads, lack of design, the knots, and ugliness we need to remember it is not meaningless.

Our Weaver is taking all the things of our life and making a work of art.

Keep your eyes on Jesus.

Stay close to Him.

Trust Him.

Live in Him and obey Him.

From where we are, we only see the back of the tapestry.

We can only imagine the beauty from God's perspective!

One day we will see it with Him.

BEWARE OF PITY PARTIES

Let me tell you about a party I threw for myself years ago. I wouldn't recommend this to anyone. Well, it was a PITY PARTY.

I was driving around town in my car and I was having my pity party all by myself. There were no guests. No one would have wanted to come. If they had, they would have left early, very early.

This was a very special party for me. I can't say it was the first PP I had, and I sadly have to say it wasn't the last. But God used this one in a unique way. It was a moment of discipline or teaching.

It was quite a moment. In my mind I had black balloons, black streamers, and black confetti. I was feeling sorry for myself. I was bemoaning the situation in the church I was working in. Ninety percent of the people were old. The church lived remembering its glory days when it had an attendance that was five times larger than it currently was. The current preacher was close to retirement and seemed to have lost his motivation for working or moving ahead to anything other than retirement. He was preaching old sermons out of his files. They were more like lectures lacking any passion. I had also discovered that some of the key leaders were racial bigots. I was unhappy with the situation and thought everything would be better in life if God changed all the other people and situations in the church.

It all seemed bleak, and I was frustrated. I was having a wonderful time thinking about the terrible situation I was in, feeling sorry for myself. I have to say that it was an excellent party. It was a shame that others weren't there with me sharing in the moment. Well, actually Someone was there. And I'm sure He wasn't enjoying the party.

Then right in the middle of the party, it hit me, or I should say, God intervened in my party. It was rather shocking! I didn't hear an audible voice, but I know the disrupting thought came from God.

He rained on my party.

The balloons popped.

The streamers disappeared.

No more confetti was thrown.

It was all over.

Bummer. I was actually enjoying it in a sick kind of way.

Hey, I was the guest of honor. The party was for ME.

And I had been having such a good time complaining about everything wrong with everyone else!

When the thought popped into my mind I immediately tried to erase it and forget it.

I wanted to delete it but I couldn't find the delete button.

It was too late. It had been burned into my brain. It was permanently tattooed there. It is still there. I can see it. And God has brought it back to my attention a number of times in my life since that day.

The thought? The tattooed message?

"John, I'm (God) not nearly as interested in changing your circumstances as I am in using your circumstances to change you."

That truth was the party crasher in my car. Poof! It was over. That was not the message I wanted to hear. Hey, how about a little sympathy for my situation?

Ahhh, I was nailed and I knew it.

I had a common human condition. I had been wailing and crying out to God to change my circumstances, believing that would make me happier.

Now I must say there are legitimate circumstances in which to cry out to God and ask for deliverance. But for me this was not one of those times.

At that time and place God had a better plan. He knew that if he changed all those things I'd eventually find new things to complain about and then I'd just start the next pity party not having learned anything.

I wanted God to put me in a Paradise situation. It wasn't going to happen. That wouldn't have made me better or happier for the long haul. That would have been the worst thing God could have done. I wanted that, but that was not best for me. Now heaven is coming but I'm not there yet.

I wanted God to make everything around me perfect NOW and then I would be happy. I wanted God to put me with a great preacher, a great congregation, a great neighborhood with everything just right.

If I lived in the most elaborate neighborhood in the country, with a new house, new cars, club membership, great job, great boss, great church and preacher, etc. I would still have the same problem I had at the time of my pity party.

The problem was me.

I wanted something better around me, but God wanted something better within me.

That is what the problem was. I wanted God to change and fix everything and everyone around me so I would be happy instead of fixing me. I didn't think I had much fixing to do compared to the others. Yowzer. I sure got that one wrong. And God knew it. He still had to teach me a lot. And he still does.

I remember a book someone wrote years ago. The title was *Happiness is an Inside Job*. They are right. I want to create happiness in my life by making all the externals just right, people, places, environment, house, income, vacations, jobs, churches, etc.

God wants to create joy in my life by making the internals right. God knew I'd be happy basically anywhere if I was changed inside. And nothing short of that would work or last.

God can use everyone and everything around me to help me be mature, grow, and become more like Jesus. God wanted to change ME. He isn't done yet.

My happiness isn't determined by having a perfect world around me but by what is in me. I need to be connected and in peace and union with Jesus.

God wants to change John. I thought it would be a lot easier to change everything and everyone else. Bummer. It doesn't work that way.

There are many Godly people in the Bible who discovered how to stay close to God even in the face of tough times and personal failure.

Noah

Moses

David

Joseph

Many of the prophets

The apostles

It is a long list.

Interestingly enough, other people or circumstances can show me where I need to grow. They can be like spiritual mirrors, reflecting areas of my life that God would like to change.

What do the other people or circumstances and my reaction to them reveal about me?

Do my reactions to imperfect people and circumstances reveal my:

Impatience

Intolerance

Lack of love

Lack of trust

Critical spirit

Arrogance

Selfishness

Pride

Lost faith in the future with God

Thinking God has abandoned me

Trusting that happiness is an eternal job

Letting externals make or break my day

Whininess

Lust for control

Thinking everything has to be done my way

Bossiness

And there is SO much more.

Now we are getting down to where God wants to work.

Many go through life trying to FIX everyone and everything around them to be pleasing to them. It is a losing effort.

We have more than enough to work on in ourselves.

We can change and become more loving, kind, giving, forgiving, patient, etc., and it doesn't matter where we live or with whom we live and work. Life will be better and others will like being around us a whole lot more.

God's goal is not to make our world perfect.

His goal is to make us like Christ, and that is a lifelong process.

Romans 8:28,29 *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be **conformed to the image of his Son**, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*

UNDRESSED AT 35,000 FT.

At the age of 63, I was on the eight-plus-hour flight to the U.S. returning from Peru. The plane hadn't been in the air very long. I'm not sure how God started this process with me but something made me start writing a list of the areas that I saw that I still needed to grow in. I was a little surprised at how quickly I got about 30 things on the list. Then out of somewhere there was an inner prompting to keep thinking of things that I needed to work on and see how long the list would be.

Most of the things were poor attitudes that crept into my life now and then. Some appeared more frequently than others.

Then all of a sudden it was as if God took over. I got tired of all this after a while but God wasn't done with me. I was stuck on the plane. I couldn't get away from it. Every now and then another item popped into my mind. Well, hours later I put the folder away. I had over 70 items listed. I couldn't believe it. ME! Now that was humbling. And it was God reminding me He isn't finished with me yet. While it started as almost a game, it ended up being rather shocking, humbling, and revealing.

What do you think is your terrible situation?

Your mate doesn't treat you right?

Your parents don't treat you right?

Your kids aren't being what you want them to be?

Your boss isn't a good one in your mind?

Your church is full of problems?

Your team or club is falling apart or there are troublesome people in them?

Your neighbors are the worst ever?

One can make this list REAL long.

And you know what? That all might be true.

But what is the most important issue here?

What does God want to do with ME?

Forget about the others and what they need to change.

What do our reactions show about our character, life, attitudes, etc.?

Are we willing to cooperate with God and change those things in us?

Read about what Paul went through.

II Corinthians 6:³ We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. ⁴ Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; ⁵ in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; ⁶ in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; ⁷ in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; ⁸ through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; ⁹ known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

II Corinthians 11:24 I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

Tens of thousands of Christians are suffering today for their faith.

We all have losses, pains, hurts, and sufferings. Some have a lot more than others.

Rough times are to our faith and character what going to the gym and working out is to our body. It can be painful but in the end beneficial. Many don't go to the gym or work out because of the pain. We would rather sit on the couch and eat and relax. That is more pleasurable. But in the end we are weak and not in condition to do greater things.

Romans 5:3 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

It needs to be pointed out here that I'm not suggesting that we blindly stay in dangerous situations if we have the opportunity to escape them. Paul escaped dangerous situations in which his life was at risk. If someone is in an abusive, dangerous situation and they can get out of it, they should. But life brings us many situations that we can't escape, illnesses, injuries, imperfect relationships, etc., and we can't get out of all of them. If that is the case, we need to know that those circumstances don't have to rob us of the joy and peace we can have in Jesus.

THE FIRST PRIORITY IS LOVING GOD THE SECOND COMMAND IS TO LOVE OTHERS

God commands us to love others.

First we must love God with all our heart, soul, and mind.

Second, we must love our neighbor as ourselves.

Our ability to do the second will be determined by how well we do the first.

Who is our neighbor?

It includes those who live in our house, our mate, kids, parents, siblings, etc.

It includes those living next door, those at our school, work, club, team and those we meet around town or in our travels around the country and world, and our enemies.

Now this is no small task. Let's face it. It is not easy. If we don't do the first command, we won't do the second very well. If we don't do the second, it shows that we aren't carrying out the first very well.

I John 2:9-11 ⁹ Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. ¹⁰ Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. ¹¹ But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.

I John 3:11-18¹¹ For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. ¹² Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. ¹³ Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, ¹⁴ if the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. ¹⁵ Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him. ¹⁶ This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

One day a man asked Jesus what he had to do to be right with God.

Luke 10:25-37 ²⁵“On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” ²⁷He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” ²⁸“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” ²⁹But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denari and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’” ³⁶“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” ³⁷The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

This story shows the three philosophies by which everyone on the face of the earth lives. Usually one is predominant with possible flashes of the others at times.

Following are the three philosophies of life revealed in this story.

The first is that of the robbers. Their philosophy of life is:

WHAT IS YOURS IS MINE IF I CAN GET MY HANDS ON IT.

(And I'll do whatever I have to in order to get it, lie, cheat, deceive, control, overpower, bribe, bully, steal, abuse, etc.)

Half the world lives by that philosophy. And it can be anyone. A rich man or a poor man, woman, man, youth, any race, presidents, politicians, parents, partners, promoters, priests, preachers, professors, policeman, of any class, race, nationality, etc.

The second philosophy is revealed in the priest and politician who walked out around the man in need. Their philosophy is:

WHAT IS MINE IS MINE IF I CAN KEEP MY HANDS ON IT.

Half the world lives with that philosophy.

Their response is, “I’m so sorry you are going through tough times but I’ve got my hands full just trying to keep my nose above the dangerous waters of life. But can I pray for you before I go?”

The third is the philosophy of the Samaritan. We call him the THIRD MAN. This man was on the lowest social totem pole in his society but he was living at a life level and philosophy well above the others. His philosophy was:

WHAT IS MINE IS YOURS IF YOU NEED IT. IF YOU NEED MORE THAN I HAVE TO GIVE I'LL TRY AND HELP YOU TO FIND IT.

My friend Jim Larsen has an abbreviation as to how to remember the three, YMMMMY.

Yours is **M**ine

Mine is **M**ine

Mine is **Y**ours

Which philosophy is dominating in your life?

In Jesus we are called to love the un-loveable.

Luke 6:27-38 ²⁷ But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, **do good** to those who hate you, ²⁸ **ble**ss those who curse you, **pray** for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. ³⁰ **Give** to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. ³¹ **Do to others as you would have them do to you.** ³² "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. ³³ And **if** you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. ³⁴ And **if** you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. ³⁵ **But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back.** Then your reward will be great, and **you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.** ³⁶ **Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.** ³⁷ "**Do not judge,** and you will not be judged. **Do not condemn,** and you will not be condemned. **Forgive,** and you will be forgiven. ³⁸ **Give,** and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

There is one more important thought about loving others.

Romans 12:18 *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

There are situations in which it isn't possible to interact with some people who don't like us, who mistreat us, use us or choose to be our enemies. But their bad attitudes or philosophies don't have to control and determine mine.

Paul recognizes that in this verse. He acknowledges that it isn't possible to be at peace with some. But even if they choose to reject us, we can choose to act with respect and courtesy.

We can choose to be:

Kind

Respectful

Patient

Forgiving

Tolerant

Sensitive

If you would be interested in starting your own

THIRD MAN GROUP,

go to www.tmc2.org and see how to do it.

Start with your family, friends, neighbors, etc.

Make a difference in the world. Start a group at your work, with your employees, team, or club.

WE HAVE A FAMILY, BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

It's all about relationship. The Church is the Bride of Christ. Jesus will come for her one day. She is made up of all those who are Disciples of Christ.

We need each other in the church. Even though we aren't perfect, we can often get off track, we are works in progress and we are very different from each other we still need each other.

We have the same Father, Savior, Friend and the same mission in life and the same destiny.

While watching TV nature shows, have you noticed how lion prides or wolf packs hunt? They always try and pick out the weak, old, or a newly born and separate it from the herd. They want to isolate it. Then it is six predators against one prey instead of six of them against 129 in the herd. When it is six against 129 the odds are in their favor. It is easier to take the isolated one down when it is six against 1!

Satan knows that if he can isolate one of us from God or other Christians by boredom, hurts, anger, disappointments, or whatever, we will be easier to take down. Don't forget that is his goal.... to take us down.

It is so vital that we stay connected with the group, band, gang, family, and fellowship of other believers who are in the journey with us. We are a family. We are the army of God armed only with truth and love.

Together we can be more powerful for God. Isolated, we become very vulnerable. Loners are very vulnerable. They are easy pickings.

That is why we are told to confess to one another. That is, don't hide your struggles and sins from each other for shame, embarrassment, or pride. We are more like a wounded impala to a herd of lions when we hide stuff. Satan moves in for the kill.

It is not always easy being part of the family of God. Our spiritual siblings have problems, too, just like us. But we are called to love each other and grow together.

In the New Testament, Christians are called upon time and again to love one another. This falls under the number-two command, loving our neighbor includes our family in God.

Jesus told His followers that the world would know we were his followers by the love we had for one another. Wow, how often have we failed in that one.

If we practiced the following ONE ANOTHERS in the New Testament it would eliminate almost all separations, divorces, family break ups, church splits and broken friendships in the church.

We are called to practice these. How are you and those Christians around you doing?

Can you imagine what would happen if WE REALLY PRACTICED THESE?

Why aren't we? It can only be disobedience!

After each one, make a list of how you could practice it or carry it out. And then do it.

Are you bored, frustrated, upset, and feeling alone in life? Start practicing this list and things will change. It will take the focus off of you and put it on others. It is mind boggling to think what a life committed to doing these things would be like.

Romans 12:10 *Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.*

Romans 12:16 *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*

Romans 13:8 *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.*

Romans 14:13 *Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.*

Romans 15:7 *Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*

Romans 15:14 *I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another.*

Romans 16:16 *Greet one another with a holy kiss.*

I Corinthians 1:10 *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.*

2 Corinthians 13:11 *Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.*

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Galatians 5:13 *You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.*

Ephesians 4:2 *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*

Ephesians 4:32 *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

Ephesians 5:19 *speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord,*

Colossians 3:13 *Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

Colossians 3:16 *Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.*

James 4:11 *Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another.*

James 5:9 *Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!*

I Peter 1:22 *Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.*

I Peter 3:8 *Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble*

I Peter 4:9 *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.*

I Peter 5:5 ***In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,***

As we are told in **Hebrews 10:19-25**: ¹⁹ *Therefore, brothers and sisters, **since** we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,* ²⁰ *by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,* ²¹ *and since we have a great priest over the house of God,* ²² ***let us draw near to God*** *with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.* ²³ ***Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess,*** *for he who promised is faithful.* ²⁴ ***And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,*** ²⁵ ***not giving up meeting together,*** *as some are in the habit of doing, but **encouraging one another** —and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

DON'T LET YOUR PARTICIPATION IN A CHURCH RUIN YOUR FAITH IN GOD!

I did a series of messages with this title years ago when we lived in Chile. I want to give a summary of the four talks here.

It sounds weird, but it happens all the time. It shouldn't happen, but it does. I run into people all the time who have pretty much abandoned God due to some unfortunate situations in a church. We shouldn't let this happen to us. Many of them say they haven't abandoned God but they really don't want anything to do with church anymore. Now where we congregate and who they are may change for us over the years, but we can't serve the Lord and not participate with the FAMILY in some form whether it's a house church, small group, larger congregation, or whatever. We need the family.

We need our family, but at times great harm can come through a church. If Jesus said, "Not everyone who says Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of heaven," then I guess it would be fair to say all that call themselves Christians or church are not part of the Kingdom or at least acting like someone in the Kingdom should. And then we need to understand that NO ONE in any church is perfect in all they do. Everyone is growing and maturing and liable to error.

Here are four common situations in which people get turned off to CHURCH and in the end often give up participating in any congregation (including house churches or small groups of Christians) and more often than not step back from the Lord, too. They say they still believe in God, but other than whisper a prayer now and then their relationship cools and is comatose or on a ventilator. That isn't good or necessary.

1. BE CAREFUL. THERE ARE CHURCHES WITH BAD TEACHINGS OR DOCTRINE.

Be careful.

Not all who call themselves Christians or churches teach the New Testament correctly. There are those who are seriously wrong in their teachings.

There are phonies and deceivers. We are warned about them all through the New Testament.

Some are just sincere in their faith in Jesus but have adopted erroneous teachings.

There are also false Christians, preachers, and churches.

There are churches with bad doctrine.

Study the following warnings given in the New Testament.

ACTS 20:²⁸ *Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God^l which he bought with his own blood^l* ²⁹ *I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.* ³⁰ ***Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.*** ³¹ *So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.*

Romans 16:¹⁷ *I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.* ¹⁸ *For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.*

Colossians 2:¹⁸ *Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.* ¹⁹ *They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.*

I Timothy 4:4 *The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.* ² *Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.* ³ *They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.* ⁴ *For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving,* ⁵ *because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.*

Ephesians 4:4 *Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.*

Matthew 7 ²⁴ *Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.* ²⁵ *The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.* ²⁶ *But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.* ²⁷ *The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.*

Acts 17:11 *Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*

Hebrews 4:12 *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

I John 4: 1,2-6 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.⁴ You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

I Corinthians 11:² I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you....¹⁵ Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.

So how many warnings do we need?

Don't be afraid to ask anyone about what they teach if you have your doubts.

Don't be afraid to seek a second opinion.

I encourage you to read the following passages in your copy of the New Testament.

Acts 4:12, 17:11

I Corinthians 10:23-33

II Corinthians 11:3,4

Galatians 1:8,9

Ephesians 4:14

Philippians 4:8

Colossians 1:23, 2:18-23

2 Thessalonians 2:14

I Timothy 1:10, 6:3,4

4:1-6

2 Timothy 1:13, 3:14, 18, 3:16,17

Titus 1:9, 2:1

I John 4: 2-8

Judas 8, 9

Why are there SO MANY verses warning us about false teachers? Because there are many in the world. There were when Jesus lived, and there are today. We have been warned. Be careful. Make sure you aren't one of them.

Check out the teaching of anyone teaching in the name of Jesus to be sure what they preach is what the New Testament writings teach. If not, don't follow them, don't obey them, and don't believe them.

While we don't want to become nasty mean legalists (watch your attitude) don't apologize to anyone for wanting to make sure you are following Jesus and not men.

Now this obviously suggests that we ought to be reading and studying the New Testament enough on our own to be able to test whether what others are teaching really is correct.

2. BE CAREFUL. THERE ARE CHURCHES WITH BAD LEADERS.

Part of the problem here is that some leaders' lives are out of whack.

Part of the problem here is that some followers' expectations are out of whack.

No leader is perfect.

I understand that some act and think like they are. They aren't.

Some people seem to think their leaders are perfect. They are wrong. They aren't.

Both of those issues can cause huge problems for us.

Some leaders tend to portray themselves as something greater than they are, and they use that to deceive, manipulate, and control.

Some followers seem happy to think their leaders are something greater than they are and are happy to let them be their spiritual representatives before God just like we would have a lawyer be our legal representative before a judge. That is just all wrong.

We should NEVER let any man or woman become the center of our faith.

We have ONE Lord.

We have ONE Savior.

We have ONE Teacher.

We have ONE Shepherd.

We have ONE Father.

We have ONE Pastor.

And any person who tries to supplant Him ought not to be trusted or followed.

Anyone who seems to be calling us to follow them and be allegiant to them instead of Jesus ought to be ignored. Don't fall for that trap.

If you encounter any leader who seems to be seeking fame, notoriety, a following, to be a spiritual star or big shot, watch out. If you want to end up disillusioned, then believe it all and follow them instead of Jesus. Make them your hero instead of Jesus. You will have a fall because at some point you will find out they have feet of clay. They are humans like the rest of us.

They aren't Jesus, and Jesus never appointed them to such a high place in your life.

Now love them, encourage them, learn from them, cooperate with them IF what they teach is correct and matches what the Apostles taught. But don't submit to them as if they were God in your presence. That place was and is reserved for Jesus.

Oh, it's a common temptation. Even the mother of two of his early disciples went to Jesus and asked if they could sit at his right hand in the new kingdom. Even she wanted prestige and power for them (she might even benefit from it). People still want to be seen as important. All leaders ought to be working to make JESUS more important in your life not themselves. Pride comes before the fall.

Church leaders should be:

Models

Examples

Teachers

Encouragers

Coaches

Servants!!!!

But that doesn't put them in the position of Jesus.

They:

Are imperfect.

Struggle with temptation.

Are immature in areas.

May try and hide their imperfections.

Like to be approved and appreciated etc.

Like to be important, affirmed, and trusted.

And it is disappointing when one of them FALLS in sin and gets caught in it.

BUT if one of them should fall in some unexpected way, that ought not to affect our relationship with God.

If I had brothers and sisters who were mean, careless, unloving, disrespectful etc., that would be sad, but I'm not going to let their attitudes and behaviors stop me from loving my Father. That would be silly.

You will find leaders who fall in:

Lying

Stealing

Cheating

Adultery

Fornication

Unacceptable sexual relationships

Pornography

Unkindness

Pride

Greed

Selfishness

We have all seen it happen.

It is sad.

They need to be disciplined just like any others in the family.

They need to humble themselves and repent.

They may need to step down from their leadership position for a good while. It depends on what their sin was and how long they had been enslaved in it. There are a lot of factors involved. That is what the elders of the congregation should deal with.

BUT DON'T LET WHAT THEY DO RUIN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

Noah failed God.

Abraham failed God.

David failed God.

Samson failed God.

Peter failed God.

Prophets failed God.

And the list goes on and on.

That doesn't stop me from believing in God.

It strengthens my faith in God.

God uses all of us, and all of us have failed in some way.

We all do.

One last time. Don't let others' failures ruin your relationship with your Father.

3. BE CAREFUL. THERE ARE CHURCHES WITH BAD PROGRAMS AND MINISTRIES.

Some churches really get off track from what God called the church to do in the New Testament.

They can get distracted and involved in social programs that have nothing to do with Kingdom work.

They can get focused on political issues that the church was never told or commanded to get involved in.

They can get involved in all kinds of events, activities, programs, and services that have nothing to do with what God called the church to do.

They can end up like exclusive tight-knit social clubs.

They can start making unreasonable demands about your supporting them and their programs.

They can start projects expecting you to foot the bill for something that really isn't necessary for the Kingdom.

They can start demanding you invest an unreasonable amount of time working for them.

It is a long list.

Everyone has to evaluate this situation, but in the end we don't have to abandon God and other congregations because some are way off track in these ways.

4. BE CAREFUL. THERE ARE CHURCHES WITH PEOPLE WHO CAN AND MIGHT HURT YOU.

Now this is similar to the first point but different.

There are mates who are abused by their Christian mates.

There are Christians who are unfaithful to their mate.

There are Christian mates who abandon and divorce their innocent mate.

There are Christian parents who neglect, abuse, or don't protect their kids.

There are Christian friends who betray friends.

There are people fired unjustly from churches they have worked for.

Oh, I have seen and heard it all.

I'm not defending or excusing any of that kind of behavior.

And I have seen people abandon God because of what others have done to them.

Now come on. That doesn't even make sense. We will suffer as a result of other Christians' bad decisions or sins. But don't throw the BABY (God) out with the dirty bath water (the other who sinned against you).

DEALING WITH OUR OWN SINS. Be careful. Don't pursue sin and then blame God that all isn't going right in your life.

Alcoholics Anonymous has a great saying: "You get what you got when you do what you did." And how many alcoholics or any kind of addict want to blame their parents, mate, friends, boss, etc. for their drinking?

Many people ignore God and live the way they want and then when things don't go right, they blame God for their misfortunes.

Proverbs 19:3 **From The Message (MSG)**

³ People ruin their lives by their own stupidity,
so why does God always get blamed?

From the Living Bible (TLB)

³ A person's own folly leads to their ruin,
yet their heart rages against the LORD.

From the New International Version (NIV)

A man may ruin his chances by his own foolishness and then blame it on the Lord!

It is a human condition. It is our way of trying to justify ourselves by blaming someone else, at times even God.

That doesn't work. Nice try.

WHAT DO WE DO WHEN WE OFFEND SOMEONE OR WE ARE OFFENDED BY SOMEONE?

Trust me, it is going to happen. Maybe sooner than later. Maybe more frequently than not. It would be nice if it didn't happen. But it does. So it is good for us to anticipate what to do when it does.

You are going to be offended by someone and you will offend others along the way.

Some people are more sensitive than others and are more easily offended.

And we all have different ways to react to being offended or hurt by another.

Some common reactions to being offended are:

Withdrawal

Blame

Attack

Accuse

Play the victim

Get sick

Gossip (that is talk about the offender rather than to them)

Yell

Scream

Cry

Throw

Get angry

Resent

Get nasty

Call names

Pout

Retaliate

Slander

HORRIBILIZE what they did (that is make it a lot worse than it really was)

And the list goes on and on.

Jesus gave us a very simple strategy to follow when we are offended or hurt by someone or when we have offended another. Following his teachings can save ourselves so much grief. But we seldom do it with our mate, kids, parents, friends, neighbors, people at work or school and we suffer unneeded consequences.

Here is a common scenario as to how it often happens:

Someone says or does something (or doesn't do something that we thought they should have done) that offends or hurts us.

We feel hurt, angry, abused, betrayed, let down, slighted, attacked, criticized, etc.

Then we let our feelings lead us to do some of the things listed above. We feel obligated to let them know that they have seriously offended us. So after we start sharpening our skills in the items in the list, it all gets worse and worse.

Then the other person responds to our poor reaction by their getting angry, feeling hurt, shocked, betrayed (because they didn't see what they did as being bad or bad enough to deserve what they are now getting from us). They can have several reactions to what we are doing. They might see themselves as innocent. They might think it just wasn't that big a deal. They might think that they never intended what happened the way we interpreted it. They might believe that our actions are 10 times worse than whatever they did whether it was intentional or not. Then they might take the thing to a whole new level or depth by doing things on the list above, which then builds the civil war and things just keep repeating in a vicious cycle.

Then we react, and then they react, and it keeps getting worse and descends in to a deep, dark whirlpool, or may we should say cesspool.

WHAT DID JESUS SAY TO DO? If we would just do it, most conflicts would come to an early end.

Matthew 18:15 It is so clear. It would seem so simple. The only thing that keeps us from doing it is our pride.

While what he says here may have a wider application, it certainly including another's offending or sinning against us.

15 If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

What are we told to do here?

If someone sins (and that certainly includes sinning against us or offending us):

1. GO AND POINT OUT THEIR FAULT

This allows the opportunity for them to explain, defend, or accept responsibility for what they did. There are several options.

They might be innocent. I might have misunderstood or misinterpreted what happened and they can clear it up and it will go no further. In most cases, they will appreciate that I humbly went to them first. That shows love and respect.

If they aren't innocent, this gives them an opportunity to respond.

But without going to them first, they have no opportunity to respond.

They might acknowledge that they did mean it and why.

They might acknowledge it and accept responsibility, apologizing or asking for forgiveness.

They might deny it

Whatever the case, this allows you to address the issue

What do we normally do instead of going to them for conversation and clarification? We RUN to someone else whom we think will side with us, accept our version of the incident, and back us up in the abuse that has been committed.

2. JUST BETWEEN THE TWO OF YOU.

That eliminates gossip. Gossip kills.

The principle is talk TO the person not ABOUT the person. Just doing that would eliminate so many crises in our lives.

3. IF THEY LISTEN TO YOU, YOU HAVE WON THEM OVER.

So we didn't start a war and we may save a friendship or relationship. They see they can trust us. They know we will go to them first with anything in the future and not others. Don't we all like that even if the situation deals with a failure of ours?

4. IF THEY WILL NOT LISTEN, TAKE ALONG OTHERS.

Now the purpose of that is to have others who are objective and can make a good judgment about the situation. I could be the one who is wrong instead of them! So you don't talk to two or more others, try and convince them of your case and THEN go to the other with your TEAM all prepared. They are there to help determine what is really going on in order to make a wise judgment and help restore peace.

5. IF THEY REFUSE TO LISTEN

Then share it with a respected person/s. We are obviously talking about serious situations here. This could easily be abused by someone with hidden anger or bitterness. This does not suggest we broadcast the results to the whole world. The only ones with whom it needs to be shared are those affected by what is happening or those who can give wise counsel. A lot of wisdom is called for here. This isn't permission to start gossiping about the other person. It is seeking counsel.

So the question becomes what do we do in response to being offended?

In most cases, we don't do what Jesus told us to do.

Some GO, but they go attacking, yelling, blaming, accusing etc. and immediately put the other on the defensive by their approach. Then they can justify their actions by pointing to our actions or behavior, which they will then say started the whole mess.

Going and saying something like, "The other day when you did/said _____ I felt attacked, belittled, condemned (or whatever). It really made me feel bad and I felt I needed to talk to you about it." And then let them respond.

More often than not, people go to OTHER people in an attack mode and to talk about the person's offense, sin, failure, or fault. We often go blaming rather than seeking clarification and reconciliation. From there on things are not going to work out right. Good luck. Actually good luck won't even help at that point.

Go with a humble heart concerned about the fact you don't want a damaged relationship with the other person and you want to be sure you haven't done something to cause it.

The person might have spoken the truth and you just don't like it.

The person might have been lashing out for something you did.

The person might have been misunderstood.

But the way to get to the bottom of it is TO GO TO THEM FIRST and seek to clear it up.

I read a statement years ago that said, "If you button the first button of your sweater wrong, all the others will be wrong as a result."

That certainly applies to this scenario.

If we start dealing with an offense by going to other people first, then in most cases we have put the wrong button in the wrong button hole and all the others will be wrong, too.

Now the second area of fixing conflicts.

This is when WE HAVE OFFENDED someone else.

We did it and we know it. It doesn't matter if it was intentional or not.

We find out somehow that they feel offended.

They might be avoiding us. We might find out from others telling us that the other feels hurt.

Here is what Jesus says to do in these cases.

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

This is so interesting. This would heal so many broken or damaged relationships if it was practiced. What do we find here?

This is so important to God because with Him it is all about relationship. That is part of loving our neighbor as ourselves. There is nothing more important.

If I am off doing something wonderful:

Serving God,

Teaching Sunday school

Policing the streets

Doing lifesaving surgeries

Doing important volunteer work

Working hard to support my family

or whatever, that is I'm offering what I have to God or mankind AND I remember (my conscience is working) or I'm told that someone has something against me:

That is I hurt, offended, or failed them, or

They believe or feel that I hurt or failed them,

And that results in there being something in their mind or heart that is acting as a barrier between them and myself as a result of my offense.

IF THAT THING COMES TO MY MIND OR THE POSSIBILITY OF IT, OR I'M TOLD BY THEM OR SOMEONE ELSE, then I need to stop what I'm doing as soon as possible (don't stop the heart surgery in the middle of the operation) and GO and be RECONCILED with them. Being reconciled is what is most important to God. Being at peace with Him and others is what is important. So if we remember that someone has something against us, we need to make it TOP priority to go to them and restore our relationship.

We need to go and deal with the issue.

If that is acknowledging our neglect, bad attitude, or actions then we need to do that.

If that means confessing and asking for forgiveness, then do that.

It could be that they FEEL hurt over something that we didn't mean or intend. If that is the case, we still need to address it and try and fix it. You can deny your intent but your denial in and of itself won't make their hurt go away. Acknowledging the situation or their hurt feeling is the beginning to fix things.

But so often we wait for others to come to us. Our pride raises its head.

We become defensive, justifying ourselves, we act offended that they even thought such a thing. Then we seek out others to side with us.

While we might be able to think of 50 reasons not to do this, God gives us one good reason: reconciliation. And that is what God is all about. That is more important than our service, donations, work, or whatever. After all, what else do we have that is more important than relationships. How sad it is to see people who have ALL the stuff/toys but have a trail of broken or empty relationships behind them.

This teaching applies to the present. And it can apply to old relationships from the past that we have walked away from. They are still broken. Maybe we helped break them. And God would like to see us be mature and responsible and take the first step to fix it.

Can you think of such relationships in your life? Maybe today is the day to practice what is taught here. What is there to lose? If the relationship is already broken or cold, it probably can't get worse. Maybe it can get better, better than it was in the past.

The call is to reconciliation, especially if you think or know you are the one who may have caused the damage.

Here is something I've learned over the years. If someone else says they FEEL hurt or offended by you, no amount of arguing, defending, excusing, or denying on your part is going to change that. Rather than spend eternity telling them that it is silly to feel the way they feel, it is better to just acknowledge their feeling by saying "I'm so sorry you feel hurt or offended."

Their feeling hurt doesn't mean you are guilty of something (although you might be).

But just acknowledging it is accepting the FACT that they FEEL hurt. No amount of arguing will change that. So accept it.

Acknowledge it and then you can respond in any number of ways. You have to choose which you think fits the situation:

"I'm sorry you felt hurt. I didn't say it or do it."

"I'm sorry you felt hurt. I never intended to hurt you. I didn't mean what you interpreted that I said. I never meant that at all."

"I'm sorry you felt hurt. Someone was gossiping about me and what I said or did. It didn't happen."

"I'm sorry you felt hurt. And you have reason to. What I did or said was thoughtless. Would you please forgive me?"

"I'm sorry you felt hurt. And you have reason to. What I did or said was thoughtless and unkind. It was intentional. It is without excuse. Would you please forgive me?"

Now, I can't predict how the other will respond but you have gone to them, you have acknowledged their feelings, you haven't retaliated, you have expressed your view, you have confessed if that was needed. Now what they do is up to them.

You might have stopped a war before it began. Or you might start the process of ending a war that has been going on for some time.

If further conversation is needed to clear up the issue, then that can take place.

Be self-controlled. Be humble. Be sincere. Be understanding. Listen. Don't attack.

If you intentionally hurt the person, you can ask them to forgive you. Some might forgive you. Others might not. But you have done what is the responsible thing on your part. Give them time. Be patient. At least you have done the proper thing at this point.

Others might be hesitant to forgive you or not be willing to because you have already failed them so many times they see your words as empty. If that is the case, you will have to give them time and show them your sincerity by really changing the way you treat them. That might take time. Some may never forgive you. But again, you have done the proper thing. Don't attack, criticize, or run them down. That solves nothing.

You lose all ground gained at that point.

Now, go and do good.

Make every effort to be at peace with all.

SEEING OUR SHORTCOMINGS THROUGH OTHERS' PROBLEMS

Years ago, I read about a counselor and a technique he used with many clients. He gave individuals who came in for their first session about a bad marriage the following homework. He then told them they had to do it and return it to the office in order to be able to have a second appointment. If they didn't do this part, he wouldn't see them again. He explained that if they didn't do this, he couldn't help them much. Now this wasn't to say that the other person didn't have some real issues to deal with, but he had learned that if this wasn't done and understood he couldn't get very far with these clients.

It all started with this passage in the Bible.

Matthew 7:3,4 *Why do you look at the **speck** of sawdust **in** your brother's **eye** and pay no attention to the plank **in** your own **eye**?*

*How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the **speck** out of your **eye**,' when all the time there is a plank **in** your own **eye**?*

SEE THE CHART BELOW

The first thing the client had to do was to fill in the top row listing the six most serious things that irritated, upset, disturbed, or angered them about their mate. At this point they are thrilled and are pleased with their decision to have come to this counselor. Most often they asked if they could fill out a second sheet of six.

Then the counselor explained that after they had accomplished this part of the assignment, they had to list eight poor or bad responses of theirs to each of the six items at the top.

At this point they are sure they misunderstood what the counselor said. "Would you repeat that please. I don't think I got that right." Their experience just went from sweet to sour.

HOMEWORK....

Irritations Annoying Maddening	1	2	3	4	5	6
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						

“No,” the counselor would say. “You understood me.” And he repeated the assignment. Then he explained the simple truth that the client would never be able to change their mate. Period. So for starters, all they can focus on is themselves and their poor attitudes and actions. They are the only one they can change.

But that was NOT what the client came to him for. It is the other one who needs changing, they insisted. Well, there is no doubt that the other needs to change some things, but for now all the counselor can do with this person is help them identify their poor behavior and help them change....if they are willing to. “So, do the homework or don’t bother coming for another session.”

Now, I suppose there were cases of serious abuse when other approaches were used by the counselor, but for most situations this was a great technique.

With that, the stunned client walks out not sure they want to do the homework. They have a tough decision to make. It all depends on whether they are mature and wise enough to realize they need to work on themselves for now.

The counselor based this on the story in Luke about one trying pick a speck out of someone else's eye when they had a plank sticking out of theirs. That is a common human problem. We see everyone else's faults but are slow to see ours or we are quick to try and explain away our defects by excusing them or denying them. Well, that doesn't help us much. So we can all learn from this exercise. Give it a try. Put in the name of your mate, parent, child, boss, employee, etc.

Again, this is not to say others don't have problems to deal with, but the place to start in life is with ourselves.

So let's use this example. Your mate, a friend, parent, or child is always late, and it drives you crazy. So we will list that at the top of the column. Now what could be eight bad responses of ours? They may be having problems with the same thing at work or school, too, but we aren't going to focus on their speck for now.

This exercise doesn't say that tardiness or any number of other things are not important issues, but it says we need to start with ourselves and make sure we take care of us and our actions and attitudes. I can't change them. I can only change me. And it is possible that the way I act contributes to their problem.

Our starting with ourselves and focusing on ME and my problems rather than focusing on the other might even be an encouragement to the other to improve things in their life. We take the pressure off by putting the pressure on us to change our behaviors.

How might a person react to someone always showing up late?

Yell at them.

Scold them.

Call them names.

Horribilize the problem. Make it worse than it is.

Give them nasty looks.

When you get to where you were going and you show up late, be sure and let everyone know it was the other's fault.

Gossip about them to your parents or friends.

Run them down in front of the kids.

Show up late to something important for them.

Don't speak to them. Give them the silent treatment.

Throw things.

Pout

Point out all their other weaknesses. Make it a bundle of failures.

If it is your mate, make them sleep on the couch.

Threaten them with any number of things.

Retaliate by letting them down in something important to them.

We just listed 16 possible responses to the other's one problem. I suppose we could come up with 30.

Those make up the PLANK in our eye. It is much easier pointing out your SPECK than it is to deal with my PLANK. Jesus got it right.

Now it is up to us.

This is part of loving our neighbor as our self.

Now it is up to us.

Do it. Obey Him or suffer more.