



Student Notes

# Caring for One Another

Informal Spiritual Care

Dr. Bruce Havens

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## **Session #1 – All Disciples Are to Make Disciples**

### **Preliminaries**

Introduction

Expectations

Context

Isaiah 55:8-9

1 Corinthians 2:12-14

**Learning Outcome:** By the end of this week, students will be able to identify the responsibility God gives church members (disciples) to care for one another.

Calling

### **The Great Commission – Matthew 28:16-20**

Who is Jesus' command intended for?

### **All disciples are called to make disciples**

Jesus' authority

Evangelism

Discipleship

What is a disciple?

### Confusion about discipleship

1. Disciples are learners, but not necessarily a believer. (John 6:66)
2. Disciples are committed believers (leads to two classes of believers)
3. Disciples are ministers
4. Disciples are converts; discipleship comes later
5. Disciples are converts who are in the process of discipleship

### Simple concept

1. Learner (knowledge)
2. Follower (action/obedience)

Michael Wilkins

“...a disciple of Jesus is one who has come to Jesus for eternal life, has claimed Jesus as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following Jesus.”

## **Mobilizing the Church**

Ephesians 4:11-16

1. Spiritual leaders equip the saints
2. Saints do the work of ministry
3. Saints help in building up the body (church)
  1. Maturity
  2. Fullness of Christ
  3. Not deceived by false doctrine

How?

### **Class conclusion Six key principles to building a culture of care:**

A culture of care involves every member in the church community.

A culture of care glorifies God by displaying His character.

A culture of care responds to the contextual status of the person.

A culture of care uses God’s authoritative and sufficient Word.

A culture of care battles idols in the heart.

A culture of care teaches one how to live according to the truth.

## **Projects for growth:**

The Gospel of Matthew begins the transition from the Old Testament economy to the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God chose Israel to be His people who would be an example and be responsible for pointing other nations to God. Throughout the Old Testament (Exod 3:1–4:16; Num 22:22–35; Judg 4:4–10; 1 Sam 3:1–4:1; 1 Chron 22:1–16; Ezra 1:1–5; Jer 1:1–10; Ezek 1:1–3:15), Benjamin Hubbard identifies a pattern in God’s commissioning narratives that aligns with Matthew’s Great Commission structure. The Great Commission in Matthew is not a new strategy for God, but a continued call for His people to proclaim the good news of a Redeemer, the Messiah, who would come from Israel to rule all people.

### **1. For this week, please read Exodus 3:1 – 4:16 and answer the following questions.**

- Q1.** In this portion of scripture, how does the text identify Moses?
- Q2.** What is the context or the circumstance at hand?
- Q3.** Who will deliver Israel?
- Q4.** What is God’s plan for delivering Israel?
- Q5.** What reasons does Moses give for why he should not be the person who goes on God’s behalf?
- Q6.** What reasons hold you back from obeying God’s plan of sending you to care for people?
- Q7.** How does God reassure Moses?

### **2. Memorize Matt. 28:18-20 (Be ready to review at our next meeting)**

### **3. Read “Summoned to the Savior” Chapter two in Am I Called? by Dave Harvey**

I know this is written to pastors, but the premise applies to people caring for the souls of others as well.

### **4. Pray – Proactively ask God to send you to someone, so that you can give biblical care to them over the next 6-8 weeks.**

### **5. Make a list of five potential people you could show care to (church, family, friends, co-workers, etc.) The goal is for you to work with one person over the next six to eight weeks and then continue or repeat the process.**

Have questions? Please contact me.

[brucehavens@gmail.com](mailto:brucehavens@gmail.com)

## **Session 2 – The Purpose for All Disciples is to Glorify God**

**Learning Outcome:** By the end of this week, students will be able to discern the foundational purpose of believers to glorify God in one's life.

### **Introduction**

Purpose – Glorify God

### **Isaiah 6:1-10 – case study**

Uzziah

God

Seraphs

Isaiah

Answers the call

Struggles

### **Definition: Glorify God simply stated**

1.

2.

## **Glorify God simply stated**

### **1. To acknowledge God's Sovereignty (inner man)**

Attributes of God

### **2. To actively display His character (outer man)**

Romans 15:14

Goodness

Knowledge

Humility

Matthew 7:1-5

Philippians 2:5-7

Gentleness

Galatians 6:1-10

## **Confidence in God**

Philippians 1:6

## **Display God's character**

New Testament One Another Commands

## **Projects for growth:**

Worship is a human response and will grow or shrink in direct proportion to a person's understanding of who God is revealed in the Scriptures. Therefore, people need to daily hear about God's character if he/she wants to grow spiritually.

### **1. Read and think upon the following passages about God:**

James 1:17 – What does God's Word say about God's character?

Exodus 34:6-7a – Describe God as judge.

Titus 3:4-6 – What are the components of God's love? Take time to describe each one.

Jeremiah 10:6-7 – What is God's holiness?

Psalms 139:7-10 – What implications does this passage have in caring for others?

### **2. Memorize 2 Cor. 5:9-10**

### **3. Read "The Godward Focus of Biblical Counseling" by Douglas Bookman Chapter four of Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically (John MacArthur)**

You can also find the article here:

<https://learntheology.com/the-godward-focus-of-biblical-counseling.html>

There are many helpful books on God's character/attributes. Consider adding one of these to your regular devotional reading.

#### **Classics**

The Holiness of God by R.C. Sproul

The Knowledge of the Holy by A.W. Tozer

The Existence and Attributes of God by Stephen Charnock

Pursuing Holiness by Jerry Bridges

#### **Contemporary**

Before the Throne: Reflections on God's Holiness by Allen Nelson

None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God by Matthew Barrett

Incomparable: Explorations of the Character of God by Andrew Wilson

### **4. Pray – Actively pray for personal boldness and confidence in God so that you might display His character in your life while caring for one another.**

### **5. Invite someone to meet with you (coffee, lunch, hang-out, etc.)**

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[brucehavens@gmail.com](mailto:brucehavens@gmail.com)



## Session 3 – Disciples Experience Sin and Suffering

**Learning Outcome:** *By the end of this week, students will be able to recognize the contextual status of a person, so that it will direct a plan for care.*

**Introduction** - Identity problem

**People suffer in different ways and for different reasons;  
our afflictions as God's children are not uniform.**

Job?

Samaritan Woman at the well?

Woman hemorrhaging?

Jonah?

Proverbs 20:5

<sup>5</sup> Counsel in a person's heart is like deep water,  
but an understanding person draws it out.

**Saints who need confirmation of their identity as children of God.**

Ephesians 4:17-21

**Sufferers who need comfort in the midst of their afflictions.**

The doctrine of suffering is more complex than this oversimplification.

Job 4:7-8 Eliphaz

Job 8:20 Bildad

Job 11:14-15, 17 Zophar

**1. Sometimes suffering is from sin.**

Galatians 6:7-8

**2. Sometimes suffering is for spiritual growth**

Romans 5:3-4

**3. Sometimes suffering is for Christ's sake**

1 Peter 4:12-14

**Biblical Lament**

- (1) an address to God,
- (2) a complaint,
- (3) a request, and
- (4) an expression of trust and or praise

**Sinners who need challenge to their sin in light of God's redemptive mercies.**

Hebrews 3:12-14

Romans 6:1-14

**Unregenerate who need the gospel.**

## **Projects for growth:**

Yes, all people are to glorify God in whatever they do but one size does not fit all when it comes to problems in life. Glorifying God looks different for each situation because people have different types of problems they are responding to.

**1.** Read the following passages about people. Then indicate how you would direct your care towards them by using one of the two types: **regenerate or unregenerate.**

If regenerate, then indicate the direction of your care: **confirming identity, comfort in the midst of affliction, or challenge to repent of sin.**

Job – You do not have to read all 42 chapters, but 1-3 and 38-42 should suffice.

Samaritan Woman – John 4:4-42

Woman hemorrhaging – Mark 5:25-34

Jonah – All four chapters

## **2. Memorize Proverbs 20:5**

## **3. Read – Getting to Know People by Paul David Tripp**

**4. Pray** – Actively pray that God will help you to grow in humble discernment regarding the status of people in their problems so you might display love rather than being judgmental while caring for one another.

## **5. Set up a meeting for next week.**

The goal for the first meeting is to build the relationship.

Discuss the problems of life.

Ask good questions.

How are they spiritually responding to life? (Glorifying God?)

Don't get the cart before the horse.

After the meeting, go home and pray about a potential direction for care.

See if they are willing to meet again to talk about spiritual matters.

Have questions? Please contact me.

[brucehavens@gmail.com](mailto:brucehavens@gmail.com)

## **Session 4 – The Importance of Disciples Being In God’s Word**

**Learning Outcome:** *By the end of this week, students will be able to distinguish between proper and improper uses of God’s Word in providing care.*

### **Introduction - Communication**

Why do I need it?

How does it work?

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

### **Why do I need God’s Word?**

Psalm 19:1-6 – General revelation helps people understand there is a God.

Psalm 19:7-11 – Special revelation explains the creator and sustainer of life.  
(Redemptive solution to sin)

Subjects – law, testimony, precepts, commandment & rules

Possessives – “of the Lord”, “by the lord” & “The Lord’s”

Adjectives – perfect, sure, right, pure, clean & true

Participles and verbs – reviving the soul, making the wise simple, rejoicing the heart & enlightening the eyes

- 1. God’s Word restores the soul.**
- 2. God’s Word is understandable.**
- 3. God’s Word is accurate.**
- 4. God’s Word clears the eyes of people.**
  - a. Removes hindrances**
  - b. Aids performance**

## How do I use God's Word?

2 Timothy 3:14-17

For teaching – doctrine for life (thinking, desires & actions)

for reproof – exposing someone's sin for acknowledgement

for correction – has the idea of straightening

for training in righteousness – continued growth

### 1. The approach to Scripture

Observation – **What does the passage say?**

Be a good journalists.

(Who, What, When, Where, Why and How)

Interpretation – **What does it mean?**

**What is God seeking to communicate through the biblical writer to the original reader?**

Application – **How does God's truth apply to life?**

Our inner being consists of three aspects...

**Beliefs** – **What is controlling my thinking?**

**Desires** – **What do I want?**

**Commitments** – **What are my actions?**

### 2. Dispensing Scripture

### 3. Use biblical terms

### 4. Meditate on Scripture

## **Projects for growth:**

### **1. Read Proverbs 3:1-8 twenty-five times this week.**

#### **Study Proverbs 3:1-8**

- Observations (answer the journalistic questions)
- Interpretation (What does God want people to know, desire and commit to?)
- Application (What will you personally change in your life because of this truth?)

### **2. Memorize Proverbs 3:5-6**

### **3. Read – The Necessity and Possibility of Reading the Bible Supernaturally by John Piper**

Watch Bob Newhart video: <https://vimeo.com/10880189>

### **4. Pray/Meditate on Ephesians 3:14-21**

### **5. Meet and provide biblical care to one person.**

Have questions? Please contact me.

[brucehavens@gmail.com](mailto:brucehavens@gmail.com)

## Session 5 – All Disciples Must Battle Sin in the Heart

**Learning Outcome:** By the end of this week, students will understand the key battle for continual spiritual transformation is fought in the person's heart.

**Introduction** – The problem is not the problem, the heart is the problem.

Are you mowing weeds or killing them at the root?

Case study – lying

### Assurance of salvation issues

1 John 5:18-21

- We know
  - o Verse 18
  - o Verse 19
  - o Verse 20
- Guard yourselves from \_\_\_\_\_ .

Matthew 12:34b

For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

### The heart is the source of conflicts

James 4:1-10

- Passions
  - o Luke 8:14
- The commands – is this a strategy for guarding your hearts?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>o Submit to God</li><li>o Draw near to God</li><li>o Make your hearts pure</li><li>o Mourn</li><li>o Turn</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>o Resist the devil</li><li>o Cleanse your hands</li><li>o Grieve</li><li>o Weep</li><li>o Humble yourselves</li></ul>
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## The correction of idolatry

Ezekiel 14:1-8

- Context
- The battle within
- Turn from idols (repent)

## What is Idolatry?

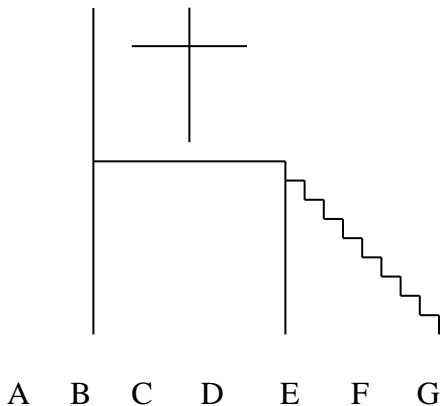
Brad Bigney *Gospel Treason: Betraying the Gospel with Hidden Idols*

“An idol is anything or anyone that captures our hearts, minds, and affections more than God.”

## Identifying idols:

- either in objects (e.g., lust for money),
- other people (“I need to please my critical father”),
- or myself (e.g., self-trusting pursuit of my personal agenda).

Good desires become inordinate ruling desires



- Is it consuming your mind? or Do you think about it often, to the point of obsessing over it?
- Am I willing to sin to get this?
- Am I willing to sin if I think I am going to lose this?
- Do you manipulate, nag, pressure, or guilt-trip others to get your desire met?
- Do you attack or separate from others when you don't get your desire met?

Robert Jones, *Gospel for Disordered Lives, Uprooting Anger, Pursuing Peace* & class notes at SBTs.

## Worship God through the Gospel Each Day

Mistaken attempts to change behavior

- We threaten
- We manipulate
- We instill guilt



## **Projects for growth:**

### **1. Read James 4:1-10 twenty-five times this week.**

**Study the commands** (submit, resist, draw near, cleanse, make your hearts pure, grieve, mourn, weep, turn and humble yourself).

**Explain each command.**

### **2. Memorize 1 Thessalonians 1:9**

### **3. Read – Married to Christ Tim Lane & Paul David Tripp.**

### **4. Read Daniel 9:3-19.** Write a prayer from the applicational truths you discerned from it.

### **5. Regarding the person you are caring for:**

a. Write down the presenting problem(s).

b. Write down what possible idols you believe are hindering his/her relationship and worship of God.

c. meet with the person a second time

1. teach the person about the battleground of the heart (idols/inordinate desires).

2. ask the person the following diagnostic questions.

3. Assign the questions for next week to see what he/she believes are potential idols in his/her life.

Is it consuming your mind? or Do you think about it often, to the point of obsessing over it?

Am I willing to sin to get this?

Am I willing to sin if I think I am going to lose this?

Do you manipulate, nag, pressure, or guilt-trip others to get your desire met?

Do you attack or separate from others when you don't get your desire met?

Have questions? Please contact me.

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## Session 6 – Disciples Are to Utilize the Transformed Heart

**Learning Outcome:** By the end of this week, students will be able to identify the functions of the heart and describe the process of biblical change.

### Introduction – Ongoing battle with sin

Romans 7:21-26

### The Unregenerate Heart – Problem & solution

Jeremiah 17:1-2, 5-6, 9-10

Ezekiel 36:22-27

- Jews (Jeremiah 31:31-33)
- Gentiles (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2)
- New Covenant (Eph. 2:11-22; Luke 22:20)

### The Regenerate Heart – A heart transplant

- **a new leaning** progressively – away from self and toward God and others.
- **a new disposition** – instead of worship of self, worship of God.
- **new desires** – instead of fulfilling its own wants,  
it progressively asks what can I do to please God.

### A Warning

Hebrews 3:12-14

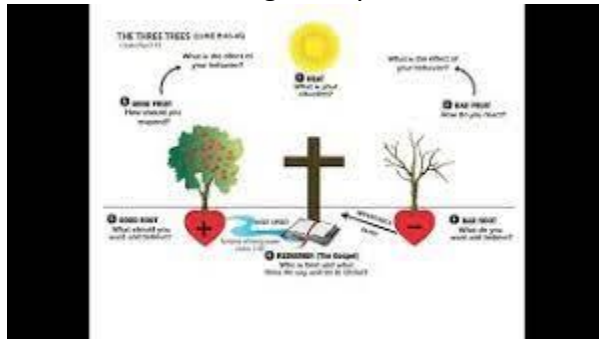
Proverbs 16:2; 21:2

## Utilizing the Heart – Living according to the truth

### ➤ Inspecting – What is going on in the heart?

Luke 6:43-45

The Three Trees diagram by CEF



**HEAT** – What is your situation?

**THORNS** – (How do you react? What do you want and believe?)

**CROSS** – Who is God and what does he say and do in Christ?

**FRUIT** – How is God calling me to seek him in repentance and faith?

### ➤ Directing – Put off, Renew the mind & Put on

Ephesians 4:22-24

2 Timothy 3:16

**One, teaching** – right doctrine

**Two, conviction** – Acknowledge God that brings repentance

**Three, correction** – This must be the controlling belief and desire

**Four, disciplined training in righteousness** – This is not a one-time event or occurrence, but a lifestyle behavior

- Union with Christ – communion means fellowship, mutual participation

### Three common mistakes

1. Casual Christianity
2. Let go and let God
3. Self-righteousness

## **Projects for growth:**

### **1. Read the following passages.**

Ephesians 4 :17-32

Colossians 3:1-17

Romans 6:1-14

Hebrews 12:1-14

1 Peter 1:3–2:3

- What is each passage talking about?
- What repeating themes do you observe?
- What are the key components for a believer to live according to the truth?

### **2. Memorize Romans 12:1-2**

### **3. Read – Act the Miracle: God's Work and Ours in the Mystery of Sanctification by Kevin DeYoung**

Or watch the message at this link <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/incentives-for-acting-the-miracle-fear-rewards-and-the-multiplicity-of-biblical-motivations>

### **4. Pray each day**

- for the person you are caring for
- for you as you encourage, care and disciple
- for dependence on God
- that God would be glorified

### **5. Meet with the person for a third time**

The goal for this meeting is to help them think about living for the truth

- Put off
- Renew the mind
- Put on

What would this look like for his/her specific situation?

This class is an introduction to biblical counseling. If you desire to learn more about biblical counseling, I offer training at Calvary Baptist Church in Brewerton, NY. Typically, classes are one Saturday a month from 8:00 AM – 2:00 PM in January, February, March, May, June, July, September, October and November. You can learn more at [www.bcmworldwide.org](http://www.bcmworldwide.org)

Have questions? Please contact me.

[brucehavens@gmail.com](mailto:brucehavens@gmail.com)

## Appendix

## **Dave Harvey: Am I Called?**

### **Chapter Two: Summoned to the Savior**

Phone calls always had a strange, peace-shattering, life-giving power for my young kids. Whether sleeping, playing in another room, or listening to music with the decibel level set on “rock concert,” a single ring from a phone would catalyze them into action and catapult them toward the source. Collisions were common, though no emergency room visits came of it. How come? More sophisticated minds may not get it, but to them, unlocking the mystery of the caller was as suspenseful as a Hitchcock thriller. Who knew what fun might be unleashed, what travel might result, what intrigues might await? It could be Gandalf recruiting for an adventure, or pirates needing shipmates, or maybe even the president looking to field-test some ideas with the prepubescent set. The right call could alter their entire evening—maybe their entire destiny.

Or maybe we just needed to get out more.

In any case, my kids detected something important: calls come from callers. A ringing phone is proof positive that someone from outside has turned his or her attention toward us. My wise and insightful children realized early on that they couldn’t conjure up a call. No amount of concentration or wishful thinking can induce a phone to ring. The caller’s initiative is everything.

This is why it’s unfortunate that this whole business of calling so often begins in the wrong place, with the wrong question. Dude, let me ask you a question. Do you think I’m called? This is a great question, an awesome and mysterious question. Scripture would add that it’s a noble question. I can say from my own experience that it’s a seriously exhilarating question. But I also want to state from the outset that it’s not the most important question. Guys asking this question are often looking hard at their résumés, reckoning that the bottom line is their education, character, competence, or experience. It typically starts with who they are or what they’re destined to do. But that approach just doesn’t seem to line up with Scripture.

Now I don’t want to be picky, but I’ve learned something. There’s another, more magnificent place to start: God. The call to ministry is about God’s character and activity, about his mercy and love, and ultimately about his provision to those for whom he died. If the Caller’s initiative is everything, then we must preoccupy ourselves with the Ultimate Caller. It’s that simple—and that profound.

#### **God at the Bottom of It All**

Pastor and theologian Sinclair Ferguson has pointed out that “one of the New Testament’s most frequent one-word descriptions of the Christian is that he is ‘called.’” Which makes us wonder: What are we supposed to do with that? Seems like we’ve got two options.

We can imagine it makes much of us: God called me! Or we can see it as making much of God: God called me!

Who's really at the center of the Caller's call ?

I know a guy who knows people, if you know what I mean. This guy told me about a trip he once took when he picked up a flu bug. Too sick even to get out of bed, he spent three days stuck in a hotel room. In the middle of the second night, his phone rang. I would have ignored it, but he picked it up. Get this: the president of the United States was on the line. My friend (I've decided anybody I know who knows the leader of the free world is automatically my friend) had once done some work for the president. The president somehow heard he was sick, and called to inquire about his health. My friend told me he jumped out of bed and stood at attention in his boxers to continue the conversation. As this guy related his story to me, it was evident this call was one of his life's highlights. And that wasn't because of him. It was because of the caller. In an infinitely more profound way, our call to ministry, just like our call to salvation, ultimately says little about us and a great deal about the Caller. If we're truly to understand the importance of calling in ministry, we need to grasp that the impetus for it originates with a wise, loving, and sovereign God. And before he calls us to ministry, he calls us to himself.

Before he calls us to ministry, he calls us to himself.

This Caller has "called us to a holy calling" (2 Tim. 1:9). Our self-understanding as believers is fundamentally wrapped up in the wonder of this frequently repeated truth:

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor. 1:9)

And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom. 8:30)

We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess. 2:13–14)

As you can see, the calling spoken of here is not a summons to vocational ministry, but something much more profound and fundamental—what theologians refer to as the effective (or effectual) call. Wayne Grudem defines it as "an act of God the Father, speaking through the human proclamation of the gospel, in which he summons people to himself in such a way that they respond in saving faith." This calling is from God (Eph. 1:3–6; 4:4–6) and calls us to God (Rom. 1:6–7). In other words, the call for our salvation precedes and grounds all other callings.

This is the point that John Newton's friend, Thomas Scott, finally got. He'd accepted a call to ministry, but he had no confidence in a call from God. Newton was right to lock in on

this. He was willing to be ridiculed because he knew that a man over God's people who doesn't know God is like the Titanic putting to sea—a tragedy in the making. If we understand the gospel correctly, we see several important things about this call to salvation: The Caller is pursuing his enemies—those who never wanted to hear his voice (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:21). He isn't pursuing his friends or peers in this world, because there aren't any.

The Caller visited earth in person. The gospel summons came not as an audible voice or angelic vision, but in a personal visitation, the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

Through the cross, the Caller restored the lines of communication and fellowship that had been severed by sin. We don't discover the call of God by modeling his example or emulating his teachings. Jesus came ultimately to yield his life on the cross in ransom for ours. Through his atoning blood, our connection to the Caller is finally established. By that connection our hearts are made new, our eyes and ears are opened, and we can hear and heed the ongoing callings of God.

The gospel is the instrument of our call. The gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ—is the instrument by which God issues his effective call to us and brings us into new life and union with Christ by grace (Eph. 2:5). It's a call out of something: the bondage and blindness of sin. And it's a call into something: renewed fellowship with the God who created us. When we cut to the chase, we realize that the One who calls has done it all.

Charles Spurgeon discovered this prior call in a memorable manner one evening when he was "sitting in the house of God" :

The thought struck me, How did you come to be a Christian ? I sought the Lord. But how did you come to seek the Lord ? The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, How came I to pray ? I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. How came I to read the Scriptures ? I did read them, but what led me to do so ? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that he was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, "I ascribe my change wholly to God."

What Spurgeon grasped and held on to through years of fruitful ministry was that before we do, God has done. In everything, God is "at the bottom of it all!"

### **Getting a Grip on the Gospel**

"Okay," you might be saying, "I got it, Dave. My soteriology's locked down. But I'm looking to move beyond that—I want a role where I can help others get what I've got."



But that's the trap. We assume the gospel, and then dedicate ourselves more to the special call of ministry. We stop reading books about the atonement and start reading books on leadership. We want to be relevant, so we study culture more than the cross. There's no growth metric we can't cite, no new church models we're not familiar with, no leadership trends we aren't tracking.

Here's the irony: those called to preach the gospel can be the most susceptible to drift from the gospel. That's why it's vital for the man pondering a call to ministry to have a firm and sustained grip on the gospel. Edmund Clowney's words on this are just as relevant for the church planter as they are for the pastor celebrating a silver anniversary in ministry:

There is no call to the ministry that is not first a call to Christ. You dare not lift your hands to place God's name in blessing on his people until you have first clasped them in penitent petition for his saving grace. Until you have done that the issue you face is not really your call to the ministry. It is your call to Christ.

Your question of calling isn't merely subsequent to the call to Christ; it's essentially tied to it. In fact, it's only because our primary call is secured through the gospel by the cross that we can rejoice in exploring a ministry call.

Getting a firm and tightening grip on the gospel clears the mental path to more helpfully ponder your call. Considering a call to ministry can be like slashing through a jungle overgrown with questions—big, hairy questions like: Who am I? What if I wash out as a pastor? Do I have what it takes? What should my priorities be? The gospel cuts through the overgrowth and ensures we're thinking about ourselves and our ministry rightly. It stirs faith, nurtures hope, and helps us hear the Caller clearly. Let's look at some of the answers the gospel brings to those big hairy questions, and why they're important.

### **The Gospel Supplies My Identity**

Imagine being called to ministry by none other than Jesus himself—in person. It happened to Paul that way. He was marching to Damascus as a hired gun with Christians in his crosshairs, when Christ appeared with news of a career change. Paul was to become “a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). A call to global ministry from the risen Christ would tend to become an identity marker, don't you think? After all, a supernatural call is a brilliant branding strategy.

There's no question Paul's call was unique and essential to his ministry. But what fundamentally defined him was neither what he was called to do, nor his education or social standing, nor his career or background. Knowing Christ as Lord surpassed everything: “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8).

Being chosen for ministry is great. Being chosen for sonship is infinitely greater. Who am I? I'm one with Christ, no matter what happens with any specific sense of calling I may have. My union with him is the most important and meaningful thing about me. Keeping this as our source of identity is essential.

Don't believe me? Just talk to a man who's had to step out of ministry. Maybe a church can't afford to keep him. Perhaps his health is an issue. Or maybe he's under discipline. It doesn't matter. A man finds out where he truly locates his identity when he can no longer do the ministry he felt called to do. As we used to say on our pastoral team, we live with our resignation letters on our desks. If during transition time my fingers have to be pried off my ministry, something went colossally wrong. That's why I need to keep my grip on the gospel. It supplies my main identity.

### **The Gospel Is Adequate—I'm Not**

There's a guy I want to speak to just now. He's the one who thinks God might be calling him to be a pastor, but he's scared stiff about it. He wonders if he can cut it. Maybe he's making a good salary and doesn't want to take the financial hit. Or he's seen leaders crash and burn in moral failure. Whatever the reason, he's looking for a place to hide—as if God will see his reluctance and move on to the next unsuspecting victim . uh, candidate.

I can relate. During those years when I was wrestling over whether I was called to ministry, I was the head of security for a major department store. One time I had to tussle a guy to the ground because he was stealing clothes from the store. It wasn't my most pastoral moment. He got bloody, the cops came, reports were taken.

A few days later I had a strong impression that I was unqualified for pastoral ministry because I was a man of bloodshed. That may sound nuts to you, but when you're an impressionable young security guard hoping to become a pastor, strange thoughts can speak pretty loudly. Fortunately, a pastor got hold of me and set me straight. "Dave," he said, "you're an idiot." Good pastors know just what to say, and that's what I needed. But I'll never forget feeling unqualified, unworthy, too stained for what Paul called "a noble task" (1 Tim. 3:1).

Maybe that's how you're thinking. Well, buddy, here's what the gospel says: we're not perfect—we're not even capable—but God loves to use human inability as an earthly canvas to display his glory. We see this in our salvation, where God supplied everything except the sin from which we're saved. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). When we have a grip on the gospel, grace turns our eyes away from our fears and weaknesses and places them on God. We're actually able to hear the pastoral call because of the gospel.

But it doesn't stop there. Ministry trepidation exists because you expect a bad outcome—you're afraid you'll do something wrong or fail in some spectacular fashion because of your inadequacy. It's true that you're unworthy, incapable, and filled with potential failures.

But here's the good news: acknowledging those limitations is what makes you a fit vessel and starts you on the path of fruitful service. God designs gospel ministry in a manner that diminishes us and exalts him. "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong ... so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor. 1:27, 29).

Don't treat your fears and weaknesses as if they're some strange phenomenon previously unknown in the annals of Christian history. God arranges ministry so it flows from weakness. He appoints the least likely to have the greatest impact. Maybe your apprehension is just a sign that you're getting the point.

### **The Gospel Sets My Priorities**

Does your sense of call orbit around your own abilities, vision, or performance? The gospel call says infinitely more about the glory and grace of God than it does about those things. When a man is called by God to ministry, he does well to remember that both his salvation and his service come from God and are aimed at returning us to God. As Os Guinness reminds us, "First and foremost we are called to Someone (God), not to something (such as motherhood, politics, or teaching) or to somewhere (such as the inner city or Outer Mongolia)."

Our salvation isn't simply a contractual arrangement where we form a partnership to achieve certain goals. God's call carries his design and intention—specifically, to join us into a love relationship with himself through his Son in which we're growing in intimacy with, knowledge of, and conformity to Jesus. This will always, day in and day out, remain our primary and most important calling. And it's this relationship with God—not our intellect, competencies, or gifts—that will always position us best to serve God's people most effectively. God's reconciling work positions us to engage God and his Word and then supply others with what we read, hear, and experience. All other calls bow to this one.

Once after a church service where I preached, I was cornered by someone who was considering membership. The young man asked, "What can you tell me about your devotional life?" My first thought—well, from your question, apparently it doesn't help my preaching—remained wisely stifled as I commended his inquiry. Somehow this insightful listener had come to discern something many believers never grasp: few things could summarize my relationship with God quicker than a brief rundown of my devotional life. And to this chap, my active, fervent relationship with God mattered.

A lot of guys look at pastoral ministry as a blissful mixture of study and sweet communion with God. And it is, if you can find time between meetings, counseling, phone calls, administration, hospital visits . . . a seemingly endless list. There's a reason why we build "consistent devotional life" into every pastor's job description at our church, and follow up on it in our fellowship groups. It's just as hard for a pastor to die to himself and live as if he really

needs God as it is for a politician, computer programmer, or police officer. But pastors keep God at the center in public when they're pursuing him passionately in private.

### **The Gospel Is What Really Matters**

I just read a story in a news journal last week. It seems a brother and sister in London were cleaning their parents' home when they found an old vase. They were tickled over the quaint relic, set it aside, and eventually turned it over to an auction house for sale. There they discovered it was valued at almost \$2 million.

But get this. In the auction, spirited bidding drove the price up to \$69.5 million. Their relic turned out to be an eighteenth-century Qing dynasty vase. I have no idea what that means, but it always seems as though anything with "dynasty" in its name immediately becomes expensive. The comment from the auction spokeswoman really caught my eye. She said the brother and sister "had no idea" what they'd found, and when the final bid was official, they "had to go out of the room and have a breath of fresh air."

Christians are like that. We discover something valuable in the gospel—precious enough to save us—but we don't recognize its true worth. Like the brother and sister, we possess it but don't perceive it. What was said of them could be said of many believers: we have no idea what we have.

God raises up leaders to ensure the gospel is preached, applied, and valued in the daily life of the church. The purpose of ministry proceeds from and orbits around the prized evangelion, the gospel. Remove the gospel, and authentic biblical ministry disappears.

Think about it this way: if there were no gospel, no saving work of Jesus Christ, would there be a need for pastors? Apparently so, if you drive around any town in America and see the amount of churches and other religious buildings filled with things that have nothing to do with Jesus Christ. Or drop in on religious classes at any number of denominationally affiliated universities, and you can make a pretty good case that if we junk the gospel, pastors still have plenty of work to do.

Remove the gospel, and authentic biblical ministry disappears.

Truth is, gentlemen, if we don't have a gospel, we don't have a job—at least as God sees it (1 Cor. 2:2). We exist because God's people need men to gather them into local families and preach to them the Word of God in faith and power. Sure, they need to talk about their problems, have people officiate their marriages and funerals, and participate in wholesome family-friendly activities. But all that could happen without pastors. Men are called as church planters, as pastors, to celebrate the worth of Jesus Christ—to make sure it's never said of their congregation in regard to the gospel, "They have no idea what they have."

Brothers, if you love the idea of pastoral ministry because you think you're qualified to help people with their problems, or because you can ponder theology, or because you like the

idea of people coming every week to hear the latest thing you have to say, then serve the church by getting off the bus. Pastoral ministry exists for the proclamation and protection of the gospel for people inside and outside the church. We need to value the gospel and know what we have so we can share it with others.

John Bunyan sat in jail for twelve years rather than allowing the gospel to be censored in his preaching. His thinking was, Why be a free pastor if I can't preach the gospel ? It was clear to Bunyan: removing the gospel made pastoral ministry irrelevant. Is it clear to you ? Do you know what you have ?

### **Is the Gospel Enough ?**

Are you wondering when you'll get off the bench and into the big game ? Do you realize that the works of ministry (loving God and others, witnessing, serving in the local church, discipleship, etc.) are all expressions of the work of the cross in our lives, not of a specific ministry call ?

As a believer, you already have a full-time ministry: to bear fruit as a disciple of Jesus Christ (John 15:1–16). In the rest of this book I want to stoke a passion for pastoral ministry. But whether you ever hear that summons to shepherd God's people, you've already heard the gospel—the most important thing that will ever be said to you. And you've heard it from the Caller himself.

Is that good enough for you ?

### **For Additional Study**

The Cross of Christ, John R. W. Stott

What Is the Gospel ? , Greg Gilbert

Pierced for Our Transgressions, Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach

Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ, John Piper

## **The Godward Focus of Biblical Counseling**

**By Douglas Bookman Chapter 4 of *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically***

By definition, the biblical counselor is one who is persuaded of and allegiant to a Christian worldview, that is, one who functions within a frame of reference that consciously sees all of the realities and relationships of life from a perspective that is biblically coherent and consistent, and thus honors the God of Scriptures. The one element of such a worldview that most dramatically distinguishes it from all pretenders is the commitment to a theocentric perspective on all of life and thought. Thus any model of counseling that is authentically biblical will be framed, designed, and executed in happy submission to the biblical demand that our lives be lived out entirely for the glory of God! In short, biblical counseling is animated by a godward focus.

The temptation today, even within the Christian community, is to do otherwise, to conduct counseling with a primary focus on someone or something other than God. But the biblical counselor must be committed to a preeminently godward focus in counseling. Why? There are three basic reasons: (1) because God demands it; (2) because the natural exaltation of self is destructive; and (3) because the soul-satisfying life God intends for His children can only be found through Jesus' spiritual paradox: deny self and focus on God.

### **THE MORAL IMPERATIVE**

Simply stated, a godward focus must be zealously maintained in biblical counseling because God demands that it be so. In one of the Old Testament's most precise articulations of the covenant-keeping nature of God, YHWH declared through the prophet Isaiah,

Thus says God the LORD,  
*Who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
Who spread out the earth and its offspring,  
Who gives breath to the people on it,  
And spirit to those who walk in it, ...  
"I am the LORD, that is My name;  
I will not give My glory to another,  
Nor My praise to graven images."* (*Is. 42:5, 8*)

Later in the same section of prophecy, as YHWH foretold the mighty deliverance He would accomplish on behalf of His covenant people, He reiterated this profound

reality: “For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act; / For how can My name be profaned? / And My glory I will not give to another” ([Is. 48:11](#)).

God, who has made Himself known in Scripture, is jealous for His own glory ([Deut. 4:24](#)). He is a sovereign God who demands that people acknowledge Him as God and honor Him as the Creator and Sovereign of all the universe. This moral imperative to honor God is most often communicated in Scripture in contexts relating to God’s glory. The Hebrew term for “glory” is *chabod*, which basically means “to be heavy, weighty.”<sup>1</sup> Deriving the idea of glory, dignity, or personal worth from the concept of weightiness is typical of Hebrew progression of thought. To the Semitic mind, honor or dignity could not be reduced to a purely ideal quality; rather, those concepts depended for their significance upon the concrete concept of something “weighty in a man which gives him importance.”<sup>2</sup> Although the term *chabod* is used with various literal connotations in the Old Testament, the concept most often conveyed by the term is that of a weighty person: one who is honorable, impressive, and worthy of respect.<sup>3</sup> This connotation prevails in more than half the occurrences of the term in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the biblical notion of glory involves more than intrinsic dignity or value; it includes the visible representation of that intrinsic value. For example, *chabod* connotes not only a rich man’s dignity and standing in his community but the riches that demonstrated his dignity (livestock, silver, and gold in [Gen. 13:2](#); the wealth Jacob carried away from Laban in [Gen. 31:1](#));<sup>5</sup> not only the honor of the priestly office but the distinctive garments worn by the priests to manifest the dignity of their office ([Ex. 28:2, 40](#));<sup>6</sup> not only the unique and infinite splendor and majesty of the person of YHWH, but the ineffable physical glory-cloud that testified of His covenant-keeping nature and sovereign rule in the midst of His people.<sup>7</sup> In sum, the term *chabod* speaks not only of intrinsic dignity and worth but of the external and tangible manifestation of that worth.

Thus when YHWH insists that He “will not give His *glory* to another” ([Is. 42:3](#); [48:11](#)), there is more at stake than the intrinsic worth of His sovereign person. Based on God’s use of the term *glory* in those statements, we conclude that His demand is not only that we personally acknowledge His unique dignity and infinite perfection, but that we consciously and publicly parade those majestic realities. Indeed, it is the stewardship of every child of God not only to embrace the truths that God has revealed concerning Himself but to deliberately and consistently order every aspect of life to display the grace, justice, and faithfulness of God, to whom that child belongs.<sup>8</sup>

To clarify this concept, consider how God publicly maintained His glory (that is, His reputation) in various narratives of the Old Testament. For instance, the drama of deliverance from Egypt, which culminated in the miracle of the Red Sea,

was carefully framed by YHWH so that He would “be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen” ([Ex. 14:17–18](#)).<sup>9</sup> The ten plagues that immediately and causally preceded the Red Sea experience were so ordered and timed by YHWH that the Pharaoh gradually steeled himself to Moses’ demands. All of which prepared the way for Pharaoh’s command—a command as militarily and spiritually stupid as any in history—that his chariot forces pursue the fleeing Israelites across the miraculously dried up Red Sea. When Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and the waters covered the Egyptians, God did indeed get glory upon Egypt. And He answered the arrogant question posed by the Pharaoh some months earlier, “Who is this YHWH that I should obey His voice to let Israel go?” ([Ex. 5:2](#)). In effect, by miraculously delivering Israel from Egypt, YHWH confronted the world of that day, and of centuries to come, with the indisputable evidence of His might and His character. (Compare the reaction of Rahab in [Joshua 2:9–14](#) and the flawed remembrance of the Red Sea evinced by the Philistines some four hundred years later in [1 Samuel 4:8](#).)

Again, when the southern kingdom of Judah was taken captive to Babylon, the name of YHWH was in severe jeopardy of being dishonored. God had covenanted with Israel that if they persevered in rebellion and disobedience He would cause them to be taken captive by a “nation of fierce countenance” ([Deut. 28:49–57](#); see [1 Kin. 8:46](#)). And yet, given the universal superstition of the time that if one nation were defeated by another it was because the gods of the victorious nation were more powerful than those of the vanquished, God’s name was in danger of being dishonored if He kept that promise of judgment upon His covenant people. But God intervened to publicly preserve His glory through the man Daniel.

As a young man, Daniel was taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar in the first stage of Judah’s deportation to Babylon (about 605 B.C., see [Daniel 1](#)). Later, God enabled Daniel to provide the content and interpretation of the Babylonian monarch’s dream, but only after all of the king’s pagan soothsayers had confessed their absolute inability to do so (ch. 2). Thus YHWH was publicly honored as Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged the power of the God worshiped by Daniel and his friends (vv. 46–47).

Some decades later, the prophet interpreted another dream for the king. This time King Nebuchadnezzar wrote a decree to be read throughout all the kingdom that told the story of his own madness and thus honored Daniel’s God as “the Most High ... who lives forever.” The king’s decree concluded with this encomium of praise to YHWH.

*For His dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
And His kingdom endures from generation to generation.*



*And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,  
But He does according to His will in the host of heaven  
And among the inhabitants of earth;  
And no one can ward off His hand,  
Or say to Him, "What hast Thou done?" (Dan. 4:34-35)*

*Thus did Nebuchadnezzar publicly and universally declare the glory of YHWH.<sup>10</sup>*

The historical examples from Scripture could be multiplied, but with these the point is made: when YHWH insists He will not share His glory with another, He wants us to understand not only that He possesses such personal majesty, but also that it is His sovereign will that His majesty be publicly displayed. It is His concern and must be our concern.

### ***Obedience and Fallenness***

There are profound implications in this mandate to deliberately and publicly reflect the God whom we serve. It means that the children of God are under scriptural obligation to see themselves as vehicles of God's glory, as mirrors with which the Sovereign of the universe has chosen to reflect His glory, as conduits to display Him before a watching world. It is morally imperative that believers frame their lives, order their priorities, fashion their relationships, and discipline their souls in ways appropriate to this relationship and responsibility.

Of course, the infernal fly in the ointment is the fallenness of mankind. Although it is cosmically appropriate for human creatures to content themselves with playing the moon to the Creator's sun and to be satisfied with the privilege of reflecting YHWH's glory (even though in so doing they are confessing that they have no glory of their own), people are not willing to do so. Indeed, it is the stuff of fallenness to be offended by God's claim that He alone is worthy of honor, and instead to exalt oneself, to thrust oneself onto the throne of one's private universe. The Luciferian rebellion is reiterated moment by moment in the souls of the unredeemed offspring of Adam when they, in effect, intone the most cardinal credo of fallenness:

*I will raise my throne above the stars of God,  
And I will sit on the mount of assembly  
In the recesses of the north.  
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;  
I will make myself like the Most High. (Is. 14:13-14)<sup>11</sup>*

It might be argued, in fact, that this proclivity to exalt self is the essence of sinfulness. As Strong observed,

Sin, therefore, is not merely a negative thing, or an absence of love to God. It is a fundamental and positive choice or preference of self instead of God, as the object of affection and the supreme end of being. Instead of making God the centre of his life, surrendering himself unconditionally to God and possessing himself only in subordination to God's will, the sinner makes himself the centre of his life, sets himself directly against God, and constitutes his own interest the supreme motive and his own will the supreme rule.<sup>12</sup>

This is the flesh that even in the believer sets its desire against the Spirit ([Gal. 5:17](#)); the lofty thing that raises itself up against Christ ([2 Cor. 10:5](#)); and the old self that has been corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit ([Eph. 4:22](#)).

It is in such a moral universe that biblical counselors must minister, indeed must consciously conceive of themselves as ministering. On the one hand, the omnipotent Creator and Sovereign of the universe demands that finite humans honor Him as such, and it is altogether appropriate that He receive that honor. On the other hand, every fallen person, whether unredeemed or redeemed, is possessed of an Adamic nature that longs to be like God, that compels each one of us to usurp the place of honor and dominion that rightly belongs only to God, despite the fact that it is altogether inappropriate that any person receive such honor.

### ***God Alone Is God***

By reason of these two factors, biblical counselors must constantly and consciously arm their spirit, inform their instruction, and constrain their counselees with a commitment to glorify God and God alone. Such a commitment will compel us to exult in the truth that God alone is God, and to acknowledge joyfully that every creature of God is under sacred obligation both to resist the temptation to exalt self and to honor God as God!

All of this might be more simply expressed in this short rendering: ***God is God, and I am not!*** God alone is eternal; He knows the end from the beginning, and thus He is able to comprehend exactly how all things will in fact “work together for good,” no matter how distressing some of those things might seem to us (given that we can know only today, and that but haltingly and partially). God alone is sovereign; we can depend on Him to order the affairs of the moral universe so as to silence the great accuser of the brethren and to cause His children to grow in the

grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. God alone is true altogether; His word is life and light, and thus are we eternally well-advised to cast ourselves entirely upon His promises and to find in His word (and in His word alone) all things that pertain to life and godliness; even though we will be set upon from every quarter by theories and truth-claims that contravene the Word of God and are so seductive as to be alluring almost beyond resistance.

But *God is God, and I am not!* Therefore, God deserves to be honored, worshiped, trusted, feared, and loved as God. Our responsibility and privilege is to glorify Him: to enhance His reputation in the minds of rational creatures and to live our lives and order our days so that all who encounter us will have a higher regard for God than they might have had they never encountered us! But our besetting temptation is to glorify self: to live life as if we were the center of the universe, as if the enhancement of our reputation were a meritorious pursuit, and as if our contentment were the greatest good of the cosmos. That is why every believer must continually be confronted with the demand that God be honored as God. And that is why biblical counseling must be framed by a conscious, undeviating commitment to the glory of God!

## SELFISH PREDISPOSITIONS RESULT IN DESTRUCTION

A conscious commitment to a godward focus in biblical counseling is also imperative because destructive consequences are certain to follow when people exalt themselves rather than God. This truth is particularly significant in biblical counseling, because so many who seek our help have, in fact, plunged themselves into just such destruction. They have fulfilled the longing to aggrandize self, and the price to be paid for such spiritual rebellion is the most profound tragedy of the human soul. In short, the temptation to exalt self is at once terribly seductive and certainly destructive.

### *Jonah: Tempted, Fallen, Restored*

The prophet Jonah struggled with the temptation to exalt himself over God, to pursue his own desires rather than obey God's commands, and he lost that struggle. The prophet high-handedly rejected God's Word and became so morally inept that he convinced himself he could run from the presence of God. He discovered in rather dramatic fashion, however, that YHWH was no stranger to Joppa or to the sea-lanes that led to Tarshish. The result of the prophet's rebellion was three days and three nights in the belly of a great fish!

Jonah did come to repentance, of course, and his prayer of contrition and confession is recorded in [Jonah 2](#). In that prayer Jonah called out in distress after he had been cast into "the deep, into the heart of the seas" (v. 3). He bemoaned the

fact that because of his own wickedness he found himself in the “great deep” with seaweed wrapped about his head (v. 5). Even as he was “fainting away,” as the breath of life was about to slip from him, he “remembered the LORD,” fastened his soul’s eye upon the temple in which YHWH had placed His name (v. 7), and acknowledged his foolishness and sin. Then God responded by rescuing the prophet from the great fish.

In Jonah’s psalm of repentance (vv. 2–9) we find a brief statement that speaks directly to the issue at hand: “They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercies” (v. 8, KJV). In other words, sin is both seductive and destructive.

### *Sin: Deceptive and Delicious*

In speaking of the seductive nature of sin, Jonah acknowledged that he had “observed lying vanities.” The Hebrew verb translated “observe” means “to give themselves up to” or “devote themselves to.”<sup>13</sup> It suggests dogged determination or clinging to something in spite of influences to do otherwise.<sup>14</sup> The lying vanity Jonah clung to was “false love for his country, that he would not have his people go into captivity, when God would; would not have Nineveh preserved, the enemy of his country.”<sup>15</sup> But the phrase “lying vanities” is more generic, it encompasses “all things which man makes into idols or objects of trust.”<sup>16</sup>

Human devices contrary to the will of God are “lying vanities;” empty, they bring no satisfaction; lying, they promise peace and safety, but bring misery and horrible troubles. So Eve found, so Pharaoh, so Israel when they went after the ways of the heathen. So Jonah himself. So all who forsake the Fountain of living waters and hew out to themselves broken cisterns that can hold no water. Worldly devices to get happiness apart from God are indeed “vanity of vanities.”<sup>17</sup>

With regard to the destructive nature of sin, Jonah acknowledged in his prayer that by clinging to empty, self-serving lies he had forsaken his “own mercy”; he had forfeited the goodness and grace that God longed to bestow upon him.

In God is salvation; out of him is destruction. There is something appalling in the doom which is here described as overtaking those who, when the Saviour may be found, turn their back upon him, in order to seek and to serve other gods. Such are said to “forsake their own mercy.” They act against their highest interests; they refuse the richest blessing; they abjure their truest Friend.<sup>18</sup>

Keil developed this same thought with reference to Jonah's warning concerning "forsaking one's own mercy":

The soul of man cannot be satisfied with husks. For God's servants to follow them is to forsake their own mercy. It is for the prodigal son to change the father's house for the society of rioters and harlots: "Many sorrows shall be to the wicked: but he that trusteth in the Lord, mercy shall compass him about" (Ps. 32:10). The way of duty is ever the way of safety, peace, and comfort; neglected duty is a sure fore-runner of trouble; an evil conscience can never be the harbinger of sweet content.<sup>19</sup>

The significance, then, of Jonah's confession is simply this: those who stubbornly cling to seductive lies deprive themselves of the mercy and goodness God longs to shower upon them. From the belly of Sheol (Jon. 2:2), Jonah acknowledged the God-dishonoring wickedness and soul-destroying foolishness of his stubbornness and repented.

### ***"Lying Vanities": Empty, Self-Serving Lies***

Jonah obeyed a lie. That lie was two-fold: (1) he believed that his desire for the destruction of Nineveh was more worthy than YHWH's desire for the repentance of that city; and (2) he believed that he could actually flee from the "presence of YHWH" (1:3). It is difficult to accept that Jonah actually *believed* that lie; he was, after all, a true prophet of YHWH (2 Kin. 14:25). It defies credulity to suggest that a ministering prophet was persuaded that his desire transcended the command of God in worthiness or importance, or that such a spokesman for God consciously conceived of YHWH as a local deity so bound by space that a person could escape His presence by taking ship. But the issue whether Jonah actually believed the lie and whether he would have consciously affirmed the credibility of its claims is moot; the historical fact, recorded in the Bible, is that he obeyed the lie. Jonah confessed that because of his own desires ("lying vanities": empty and self-serving lies) he rendered himself so spiritually foolish that he behaved as if the lie were true ("they that observe": cling to, embrace, cherish in spite of all influences to the contrary) and thus brought suffering upon himself.

The horrifying spiritual reality of Jonah's experience is this: the power of a lie is not intrinsic in its inherent credibility but in its attractiveness. The pivotal moral issue is not whether people will believe the lie but whether they will obey it! The father of lies learned in the Garden that a lie of almost infinite implausibility ("in the day ye eat ... ye shall be as gods," Gen. 3:5) will seduce if it is sufficiently tantalizing

("good for food ... pleasant to the eyes ... to be desired to make one wise," v. 6). In short, a lie is powerful not because it is deceptive but because it is delicious.<sup>20</sup>

To make the same point from a different perspective, a lie is effective only because of our selfish predisposition, because as fallen creatures we are so bent upon pandering to our own desires that we will render ourselves so spiritually foolish as to obey a lie we would never consciously affirm. But that selfish predisposition is in every case destructive. When people determine to abandon what they know to be the truth in order to embrace a beguiling lie, they forsake God's mercy. That is the testimony of the prophet Jonah.

Anyone who counsels will, by the nature of that ministry, confront people who have obeyed seductive lies, and who have forsaken their own mercy. They have obeyed lies because of their selfish predisposition. In other words, they have rejected a godward focus in favor of a self-ward focus, and the result has been spiritual, emotional, physical, and/or relational destruction. They are living in the middle of [Jonah 2:8](#), but their only hope is found in [Jonah 2:9](#). They have set their eyes upon themselves and have brought havoc into their lives. We must confront them with this wickedness and challenge them to set their eyes upon God, to obey His word, to live their lives for His glory, and in this to confess and experience that "Salvation is of the Lord"!

### ***Lying Vanities in Christian Counseling***

The tragedy in the contemporary marketplace is that many models of Christian counseling are based on theories more accurately subsumed under the error of [Jonah 2:8](#) ("lying vanities") than under the truth of [Jonah 2:9](#) ("Salvation is of the Lord!"). Wittingly or not, some counselors have proven themselves to be blind leaders of the blind; they have acquiesced to ear-tickling notions that are sub-biblical and God-dishonoring, notions that only make people more comfortable in their wickedness.

It is distressing to contemplate the catalogue of "lying vanities" that have insinuated themselves into sundry models of "Christian" counseling: models that legitimize a narcissistic preoccupation with self; models that fabricate a dimension to the human psyche that cannot be proven to exist, but the acknowledgment of which has the insidious practical effect of making individuals the victims of forces for which they cannot be held accountable, and thus of denying that people are morally responsible for the way they act, think, or feel; models that validate the notion that finite creatures have a right to be angry with the infinite Judge of the universe (who has, in fact, assured us that He will do right, [Gen. 18:25](#)), and that there can be spiritual and therapeutic benefit to expressing such an attitude of rage against God; models that speak of emotional healing and growth in relationships

and in maturity while deliberately eschewing any appeal to the Holy Spirit or to the standard graces vouchsafed us by God.

All of these are lies! They are not intellectually compelling to anyone operating within a scriptural worldview, but because they make people comfortable in their sin they are extremely seductive. Furthermore, because it is a fixed reality of the moral universe that all who observe lying vanities will *a/ways* forsake their own mercy, these lies are also destructive.

For both the counselor and the counselee, the means to counter these destructive lies is to make a deliberate and practical commitment to focus on the glory of God. This was the delivering discovery of the prophet Jonah. When he focused on his selfish desires he found himself in a mess, but when he recognized the destructiveness of his selfish predisposition, when he confessed the enslaving character of the lying vanities he had embraced, when he acknowledged that in clinging to those vanities he had forsaken God's goodness and brought destruction upon himself, Jonah found release. Millions have followed his example, people who would happily confess that all the glory and praise for the relief they found belongs to God alone.

## THE DYNAMICS OF JESUS' SPIRITUAL PARADOX

Well into His eighteen-month ministry in Galilee, when opposition had increased dramatically and it was apparent that time was short, Jesus called to Himself the twelve men He had authorized as apostles. He empowered them to work miracles as proof of that authorization and then dispatched them to "preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand!' " ([Matt. 10:7](#)). Anticipating the difficulties His apostles would encounter, however, the Lord armed them with a promise as enigmatic as it was blessed. It was a paradoxical promise, at once the most rudimentary governing principle of the moral universe as framed by God and the greatest stumbling stone to mortals, who insist on defining that moral universe based on finite perspectives and distorted human values. What was that paradoxical promise? "He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it" ([Matt. 10:39](#)).

On three other occasions recorded in the Gospels, Jesus proclaimed this principle. Some weeks after the Lord had authorized the apostles, He traveled with them to a remote area known as Caesarea-Philippi. There He told them for the first time that He would suffer many things of the Jewish leaders and would die (16:21). The disciples were horrified. Then Jesus followed this unhappy revelation with the warning that they, too, would have to be willing to take up a cross, deny themselves, and follow Him ([Matt. 16:24](#); [Mark 8:34](#); [Luke 9:23](#)). As part of that challenge, Jesus said,

*For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it;  
and whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it. (Mark 8:3)*

*And again, in the midst of His final trip to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, Jesus confronted His antagonists, the Pharisees, with this cryptic warning:*

*Whoever seeks to keep his life shall lose it,  
and whoever loses his life shall preserve it. (Luke 17:33)*

Finally, during the final Passion Week, Jesus addressed “certain Greeks” who had sought Him out. Contemplating His own impending death, Jesus said,

He who loves his life loses it;  
and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal. (John 12:25)

On at least four different occasions, while addressing three different audiences, our Lord uttered this hard saying. To finite humans, these are difficult words: paradoxical at best, nonsensical at worst. But they are, in fact, the words of the Savior Himself and they are words that communicate a truth central to His teaching about living successfully.

### ***Losing Life—Finding Life***

To understand Christ's promise we need to consider two nuances of the word *life* that are at stake.<sup>21</sup> The warning is that whoever wishes to save his or her life (that is, temporal, material life) will lose it (that is, eternal blessedness). The promise is that whoever is willing to lose life (again, temporal matters) for the sake of the Savior will, in fact, find life (again, eternally significant matters). Indeed, Hort insisted that “this ‘paradoxical’ saying gets its point from the fact that men call by the name of ‘life’ that which is not truly life: ‘he that wishes to save his ‘life’ (i.e. life in the narrower sense) will lose his true ‘life’ (i.e. life in its highest sense).”<sup>22</sup> Morison acknowledged this same distinction; he paraphrased the warning: “In grasping at the shadow he shall infallibly lose the substance.”<sup>23</sup>

The statement is paradoxical, then, only because people do not comprehend what constitutes real life. They are fully persuaded that life consists in the things that a person has; Jesus said it does not (Luke 12:15). They live under the delusion that satisfaction lies in accomplishing goals, establishing a reputation, exercising



great power, and amassing much wealth; Jesus stated simply that the person who learns to hunger and thirst after righteousness is blessed, because that person will be filled (that is, satisfied, [Matt. 5:6](#)). The soulish individuals, who have persuaded themselves that happiness and contentment are to be found in the present world, are compelled by the force of their own abominable logic to set their eyes on this world.

But the dynamic of Jesus' spiritual paradox constrains us to focus on the glory of God rather than upon the gratification of our own desires. The rationale for such a selfless ethic is as uncomplicated to the eye of faith as it is inscrutable to the natural man; it is as compelling to one impelled by the Spirit as it is repugnant to one controlled by the flesh. That rationale is simply this: "Whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's sake shall save it!" In other words, the only way to find a fruitful and contented life is to give one's self away to God ("My sake") and to others ("the gospel's sake").

It might be argued that there is egocentrism latent in this ethic, that giving one's life away with the motive of getting it back is only selfishness once removed. But this argument is based on the mistaken notion that God is displeased if people are happy, that God wants them to be miserable, and, thus, that it is morally inappropriate for anyone to long for or strive for happiness. In fact, God is a good and loving God who yearns for His creatures to find the soul-satisfaction He has provided for them. The univocal testimony of Scripture is that God's heart longs for each person to find contentment. Indeed, God so loved the world that He gave His own Son in order to provide such soul-satisfying peace. Wickedness lies not in the desire to find contentment of soul but in the determination to find it at the expense of God's standards and mandates. God takes immeasurable delight in those who determine to obey Him and by means of that obedience to know the peace that transcends human comprehension.

### ***Focusing on God***

So we see again the necessity of a focus upon the glory of God in the ministry of counseling. Tragedy will certainly befall people who live each day in an attempt to find satisfaction, for in that very effort they will lose it! When these soul-sick individuals come to us for counseling, we need to encourage them to honor the dynamic of Jesus' spiritual paradox; that is, to redirect their focus, to set their soul's gaze first of all upon God and then upon those about them, and then to order their lives in ways consistent with that focus. Lamentably, the effect of much counseling today is to reinforce the counselee's focus upon self. Exegetical and theological acrobatics are attempted to justify this strategy, but such efforts notwithstanding,

this counsel is twice grievous: it is explicitly condemned by the Scriptures, and it is disastrous to the counselee.

How much wiser and God-honoring it is to acknowledge the authority of Jesus' person and the truth of His words, and to prove the life-changing power of the spiritual paradox He gave to us.

The way of self-crucifixion and sanctification may seem foolishness and waste to the world, just as burying good seed-corn seems waste to the child and the fool. But there never lived the man who did not find that, by sowing to the Spirit, he reaped life everlasting.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, the spirit of the biblical counselor must be like that expressed by the psalmist David: "Be thou exalted, O God above the heavens; let thy glory be above all the earth" ([Ps. 57:5, KJV](#)). Indeed, the primary goal of counselor must be to see this same spirit functioning as the controlling attitude in counselee's lives. Only as a person's heart becomes overwhelmed with the desire articulated by the psalmist and is consumed with the prayer, "Be thou exalted, O God," is that person going to know the peace God longs to give to His children.

The realities of the moral universe demand that I live my life out in every way for His honor rather than for my own; after all, God is God, and I am not! But the deepest need of my soul also constrains me to honor God as God, to submit to His standards and cherish His instruction; only as I thus hunger and thirst after righteousness will I be filled. Indeed, as Tozer has reminded us:

There is a logic behind God's claim to preeminence. That place is His by every right in earth or heaven. While we take to ourselves the place that is His, the whole course of our lives is out of joint. Nothing will or can restore order till our hearts make the great decision: God shall be exalted above.<sup>25</sup>

John MacArthur, *MacArthur Pastor's Library on Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005).

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## **Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands**

### **by Paul David Tripp**

#### **Chapter 9 – Getting to Know People**

Everyone felt like they knew Betty and Brad. Their presence was so central to the life of our church that no gathering seemed official without them. I had spent many hours in meetings with Brad. I had been impressed by how quietly practical he was. We had picnicked together as families, shared evening meals, and worked together on Christian school projects. We knew their children and their extended family well.

Late one autumn evening, Brad called me to go out for coffee, making it clear that he wanted to do it right then. I heard the urgency in his voice, so I got dressed and we met at a local diner. I arrived first and as I saw Brad enter the diner, I knew that something was seriously wrong.

Brad sat down and said, “I don’t know where to start. I guess I should have done this a long time ago, but I kept thinking that we could work things out. Now we’re in a mess and I don’t know what to do.” He seemed both discouraged and angry. “I’ve put up with her stuff for years,” he said. “It has been an everyday thing, constant demands, and when I don’t do things just the way she wants, there’s hell to pay! There is never a day that I am not in trouble for something. She has called me horrible things in front of our children. Once a month she threatens to leave. For the last week she has been so depressed that she hasn’t gotten out of bed, except to eat a cracker or go to the bathroom. The kids keep asking what is wrong with Mommy, and I’ve made up a thousand stories to cover for her in front of our friends.”

But that wasn’t the worst of it. Brad went on, “A few years ago Betty was making supper and was very angry that I couldn’t help her on a project that night. In the middle of our argument, she threw a saucepan lid at me. I ducked and it flew by me and broke our kitchen window. When I heard that window break, I guess I lost it. I rushed over and slapped her across the face. She responded by kicking me in the groin and we launched into the first of many physical battles. We have been physically fighting ever since. We have broken most of our pottery and lamps and put holes in almost every wall in the house. I have hit Betty so hard that she had to stay out of sight for a week so the bruises could heal. Most of the injuries that you thought were the result of my clumsiness at home repair actually came from Betty.”

“It has really affected our children,” he continued. “Our three boys swing from whiney and demanding to fearful and timid. They hide whenever they feel like trouble is brewing. They almost always disappear when I am expected home. Recently, when we are in the middle of a fight, our seven-year-old has taken to hitting and kicking whichever of us is closest, while screaming, ‘I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.’ Betty is constantly telling me that I am destroying the children, yet she regularly points out to them the things that I do wrong. I am here tonight because I don’t know where Betty is. We had the most horrible fight we have ever had. Our house looks like a war zone. We fought from room to room. We said the most awful things we

could think of and we threw everything we could get our hands on. She is out there now, insanely angry, with all of the debit and credit cards, and a huge bottle of wine.”

It was hard for me to pay attention because Brad’s story was so disorienting. I had known this man for years, yet I knew nothing of what he was telling me now. My mind went to the many hours we had spent with this family. I had assumed I knew them, so I had never asked anything that would give them an opportunity to say anything about the true state of their personal lives. I wondered how this could have gone on for so long without anyone knowing. In that moment I realized that the most personal and important parts of our lives fly under the radar of our typical relationships in the body of Christ. We live frenetically busy lives with activity-based friendships, punctuated only by brief conversations with each other. Now I was sitting across from a friend I did not know.

### **Breaking Through the Casual**

Have you ever thought you knew someone well, only to discover significant details that you did not know at all? Have you ever started to share a story from your own life and been interrupted by someone who said, “I know exactly what you mean!”—but clearly didn’t? Think of someone you believe you know well. Try to identify some of the gaps in your understanding of his or her story. How much do you know of your friend’s family of origin? Do you know where he struggles in his relationship with God or in his understanding of Scripture? What do you know about the quality of her marriage or the struggles she experiences with her husband? If he is single, do you know how he spends his hours alone? If she is a mother, does she think she is a failure? Could your friend be fighting disintegrating relationships at work or long-term problems with his extended family? Perhaps his heart is driven by lust or eaten up with bitterness. Might she harbor deep regret over a past decision or jealousy over the successes of a friend? Are there financial woes or physical problems?

We tend to have permanently casual relationships that never grow into real intimacy. There are things we know about each other, but they fool us into thinking that we know the human beings who live within the borders of those details. So we fail to pursue them with good questions. This sets the stage for all kinds of misunderstandings. Our effectiveness as ambassadors is blunted because we don’t know others well enough to know where change is needed or where God is actively at work.

Think about it. Most of the conversations you had today were mundane and rather self-protective. We spend most of our time talking about things that are of little personal consequence—the weather, politics, sports, and entertainment. There is nothing wrong with this except that it allows us to hide who we really are. A person may be terribly distraught about her marriage, yet when people ask how she is, she will quickly answer, “Fine, how are you?” The person asking doesn’t really want to know and the person answering doesn’t really want to tell. They are co-conspirators in a casual relationship. Whether it is over the back of a

pew, in passing at a school function, or over the phone, we are all skilled at newsy but personally protective conversations.

There are many reasons why our relationships are trapped in the casual. One is that, in our busyness, we despair of squeezing ten dollar conversations into ten cent moments. There are times when we would like to tell our story, but there doesn't seem to be an opportunity to do so. We all deal with the disconnect between our public reputation and our private struggles. We wonder what people would think if they really knew us.

Another reason we keep things casual is that we buy the lie that we are unique and struggle in ways that no one else does. We get tricked by people's public personas and forget that behind closed doors they live real lives just like us. We forget that life for everyone is fraught with disappointment and difficulty, suffering and struggle, trials and temptation. No one is from a perfect family, no one has a perfect job, no one has perfect relationships, and no one does the right thing all the time. Yet we are reluctant to admit our weaknesses to ourselves, let alone to others. We don't want to face what our struggles reveal about the true condition of our hearts.

The Bible teaches that people love darkness rather than light because their actions are evil. We all find the searching light of true friendship a bit intimidating. True friendship calls you out of the darkness of personal privacy into the loving candor of mutual concern. It moves you from being a sealed envelope to being an open letter. The best relationships are built on a foundation of mutual trust-giving and truth-speaking.

Another reason we rarely talk beyond a casual level is because we do not see. The Bible has much to say about how blind we are. Sin is deceitful, causing us to see others with a greater clarity than we see ourselves. Because we tend to believe our own arguments and buy into our own excuses, we are often unaware of how great our need for help really is. We can't bare what we don't see. We think we are okay but wonder how the person next to us can be so unaware of his own sin. This not only distorts our perspective on ourselves, but shapes the way we tell our story to others. It may even lead us to question whether we need to tell our story at all.

Perhaps the simplest reason for our lack of self-disclosing candor is that no one asks. The typical rhythms of our lives mitigate against going below the surface. In the busyness of life it seems intrusive to ask questions that cannot be answered without personal self-disclosure. Yet there is a way in which we all hunger for relationships of that quality. These are the relationships in which the Redeemer does his good work.

We must not let ourselves become comfortable with the casual, where ministry is limited to offering general principles that would fit anyone's story. The genius of personal ministry is that it is personal. It can take the grand themes of the Great Story and apply them with utter specificity to the particulars of an individual's life. Personal ministry is not preaching to a very small congregation. It is the careful ministry of Christ and his Word to the struggles of heart that have been uncovered by good questions from a committed friend. This means that

effective, God-honoring, heart-changing personal ministry is dependent on a rich base of personal information. You cannot minister well to someone you do not know. Christ the Data Gatherer

It may seem like a stretch to think of Christ as a model of data gathering, but that's exactly what he did when he walked among us. This is powerfully portrayed for us in Hebrews 4:14–16.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

This passage encourages us to come to the Wonderful Counselor with the full range of our experiences and the weaknesses they expose. We can come knowing that we will receive mercy and grace appropriate to the need of the moment. This is a promise of personalized help. Christ is able to sympathize with each of our weaknesses. And the Greek word translated “sympathize” here means much more than a flash of compassion or a surge of pity. Our experience of sympathy is usually limited to feeling sorry for someone and being thankful that we’re not in the same boat. But sympathy here means to be moved by what has moved someone else. Christ’s sympathy is so strong that our problems become his. This is much more than feeling sorry for someone in a tough spot. It is understanding what it is like to live in the middle of someone else’s circumstances, coupled with a desire to do whatever is within your power to help him out.

The double negative in the passage (“we do not have . . . who is unable”) is a positive assurance that this is exactly how the Wonderful Counselor responds to us as we struggle with life. It is an amazing comfort to realize that the One we run to “gets it.” He fully understands what we are going through and is motivated to respond with appropriate help. Isn’t this what everyone in trouble wants? You want more than pity, a pat on the back, or some hopeful words. You want someone who is able to grasp what you are talking about and cares enough to help you do something about it. It is a sweet grace to realize that we find all of this in Christ. He is not only our ultimate helper, but our model as well. Only in him do we learn how to interact with people in need.

The Greek word in this passage translated “weaknesses” is also very strong. It is best understood as “the human condition.” The writer of Hebrews is saying that Jesus really understands what it means to live in this fallen world. He understands the full catalog of temptations we face. He understands how difficult and complicated our relationships are. He understands betrayal, rejection, physical pain, and aloneness. Jesus knows what it means to be human. He knows us!

Perhaps you are thinking, But Jesus was perfect! Certainly he was perfect, but this does not mean that he didn't experience the full range of the pressures we face. This is a common misunderstanding. But consider this illustration. Imagine a strong man who performs at a state fair by bending bars of steel. The first bar he picks up is a half inch in diameter. He bends it to a ninety degree angle and it breaks. Then he picks up an inch-thick bar and bends it until the ends of the bar touch, but still it does not break. Which bar endured the most pressure? The obvious answer is the second bar. It absorbed the full force of the man's strength and did not break. On earth, Christ was like that second bar. Because he never gave in, because he did not run away, because he never went where temptation would lead, but stood strong until that moment of temptation was over, he endured the full power of temptation. Christ endured stress, pain, suffering, and sacrifice of an intensity that we will never face because he did not break. He stood strong against sin for us. He endured everything the world could throw at him.

What does all this have to do with data gathering? Look back at Hebrews 4:15: "We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin." Jesus understands us because he entered our world. For thirty-three years, he lived among us, gathering data about the nature of our experience. Not one minute of those years was wasted. Not only was he passing the test that Adam failed, he was also thoroughly acquainting himself with all we would face as we endured life and waited for his return. His years of experience between the stall in Bethlehem and the mound called Golgotha made him a high priest who can fully sympathize with our weaknesses. He entered our world and his understanding is first-hand and complete.

Since Christ is our model for personal ministry, we too want to understand people so that we can serve him in their lives. We too must be committed to entering their worlds. We can begin by taking the time to ask good questions and listen well. Our hope is that others would seek us out and share more of their true struggles, so that they may find, through us, the Lord himself. Entering a person's world enables us to apply the truths of the gospel in a way that is situation- and person-specific.

### **The Problem of Assumptions**

Why don't we ask better questions and take the time to really listen? Why don't we ask people more often what they meant by what they said, or why they did what they did? Why don't we ask people to define their terms or explain their logic? Why don't we ask people more about what they were thinking and feeling? Why don't we get them to talk more about the purposes and desires that shaped their decisions? There are many answers to these questions, but one in particular seems to get in the way of our call to function as the Lord's ambassadors. It is the problem of assumptions.

When you assume, you do not ask. If you do not ask, you open yourself up to a world of invalid conclusions and misunderstandings. You may try to be God's instrument but miss the mark

because you are putting two and two together and getting five—and you don't even know it. Thanks to your assumptions, the person you think you are helping may exist only in your mind.

There are two main reasons we assume too much. One is theological and the other is experiential. Let's look at the theological reason first.

When we approach moments of personal ministry, we do not come empty-handed, but with the theology of Scripture. The theology of the Word not only describes God's plan of redemption, it explains people as well. The Bible knows us, even to the deepest thoughts and motives of our hearts. It dramatically depicts our suffering and our joy, untangling the complexities of human relationships. It depicts human feeling, knowing, and communicating. If you read the Bible, you will know and understand people.

This biblical insight is a great gift, but it is also where we get ourselves into trouble. Knowing fundamental things about people in general should not be confused with knowing the particular individuals God has sent your way. Our rich theological base should not make us lethargic data gatherers. However, because we assume we know people, we can easily fail to ask good questions.

We need to remember that God is not only the Creator of every person and the Revealer of who they are in Scripture, but he is also sovereign over every detail of their lives. Because of God's sovereignty, no two people have exactly the same story. People are at once all the same and dramatically different. Take human noses, for example. Everybody has one, yet no two are exactly alike. God's creative artistry is endless in its variations. All people are similar, yet the more carefully you look, the more you are impressed with how different we are from one another.

The endless variations of our physical bodies also serve as metaphors of our vast internal differences. Think of the endless variety of personalities or the diverse and unexpected ways different minds work. Some of us are mechanical, while others (like me) have neither the mind to figure out how things work nor the hands to fix them. Some of us are almost coldly rational, while others feel their way through life. Imagine the differences in life experience between a tall man and a short one, between someone who is obese and someone who is very thin. Think of the great difference in life experience between a man and a woman, or a thinker and a doer. The range of God's creativity is vast.

God not only uniquely creates each of us, he also sovereignly authors and directs each of our stories. There are familiar elements in all of them, but each person's story is a labyrinth of details that makes each one dramatically different from another. Because of this, you cannot know me only by knowing what Scripture says about me. You will know wonderfully helpful things about me as a human being, but you will not know how these truths are uniquely manifested in my life without asking. We must seek to know one another in a way that recognizes God both as our Creator (universal human truths) and as our sovereign Lord (the unique, individual details). This will not only make us thankful that we come armed with the



truths of Scripture, but it will also drive us to know well the particular person God has sent our way.

The second reason we assume too much is our experience. We speak the same language, share many of the same experiences, live in the same community, and often attend the same church, so it is easy to assume that we know more about each other than we really do. More dangerous is the tendency to confuse similar experience with identical experience. For example, it is safe for me to conclude that you have some kind of family. But when I hear you say the word “family,” it is not safe for me to fill in the details of what that means from my experience and not yours. When we assume an exact correspondence of thoughts, desires, and experiences, we will not ask the questions we need to ask to be useful in God’s hands. We will be left with invalid assumptions about people and we will offer help that does not really fit their needs.

For personal ministry to be effective, the principle is simple: Don’t assume—ask. This is true not only for a good counselor, but for a wise teacher, elder, spouse, parent, or friend as well. Assuming that you already know what you need to know almost always leads to misunderstandings that blunt and derail personal ministry. If you think you can take something for granted, ask anyway. Only then can you be sure that the help you offer will fit this person’s situation and relationships.

### **Making Sure Your Conclusions Are Correct**

In grappling with the reality of shared experience and the temptation to assume, it is important to make a habit of doing three things. They may seem cumbersome at first, but you will soon learn to do them naturally, and you will be thankful that you are able to avoid wrong assumptions.

Always ask people to define their terms (What?). Human language is messy. The more a word is used, the more nuances of meaning it takes on. We will speak with people who use very familiar words, but with very different functional definitions. For example, when a woman says that she and her husband had a huge fight last night, you should not assume that you understand what she means. If you do not ask her to define “huge fight,” you have simply reached into your own experience to define it. In doing so, you may have created a subtle but important area of misunderstanding that could affect the counsel you give her. This woman’s fight may seem like your normal marital conversation, or it may look like the domestic version of nuclear war. I regularly say to people, “I don’t want to put my definition on your words and end up counseling someone who doesn’t exist, so I am regularly going to ask you to define your terms.”

Always ask people to clarify what they mean with concrete, real life examples of the terms they have used (How?). If point 1 asked for their personal dictionary definition, then point 2 asks people to play us the video. The terms people use are verbal shorthand for significant situations. I want the woman to walk me through, step by step, what happened during the

“huge fight” with her husband last night. Listening to her account will make my understanding concrete and personalized, and give me a sense of the drama and emotions of the moment.

Always ask people to explain why they responded as they did in the examples they have given you (Why?). Now you not only have a definition and a concrete situation, but you can begin to get a little bit of the heart behind the person’s behavior. Ask the person to share her reasons, values, purposes, and desires. You are asking her to step back and evaluate what was behind the words she said, the choices she made, and the things she did. In so doing, you are taking the camera off the scene and putting it on the person.

When you are careful to ask people to define, clarify, and explain, you will avoid many misunderstandings and false assumptions that rob personal ministry of its effectiveness. Remember, you are not seeking to broadcast the principles of the Word in a general way. Rather, in the privacy of this moment with this person, use the Word with focused specificity. Enter her world, get to know what she is facing, and help her to understand her resources in Christ to face her particular situation. Because you are eager to contextualize the gospel for this person, you won’t ask her to define, clarify, and explain just once. You will do it again and again, seeking to avoid subtle misunderstandings and to handle the truth with concrete practicality.

### **The Importance of Asking Good Questions**

It is tempting to think that insightful people have all the right answers, and in one sense that is true. But it is also true that you don’t get to the right answers without first asking the right questions. The engineer who changes the face of a certain technology is able to do so because he first stepped back and asked questions that no one else was asking. Our thinking always rides on the rails of our questions. Good thinkers like to walk around a topic and look at it from different angles. They like asking new questions and asking old questions in new ways. Good thinkers don’t make uncorroborated assumptions, and they don’t allow themselves to think they know more than they actually do.

If you want to help people to see brand new truths (and old truths in brand new ways), you need to take on the habits of good thinkers. Asking good questions is one of the most important. I am regularly reminded that people get trapped in the conceptual cul-de-sacs of their own questions. For example, I have often heard people ask, “Why isn’t God doing anything in my life?” This is a bad question, based on wrong assumptions that can lead only to theological confusion and the emotional discouragement that follows.

What are the typical answers to our friend’s mistaken question? Many people will conclude that God doesn’t love them, or that he is not faithful to his promises, or that he plays favorites, or that he is absent in times of trouble, or that God’s Word isn’t true—or if it is, then it isn’t very practical. Remember that people were made by God to be interpreters, and the questions we ask ourselves (sometimes almost unconsciously) are what we use to try and make sense out of life. The answers we give will profoundly affect the direction of our lives. So it is important to understand that when you bring well-constructed, creative, biblically-shaped questions to a

person's life, you are doing more than getting to know them and uncovering where change is needed. You are, in fact, ministering to that person.

When I ask you questions you would never ask yourself, I am teaching you to view yourself through biblical lenses. I am doing something God can use to change you in fundamental ways. Perhaps my questions will help you see yourself more accurately. When my questions do this, I am incarnating the Messiah who came to give sight to blind eyes. Perhaps my questions will help you begin to see how Scripture explains your life. When my questions do this, I am incarnating the Messiah who came to teach as people had never been taught before. Maybe my questions will convict your heart and lead you to new levels of repentance. When they do this, I am incarnating the Messiah who sent his Spirit to convict and convince us of our sin. Perhaps my questions will help you to see that the Bible really does speak to the deepest issues of your experience, causing you to hunger to feed on the Word in new ways. In so doing, I am incarnating the Messiah who is the Bread from heaven that feeds his people. In these ways, even in asking questions we can function as the Messiah's ambassadors, incarnating him before others.

Asking good questions is doing the work of change. Through them, we give sight to blind eyes and understanding to dull minds, we soften hardened hearts, encourage flagging souls, and stir hunger that can only be filled by the truth. This not only builds a platform for the work the Messiah does through us—it is that work!

My brother Tedd, who has always been a mentor to me, was riding home with me after a conference on marriage and family counseling. We were going about sixty-five miles per hour when he said to me, "You know, Paul, we probably should apply the principles that we learned this weekend to our own marriages. Why don't you start?" He then proceeded to ask me a series of questions about my relationship with Luella. I don't remember any of the specific questions, but I do remember the profound impact they had on me. It was as if God was tearing down thick velvet curtains that stood between me and an accurate understanding of my marriage. I saw myself with clarity, and what I saw wasn't pretty! Through those questions I watched myself do and say things I could not believe. Through those questions I finally understood Luella's experience and her frustrations. I saw my defensiveness and self-righteousness, and I saw that I had to change for the sake of the Lord and for the good of my marriage. Those questions were truly life-changing for me.

As Tedd questioned me, I remembered something I had once said to Luella during an argument: "Ninety-five percent of the women in our church would love to be married to a man like me!" (She lovingly informed me that she must be in the five percent minority!) Through Tedd's questions I saw myself repeatedly defend myself by analyzing her words and shifting the focus off me and onto her. I saw that I was much more self-righteous and angry than I had ever realized. With stark clarity I saw how far I had fallen below God's standards for a husband.

That night I got home late and asked Luella if we could talk. She could tell by the tone of my voice that something important was going on. As we sat down, I told her that I had known for a long time that God was trying to show me things about myself through her, and that I had been unwilling to listen. I told her that for perhaps the first time I was really ready to hear. She burst into tears, told me that she loved me, and then proceeded to talk to me for about two hours. That talk continued the work of change that Tedd's questions had begun. Sometimes I wonder what my marriage would be like today if Tedd had not asked me the questions I would never have asked myself.

### **Now for Some Good Questions**

Since the primary way we get to know people is through the question-and-answer process, it is important to know what is a good question and what is not. Here are four principles to keep in mind.

1. Always ask open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no." Yes and no questions do not give much information. The closed question (leading to a yes or no answer) can lead to misunderstandings because it forces you to fall back on your own assumptions about why the person answered as she did. For example, if you ask someone if she has a good marriage and she answers, "Yes," what have you learned? Not much; you do not know her definition of a good marriage. On the other hand, open-ended questions cannot be answered without the person disclosing what she is thinking, what she wants, and what she is doing. Here are some examples of open-ended marriage questions.

- What things did you see in this person that made you want to marry him?
- What were your goals for your marriage when you were engaged?
- What things in your marriage make you sad?
- What things in your marriage make you happy?
- If you could press a button and change your marriage, how would it change?
- In what ways do you think God is honored by your marriage?
- How would you characterize your communication with your husband?
- Describe how you and your husband arrive at decisions.
- Describe how you as a couple resolve conflicts.
- How would you describe your spiritual life as a couple?
- Are there couples you look up to? What do you respect about their marriages?
- Why do you think you have struggled as a couple?

- What do you see as the strengths of your marriage?
- What do you see as the weaknesses of your marriage?
- What do you think you need to do as a couple to get from where you are to where you need to be?
- Describe the marriage of your dreams.
- What could your spouse do to greatly change your marriage?
- What problems in your marriage do you see as your responsibility?
- What specific things have led you to conclude that your marriage needs help?
- What do you think God is doing in your marriage right now?
- What do you think keeps you as a couple from solving your problems?
- Describe how your marriage has changed over the years.
- When you are hurt or angry with your spouse, what do you do?
- How do you communicate dissatisfaction to your spouse?
- Pick one area of your marriage where you think you have problems. Describe what is wrong and what each of you has done to solve it.
- In what ways have you attempted to communicate love and appreciation to your spouse?
- What are the biggest hot buttons in your marriage?

This list could go on and on. The point is to ask questions that require the person to examine himself or herself and to answer in a self-disclosing manner.

2. Ask a combination of survey and focused questions. We need both kinds of questions, because each discloses a different kind of information. We do not want to assume that a problem in one area of a person's life only exists in that area, so we ask survey questions. We want to trace problems to their roots in the heart, so we ask focused questions. Remember, we want to break through the casual and guard against invalid assumptions so that we can help someone we truly know.

Survey questions scan the various areas of a person's life and look at the person as a whole. Things that seem superficially different may actually be part of a larger theme of thought, motive, or behavior that you want to uncover. For example, Joe was a guy who lived for the respect of other people. The way he sought to get it at home was by establishing a violent autocracy (though what he got was more fear than respect). Outside the home Joe was known as a real servant, a guy who would give you the shirt off his back. People at Joe and Sarah's church found it hard to believe that he could be capable of the things Sarah said he was doing

with her and the children. It wasn't until the police were called that Sarah began to get the help she had needed for so long. The point is that the public Joe and the private Joe were not completely different people. His behavior in both arenas was motivated by the same craving for respect.

Survey questions help uncover themes and patterns in the person's life. Perhaps the problems in a marriage are part of a larger theme of relational sin in a person's life. A lack of self-control in the area of sex may also be the reason a person is deeply in debt. A problem with tongue control that causes a man to lose his job may also explain his estrangement from his teenage son. Maybe the fear that paralyzes a young girl in one area of her life is more pervasive than it first appears. Take the wide angle view of a person; don't assume that the confessed problem exists in isolation. Ask yourself how things that appear to be different may be different aspects of the same theme.

Focused questions look intensively into one area of a person's life. For Joe, it would mean digging into his constant willingness to serve others, seeking to know the heart behind the behavior. Is this really motivated by a love for God that expresses itself in a love for others? Or is something else ruling Joe's heart? The purpose of the focused question is to uncover roots and causes.

To really get to know someone, both kinds of questions should be asked. To illustrate this point, imagine yourself at the end of a motel hallway. The hallway, with doors every several feet, represents a person's life. The rooms behind the doors represent various aspects of the person's life (job, marriage, parenting, family, spiritual life, relationship to the body of Christ, relationship to neighbors, finances, sex, communication, problem solving, goals, motives, desires, etc.). Everything you need to know about this person is in that hallway and in those rooms. As you get to know a person, you will walk down the hallway, taking a peek in each room (survey questions). You will begin to notice certain themes (each room has a bed, desk, carpet, chair). Some rooms you will enter (focused questions), examining the contents more closely when you see something that seems worthy of special attention. Knowing when to ask which type of question is a matter of wisdom.

3. Remember that certain kinds of questions reveal certain kinds of information. To fill the gaps in your knowledge of a person, you must constantly ask yourself what you do not know. For example, I may know what a person did, but not how he did it. Or I may have established how he did it, but not where or when. I may have learned all of these things but still not know why he did what he did. To get the whole picture we need to ask ourselves, "What do I need to know about this person in order to help him? What kind of question will reveal that information?"

There are essentially five classes of questions:

- What? questions are the most basic, uncovering general information. ("What did you do?" "I talked to my wife.")

- How? questions reveal the way something was done. (“How did you talk to her?” “I yelled at her for fifteen minutes!”) Notice how much more we know already, simply by asking a follow-up “how” question.
- Why? questions uncover a person’s purposes, desires, goals, or motivations. (“Why did you yell so long?” “I wanted her to know how angry I was at what she had done.”) Here we have gone beyond the husband’s behavior to examine the heart behind it.
- How often? and Where? questions reveal themes and patterns in a person’s life. (“Where did this happen?” “At the supper table. Suppers are hard. We are both tired. We have young children. Meals are not relaxing at all! The evening meal always seems to be tense for us.”)
- When? questions uncover the order of events. (“Tell me exactly when you began to yell during supper.” “In the middle of the chaos my wife said, ‘Well, how was your day?’ She was obviously annoyed because I hadn’t asked about hers. I said, ‘Do you really care or are you just being nasty?’ She said, ‘Well, you’re the only one here with an interesting and important life, right?’ At that point I blew up.”)

Each class of question uncovers different information, so each needs to be followed by the next. This will broaden and deepen your understanding of what took place (the situation), how the person interacted with it (the thoughts and motives of the heart), and what he did in response (behavior). Use these questions whether you are focusing on one area or surveying a person’s life.

These questions were very helpful when Jim called me, expressing concern about his relationship to his wife, Bonnie. Frankly, such calls are unusual; typically, the call comes from a frustrated wife. Jim got my attention and I agreed to meet with them. Jim was very successful in his business, where he and Bonnie worked together every day, apparently happily. Outwardly they seemed to be doing well. Their lifestyle had all the hallmarks of success, they were involved in their church, and had a close circle of Christian friends.

Jim was self-consciously theological as he described how he had dedicated many years of his life mastering the doctrines of the Word of God. Bonnie was a new Christian, much more intuitive and private in her faith. As we sat together, Jim shared his grief over the fact that they had never experienced the kind of marriage the Bible describes. He said he had prayed and prayed and sought the counsel of many, to no avail. He said he had done everything he could to encourage intimacy with Bonnie, only to be rejected. He said he didn’t care about his business success when he had a cold and lifeless marriage.

It was a convincing story, but I was distracted by the hurt and angry look on Bonnie’s face. I knew I needed to ask more, so I asked both Jim and Bonnie the “what” questions, and followed up with the “how,” “when,” “why” and “where” questions. Then I began to see what was really going on. Yes, Jim was theologically knowledgeable, but it was his business that really drove his life—and therefore Bonnie’s. Their daily schedule was completely controlled by work from early

in the morning until late at night. Bonnie said that she only felt appreciated as a dedicated (and basically unpaid) employee. By the time she got home, she had nothing to give to the marriage.

I asked Jim to describe how he approached Bonnie with his concerns about the marriage. He repeated conversations, apparently unaware of the name-calling and condemnation he brought to those encounters. Bonnie was tired of being yelled at, tired of being called spiritually immature and romantically inept. She was tired of working hard with no reward, and living with someone who claimed to be close to God but was never thankful. She was at the breaking point, but did not want to tell Jim, since it would only reinforce his negative attitudes. Instead, she was distancing herself from him, hoping to avoid the ugly conversations, the accusations, and the emotional isolation.

What an incredibly different picture the follow-up questions revealed! They got below the surface impression of a godly husband and a cold and critical wife to reveal the driven, condemning man and the wife living in exhausted self-protection. The help I offered them was completely different from what I would have given without the understanding that came from asking those questions.

4. Ask a progressive line of questions, in which each question is based on information uncovered in the previous questions. There should be order and logic to the flow of your questions. Each question should be asked because you are seeking to fill gaps in your knowledge of what has already been uncovered. You accomplish this by continually asking yourself, What do I not know about what I have just heard? This challenges you not to make assumptions or settle for incomplete information.

### **The Redemptive Importance of Good Questions**

What we have been talking about is crucial for serving as one of the Lord's instruments of change. Asking good questions is vital to helping people to face who they really are and what they are really doing.

As sinners we all tend to recast our own history in self-serving ways. We hide behind the difficulty and pressures of the situation or the failures of others. We look for external explanations, not internal ones. We are more impressed with our righteousness than we are horrified at our sin.

Because of this, we all need people who love us enough to ask, listen, and, having listened, to ask more. This is not being intrusive. This is helping blind people to embrace their need for Christ. It is helping people to see the foolish ways they have lived for their own glory, and the subtle ways they have exchanged worship and service of the Creator for worship and service of his creation.

The forgiving and empowering grace of Christ is for sinners—the transgressor and the weak, the sufferer and the lost. People who do not see their need will not seek his help. But in the



Messiah's hands, our questions can become keys that open people's prisons and cause them to rely upon Christ in new and profound ways.

Through our questions Christ changes people. The beaten down become strong in hope. Glory thieves begin to live for the glory of the Lord. The self-absorbed are freed to love God and neighbor. As the Holy Spirit is at work, our questions can be the beginning of God's radical work of change. They are an integral part of what it means to incarnate him to those around us.

# **Reading the Bible Supernaturally by John Piper**

## **Chapter 11 – The Necessity and Possibility of Reading the Bible Supernaturally**

### **How Is Reading the Bible Supernatural?**

Why must reading the Bible be a supernatural act? By “supernatural act,” I don’t mean that humans are supernatural. We are not God, and we are not angels or demons. What I mean is that the act of reading, in order to be done as God intended, must be done in dependence on God’s supernatural help. The Bible gives two decisive reasons: Satan and sin. That is, we have a blinding enemy outside and a blinding disease inside. Together these two forces make it impossible for human beings to read the Bible, as God intended, without supernatural help.

It is crucial that we realize this. It seems to me that thousands of people approach the Bible with little sense of their own helplessness in reading the way God wants them to. That’s why I am writing part 2 of this book. This proverb applies as much to Bible reading as to anything else: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Prov. 3: 5– 6). At every turn of the page, rely on God. That is a supernatural transaction. If more people approached the Bible with a deep sense of helplessness, and hope-filled reliance on God’s merciful assistance, there would be far more seeing and savoring and transformation than there is.

### **The Blinding Enemy Outside**

Satan is real. His main identity is “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8: 44). His way of lying is more by deception than bold-face falsehoods. He “is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Rev. 12: 9). Therefore, he hates “the Spirit of truth” (John 15: 26). He hates God the Father from whom the Spirit proceeds (John 15: 26). He hates the Son of God, who is truth (John 14: 6). And he hates the word of God because God’s “word is truth” (John 17: 17).

Therefore, he will do his best to take away the word, if he can, and twist it, if he can’t— the way he did in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3: 1) and in the temptations of Jesus (Matt. 4: 6). Jesus described how Satan takes away the word: “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart” (Matt. 13: 19). How does that happen? It might be by sheer forgetfulness. Or Satan may draw a person from Bible reading to an entertaining video, with the result that any thought of Christ’s worth and beauty is quickly lost in the flash of fire and skin.

Or Satan may simply blind the mind to the worth and beauty of Christ, which the Scriptures reveal. This is what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 4: 3– 4:

Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

“The god of this world” is Satan. He is called “the ruler of this world” (John 12: 31; 14: 30), and John says that “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5: 19). It is this enormous blinding power that puts us in need of a supernatural deliverer. The thought that we could overcome this satanic force on our own is naïve.

### **No Opening of the Eyes without Divine Power**

When the risen Christ sent Paul “to open their [the Gentiles] eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26: 18), he did not mean that Paul could do this in human strength. Paul made that clear: “My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2: 4– 5). That is what it takes to overcome the blinding effects of Satan.

Let it not be missed that the specific focus of Satan’s blinding work is the gospel. That is, his focus is on our reading— or hearing— the heart of the message of the Christian Scriptures. Satan “has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.” Satan would be happy for people to believe ten thousand true facts, as long as they are blind to “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.” Let them make A’s on a hundred Bible-fact quizzes as long as they can’t see the glory of Christ in the gospel— that is, as long as they can’t read (or listen) with the ability to see what is really there.

### **Bible Reading That Satan Leaves Alone**

So Jesus (Matt. 13: 19), Paul (2 Cor. 4: 3– 4), and John (1 John 5: 19) warn that Satan is a great enemy of Bible reading that sees what is really there. Bible reading that only collects facts, or relieves a guilty conscience, or gathers doctrinal arguments, or titillates aesthetic literary tastes, or feeds historical curiosities— this kind of Bible reading Satan is perfectly happy to leave alone. He has already won the battle.

But reading that hopes to see the supreme worth and beauty of God— reading that aims to be satisfied with all that God is for us in Christ, reading that seeks to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34: 8)— this reading Satan will oppose with all his might. And his might is supernatural. Therefore, any reading that hopes to overcome his blinding power will be a supernatural reading.

### **We Are Complicit in Satanic Deception**

When we speak of the power of Satan over the human heart, we are not saying that all spiritual blindness is the sole work of Satan. We are not implying that Satan can take innocent people and make them slaves of deceit. There are no innocent people. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3: 23). We are complicit in all our deception.

There is a terrible interweaving of satanic influence and human sinfulness in all our blindness to divine glory. You can see this interweaving in Ephesians 2: 1– 3:

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at

work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Notice both influences: first, “dead in sins,” and, second, “following the prince of the power of the air.” We are not innocent victims of this power. We are ready partners. Following the power of Satan and living “in the passions of our flesh” are two ways of describing the same path. We are, Paul says, “by nature children of wrath.” So is “the rest of mankind.” That is, our human nature is both corrupt and guilty. We deserve God’s wrath. Therefore, no one will ever be able to scapegoat at the judgment, claiming, “Satan made me do it.”

### **The Mind of the Flesh**

Therefore, our own sinfulness is another source of our spiritual blindness that puts us in need of supernatural help, if we hope to see the glory of God in Scripture. Paul is overwhelmingly clear and strong on this point. For example, in Romans 8: 4– 9 he says there are two kinds of humans: “those who are according to the flesh” and “those who are according to the Spirit” (v. 5, literal translation). That is, one kind of person is deeply defined by the “flesh” — the merely human nature, apart of any transformation by the Spirit. And another kind of person is deeply defined by the “Spirit” — the supernatural invasion and transformation by the Holy Spirit.

Who are these two groups of humans? Paul says that the Christians are those who “are according to the Spirit.” Verse 9: “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” The non-Christians, on the other hand, have “the mind of the flesh.” This mind-set is “hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8: 7– 8).

### **A Real Cannot in Our Heart**

What then is the effect of this flesh identity of unbelievers on reading God’s word? Paul tells us in verses 7– 8: “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” These are very strong words: “It does not submit to God’s law [God’s instruction, God’s word]; indeed it cannot.” This is our rebellion prior to, and underneath, all satanic blinding. Before Satan adds his blinding effects, we are already in rebellion against God. And, Paul says, this rebellion makes it impossible (“cannot”) for us to submit to the word of God.

That is, because of this flesh identity, we cannot acknowledge that the glory of God is more to be desired than anything else. Paul has already said that we “suppress” that knowledge (Rom. 1: 18). We have “exchanged the glory of God for images” (Rom. 1: 23). We prefer our own glory, and therefore cannot prefer God’s. Cannot. That is what it means to prefer our own glory. This inability (this “cannot,” v. 7) is not the inability of a person who prefers God but is not allowed to cherish him. No. This is the inability of a person who does not prefer God and therefore cannot cherish him. It is not an inability that keeps you from doing what you want. It

is an inability to want what you don't want. You can't see as beautiful what you see as ugly. You can't embrace the glory of God as most valuable when you feel yourself to be more valuable.

### **Ignorance Is Not Our Deepest Problem**

One of the implications of this pervasive human condition is that ignorance is not our deepest problem. There is a hardness of rebellion against God that is deeper than ignorance. That is why every natural attempt at enlightenment is resisted. This hardness of rebellion cannot submit to God's revelation.

Paul issues an urgent call to all Christians at Ephesus to decisively turn away from this condition, which, he says, is typical of their Gentile roots:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.  
(Eph. 4: 17– 18)

Notice the relationship between “ignorance” and “hardness of heart” as Paul describes it: “ignorance due to their hardness of heart.” Hardness is more basic. Hardness is the cause. This is our deepest problem. Not ignorance.

### **The Impact of Our Hardness on Bible Reading**

This is the condition of all mankind, apart from the saving work of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8: 9– 10). And it makes reading the Bible impossible— if our aim is to read the way God wants us to read. We cannot submit to what we read. That is, we cannot let ourselves acknowledge that the glory of God is to be desired above all earthly treasures and pleasures. We must suppress this truth. We must exchange the glory of God for images. We cannot prefer the light when we love the dark. “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light” (John 3: 19). Our problem is not that there is insufficient light shining from the Scriptures. Our problem is that we love the darkness.

### **The Bible Is Radiant with Divine Wisdom**

The Scriptures are radiant with divine wisdom. This wisdom shines with the glory of God— and shows us the glory to come, which is the way Paul describes his own inspired teaching:

We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory... We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. (1 Cor. 2:7, 12–13)

But the problem is that apart from the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, we are not “spiritual,” but “natural.” This makes the reading of Scripture impossible, if our aim is to grasp things “not taught by human wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:13). That's what Paul says next. “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

These words “does not accept” and “is not able to understand” are the very same “does not” and “cannot” that we saw in Romans 8:7 (“The mind that is set on the flesh does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot”). And who is it that cannot grasp what Paul teaches? The “natural person.” That means all of us, until something supernatural happens to us (like the miracle of 2 Corinthians 4: 6).

Therefore, reading the inspired Scriptures must be a supernatural act if we are to “accept the things of the Spirit of God,” and if we are to “understand what is spiritually discerned.” Without God’s supernatural aid, we are merely natural and cannot see the glory of God for what it really is— supremely beautiful and all-satisfying. This peculiar, divine glory awakens no compelling affections in us, even though Paul shows that if it did, we would know it is “decreed before the ages for our glory” (1 Cor. 2:7). But instead, like the “rulers of this age,” we do not cherish the “Lord of glory”; we crucify him (1 Cor. 2: 8).

### **Any Hope to Read as We Ought?**

And what is the supernatural act of reading? In essence it is a reliance on God, and the Spirit, and Christ to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves as we seek to see what is really there in Scripture, and as we seek to savor it and be transformed by it. There are several ways that the New Testament describes this divine assistance. We will look at five of them very briefly.

### **He Opened Their Minds**

First, this miracle of divine help in reading is called the “opening” of our minds. After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus met two disciples on the Emmaus road. They did not recognize him, and so they told him, as if he didn’t know, all about the crucifixion and resurrection and appearances of Jesus. They were baffled by all this. So Jesus said, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:25–26).

Jesus said that their failure to read the prophets perceptively was owing to foolishness and slowness of heart. He did not chalk it up to ignorance but to something in their hearts. Later, in their home, he was revealed to them and then vanished. They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32). Then they ran to Jerusalem to find the eleven apostles and tell them what they had seen.

While they were gathered, Jesus stood among them and proved to them, by eating some fish, that he was not a ghost. Then he said, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then, Luke writes, “he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:44–45).

So on the road to Emmaus, he “opened the Scriptures,” and in the gathering of the eleven, he “opened their minds.” Both are needed. One draws out the meaning of the text. The other

enables the mind to see and savor the glory of what is really there. Christ took away the “foolishness” and “slowness” of heart. This is the supernatural help that every human needs if

we are to read the Bible and see what Jesus expects us to see. It takes the supernatural opening of our minds.

### **He Shone in Our Hearts**

Second, the miracle of divine help in reading God’s word is compared to God’s creation of light at the beginning of the world. We have seen the blinding effect of “the God of this world” in 2 Corinthians 4:4. Now comes the remedy for that blindness, in verse 6. After making clear in verse 5 that the miracle of verse 6 happens through the proclamation of Christ, Paul says, “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

The shining “in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” is compared to the divine act of creation: “Let light shine out of darkness.” This means that a miracle of creation is needed for any of us to see the glory of God in the “knowledge” we gain in reading the Scriptures or hearing the gospel. Until the miracle of this new creation, we are all darkness— even if we have a PhD in biblical studies. The issue is “the glory of God” revealed in God’s word— the worth and beauty of all that he is for us in Christ. That is what we cannot see until God says, “Let there be light.”

### **He Enlightens the Eyes of Our Hearts**

Third, the miracle of divine help in reading the Scriptures is called the enlightening of the eyes of our hearts:

I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might. (Eph. 1:16–19)

When Paul prays that we would know our hope and the riches of God’s inheritance and the greatness of God’s power, he is not praying that God would inform us with facts we don’t know. The facts have been taught. What he is asking is that we perceive— grasp, comprehend, assess truly, savor— the glory of our hope and the riches of our inheritance and the greatness of his power. This is a prayer not for the seeing of facts, but for the seeing of worth and beauty.

It is like the prayer in Ephesians 3: 14– 19, where Paul prays that we may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (vv. 18–19).

“Strength to comprehend” the incomprehensible! To know what surpasses knowledge. To feel the worth of the love of Christ— a love whose height and depth and length and breadth are

immeasurable. That is what these prayers are about. They are about seeing and savoring the glory of God in its extremes of hope and riches and power and love and fullness. Paul is praying that mere awareness would become intense admiration and thankfulness and affection.

### **Christians Need Ongoing Supernatural Help**

Don’t miss the obvious here. Ephesians 1:16–19 is a prayer. This shows Paul’s and our dependence on God’s supernatural intervention in answer to prayer. And don’t miss a second obvious and crucial thing: this prayer is for believers, not unbelievers. This means that the once-for-all creation of spiritual sight in our conversion to Christ (2 Cor. 4:6) does not exclude the need for ongoing supernatural help—“enlightening the eyes of the heart” (Eph. 1:18)—repeatedly in the Christian life.

The glory of Christ is not a steady-state brightness in the heart of a Christian. It has degrees. Not only do we “see in a mirror dimly” in this life (1 Cor. 13:12), but we see in varying degrees of dimness. The glory that we will see when we behold him face-to-face will be inexpressibly beyond what we see here with the “eyes of the heart.” The apostle John had seen Jesus in the flesh. He had seen his “glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14). But when he saw him in his resurrection glory on Patmos, he fell down as if dead (Rev. 1:17).

Nevertheless, lest anyone think that what we can see of the glory of Jesus now is insignificant, do not forget that it is greater than the glory of all the things in this world, and it awakens in God’s people “joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” (1 Pet. 1:8). John Owen, who is as aware as anyone that the future glory will vastly outshine the present glory, nevertheless says— and I joyfully concur:

There is no glory, no peace, no joy, no satisfaction in this world, to be compared with what we receive by that weak and imperfect view which we have of the glory of Christ by faith; yea, all the joys of the world are a thing of nought in comparison of what we so receive.<sup>1</sup>

But we all have our seasons of dimness. We all need to pray Paul’s prayer for ourselves over and over. We all need to sing the prayer of the famous hymn “Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart.”

I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies,  
No sudden rending of the veil of clay,  
No angel visitant, no opening skies;  
But take the dimness of my soul away.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Gift of the Secret of the Kingdom**

Fourth, this divine help in reading the Scriptures is also called a “blessing” — the giving of the secret of the kingdom of God. When the disciples wondered why Jesus spoke in parables, Jesus



answered, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that ‘they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear

but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven” (Mark 4:11–12). “But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear” (Matt. 13:16).

In other words, for some, the parables were part of God’s judgment. He was handing them over to their pride and hardness of heart so that they might “see but not perceive.” Or, as Jesus prayed in Luke 10: 21, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”

But Jesus did not leave his disciples in the ignorance of human “wisdom and understanding.” On the contrary, Jesus said, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4:11). The secret of the kingdom is the surprising reality that the Messiah has actually come but that he would not be the earthly king and victor over Rome that so many expected him to be. He would suffer first, and then, in an unexpected way, enter in to his glory. This “secret of the kingdom” was the same truth that Jesus criticized the disciples on the Emmaus road for not grasping from the Old Testament: “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:25–26).

The point, for our purposes here, is that the disciples should have been able to read the Old Testament and see the terrible and wonderful reality of a suffering Messiah. They should have been prepared by the Old Testament to be open and receptive to the coming of God’s kingdom in the way it came. First, it comes through suffering and death. Then through resurrection and reign from heaven. Then, at the second coming, in the establishment of Christ’s earthly rule.

But they were “foolish and slow of heart.” So a miracle of special illumination was needed for the disciples to see the pointers to these things in the Old Testament and in the teachings of Jesus. God gave that illumination, and Jesus thanked God that he had “revealed [these things] to little children” (Luke 10:21). He said, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4:11). “Blessed are your eyes, for they see” (Matt. 13:16).

### **My Father Revealed This to You**

Fifth, this divine help in reading the Scriptures is also called God’s revelation. When Peter recognized Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, his understanding was not complete, but his breakthrough was so significant Jesus exulted in the miracle. Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). This insight was not native brilliance on Peter’s part. It was not natural. It was supernatural. Jesus said, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 16:17).

“Flesh and blood” refers to what Peter was by mere human nature. This was not the source of his breakthrough. The breakthrough was a gift from God. It was the sort of gift that all of us need if we are going to see Jesus for who he really is.

To be sure, by nature—by “flesh and blood”—we can know many facts about Jesus. The disciples and the Pharisees knew more facts about him than we do. But Jesus will not be seen as the treasure he is unless the Father in heaven does the miracle in our hearts and grants us to see.

Then it will be said over us what Jesus said over the disciples: “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Luke 10:23–24). If we are going to read the Scriptures about Jesus and see him and savor him and be transformed into his image, it will not be by mere human means. It will be a “blessing” that opens the eyes of our hearts to see his all-satisfying glory for what it really is.

### **God Keeps the Keys**

If we aim to read the Bible with the goal of seeing and savoring the glory of all that God is for us in Christ, then reading must be a supernatural act. We must read in reliance on the miracle of God’s help. In 1877, J. C. Ryle, Anglican bishop of Liverpool, wrote:

Is the Bible the Word of God? Then be sure you never read it without fervent prayer for the help and teaching of the Holy Spirit. Here is the rock on which many make shipwreck. They do not ask for wisdom and instruction, and so they find the Bible dark, and carry nothing away from it. You should pray for the Spirit to guide you into all truth. You should beg the Lord Jesus Christ to “open your understanding,” as He did that of His disciples. The Lord God, by whose inspiration the book was written, keeps the keys of the book, and alone can enable you to understand it profitably. Nine times over in one Psalm does David cry, “Teach me.” Five times over, in the same Psalm, does he say, “Give me understanding.” Well says John Owen, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, “There is a sacred light in the Word: but there is a covering and veil on the eyes of men, so that they cannot behold it aright. Now, the removal of this veil is the peculiar work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

We will see later that this deep dependence on the supernatural work of God to help us see the worth and beauty of God in Scripture does not diminish the necessity to use our minds in the process of construing textual meaning. It may, at times, feel like a paradox— to say that God gives the insight we need, and yet we must labor to see it. But the apostle Paul shows us the way. In 2 Timothy 2:7 he says, “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.” So we are called to read the apostolic Scriptures rigorously, carefully, thoughtfully. Why? Not because this natural process of thinking attains the goal, but because, in that natural process of thinking, God acts supernaturally and gives a kind of sight we would not otherwise have. That is the supernatural act of reading the Scriptures.

End notes

1. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T& T Clark, n.d.), 415.
2. George Croly, "Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart," 1854, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/s/o/sogdumyh.htm>.
3. J. C. Ryle, *Old Paths: Being Plain Statements of Some of the Weightier Matters of Christianity* (London: Charles J. Thynne, 1898), 3

## **How People Change, Chapter Four – Married to Christ**

### **By Lane, Timothy S. & Tripp, Paul David**

When I got married, my wife did not know I had liabilities. I'll mention only one here! I was a student who had spent several years on staff with a campus ministry before coming to seminary. I was thousands of dollars in debt with no workable plan to pay it off, and I still had two more years of seminary to go. Fortunately for me, my fiancée had worked steadily and saved a good bit of money. The day we said "I do" was a very significant day for many reasons. Among them was the fact that my debt became her debt and her assets became my assets. It was a great financial deal for me, but not for her. This is what happens when we become Christians. Christ assumes our liabilities and graciously gives us his assets. This is God's amazing grace.

But more happened on our wedding day. Along with this new legal (and financial) arrangement, my wife and I entered into a personal relationship that has grown deeper over the years. We communicate with each other in ways that only two people who have spent decades together can. The same is true of our relationship with Jesus. We not only enjoy legal benefits; we enter into a personal relationship that grows over time as we spend our lives with him.

In chapter 3, we encouraged you to see the hope for change and the ultimate destiny that is yours because you belong to Christ. In this chapter you will see the person who changes you.

#### **The Person Who Changes You**

According to the Bible, change takes place within a deeply personal relationship that is built on a solid legal foundation. We are gradually conformed to the likeness of the One to whom we are married. In the last chapter, we saw a glorious hope to which we are destined. As Philippians 1:6 says, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." That good work begins in relationship to Jesus and is brought to completion within an ever-deepening union with him. This is the most unique aspect of a biblical view of change. It is not less than cognitive change; it is so much more. It is not less than behavioral change; it is so much more. No other secular or religious approach to change comes close to what we find in Scripture. The Bible gives us more than exhortations and rules for change. The great gift Christ gives us is himself!

The metaphor of marriage is used to describe our relationship with God throughout the Old and New Testaments. It rests on the biblical idea of a covenant. A covenant is a relational promise. God binds himself to us. He is our God and we are his people. Ezekiel, in a rather unabashed way, depicts God looking upon Israel as a husband does a wife: "Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you," declares the Sovereign Lord, "and you became mine." (Ezek. 16:8) Isaiah says, "For your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth" (Isa. 54:5).

Ephesians uses marriage as a metaphor to depict Christ's relationship with his people. After talking about human marriage, Paul says, "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). While there is a sense in which our marriage to Christ is not yet completed, biblical writers use the marriage metaphor to depict the legal, deeply personal, two-sided nature of the believer's relationship to God. It is the relationship God initiates and in which we participate.

### **Stay Focused on Christ**

As you think about the Christian life as a lifelong process of change, what things stand out as the key ingredients for change? Most of us focus on the "means of grace": Bible study, prayer, fellowship, reading Christian books, the sacraments, service, and witness. God has provided these as means to an end, but they are not the end! All the means of grace are good and necessary for change, but only if they do not become ends in themselves.

The Christian life is not less than these means, but it is much more. Several passages help us think about how wonderful it is to be in union with Christ. In 2 Corinthians 11:1—3, Paul uses the marriage metaphor to talk about being united with Christ. Colossians 1:15—23 gives us a picture of Christ, our Bridegroom. In Colossians 2:1—15, we discover the life-changing benefits Christ brings us by faith.

### **Married to Christ: 2 Corinthians 11:1—3**

How central is Christ to the Christian life? That may sound like an obvious question, but not when you read the way Paul speaks to the Corinthians! He says it is easy for Christians to forget that Christ is the center of the Christian life.

I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (2 Cor. 11:1—3)

Paul speaks with the affection of a father. He is jealous for the Corinthians' purity of heart in relation to Christ. He introduces the metaphor of marriage to describe the Christian's relationship to Christ. He speaks of Christ as a husband and the Corinthians as pure virgin brides. But Paul worries that they will be seduced by temptation and give their hearts to false lovers instead. While this passage focuses more on the future fulfillment of our marriage to Christ, it captures the idea that we are united to him now.

Engagement in the first century was more significant than it is today. In those days, engagement was as close to marriage as you could get. Notice Matthew's language in the birth accounts of Jesus:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child

through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” (Matt. 1:18—21)

While Joseph and Mary are engaged, Mary becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit with Jesus. Joseph considered divorcing her but the angel of the Lord instructed him not to do so. Joseph and Mary are engaged, but Joseph is referred to as her husband prior to the formal ceremony and physical union.

In the same way, we are “engaged,” or married, to Christ, our husband. We await the final consummation when that “engagement,” or marriage, becomes a full reality. But in the meantime, the biblical writers do not hesitate to talk about the Christian’s relationship to Jesus in terms of marriage.

Paul describes the Christian’s relationship to Christ in the most intimate terms—so intimate that it is almost embarrassing! But this is what is so amazing about the gospel. God reconciles sinners to himself through Christ and welcomes us into a relationship that is intensely personal. He does not simply tolerate us; he brings us close to himself by giving himself to us. Christ is our husband and we are his bride. We are married to Christ.

What does it mean to be married to Christ? Christ has made us the recipients of his affection and, in turn, we are to make him the ultimate object of ours. Paul speaks to the Corinthians as a jealous father who wants nothing to supplant or compromise this relationship. He urges the Corinthians to shun false saviors and false gospels and to place their hopes and affections solely on Christ.

What false lovers entice you to forget your true husband and the faithfulness he deserves? Why do we worship other things in place of Christ? Quite simply, we worship what we find attractive. We allow many things to eclipse the beauty of Christ. We devote our hearts to our jobs, other people, a state of mind (comfort, security), success, power, peace, or money. We have many options before us, but we cannot get our identity from these things.

I am easily enticed by comfort. After a hard day at work, I am ready for some downtime. I tell myself that I deserve it! Comfort and leisure are good things, but when my personal comfort becomes more important to me than Christ, it impacts my behavior sinfully. If I arrive home to a house full of children who get in the way of my comfort, I rapidly turn into a very harsh person. I have placed myself in the arms of a false lover: my personal comfort. This can happen quickly—even on the heels of counseling someone else to be wary of his own straying heart!

Paul is right on target when he pleads with the Corinthians (and with us) to stay focused on our relationship with Christ in the same way that husbands and wives should focus on their

spouses. Remain sincere and pure in your devotion. Guard your heart against anything that intrudes upon that primary relationship. Fight against anything that calls your loyalty into question. Because it is so easy to stray, you must fight the temptation every moment. My marriage to Christ is the most important relationship and circumstance of my life.

The Christian life has been described using many false models. Some approach it as a business: work hard and get a paycheck. Some think of it as a well-planned spiritual workout. Others see it as an educational pursuit: gain more biblical and theological knowledge and equate that with knowing and loving Christ. But Paul reminds us that the Christian life is much more intimate, personal, and comprehensive than all of these. Notice three profound realities that are part of my union with Christ:

If I am married to Christ, the core of my present life is not personal happiness, but spiritual purity.

Like any other marriage, the big issue is my fidelity. Will I remain faithful to Jesus or will I seek fulfillment elsewhere? Spiritual purity, single-minded devotion, and obedience figure more prominently because of my marriage to Christ. Whether good or difficult things happen to me, my attention must remain riveted to my husband, Jesus.

**My betrothal to Christ has a “now and then” structure.**

My “now” life is preparation for my “then” marriage to Christ, when the marriage supper of the Lamb sets the stage for all eternity. My life now is a time of preparation for that day. The complete fulfillment of this relationship will take place in heaven, though I experience many wonderful aspects now. Since Christ is the prize, anything that could draw me away from him is no longer essential. All of the everyday moments of life are filled with opportunities to be changed into the likeness of the One who married me.

**The Christian life is all-inclusive.**

The Christian life is far more than having devotions, giving money, participating in ministry, knowing doctrine, or having religious feelings during worship. I can do all of these things without Christ at the center of my life! For Paul, the heart of Christianity is remaining faithful to Christ in a world where many other “lovers” seek my affection. If Christ is indeed the only prize worth living for, we need to ponder just how wonderful he is. There are many places in the Bible where we could “gaze upon the beauty of the Lord,” as the psalmist says in Psalm 27:4, but we will limit ourselves to one passage. Who is our Bridegroom and husband? What is attractive about him? What benefits become ours when we are united to him?

**Christ the Bridegroom: Colossians 1:15—24**

The most obvious and important question that any prospective spouse asks is, “Who is this person I am going to marry?” Most people agonize over this decision because of the level of commitment involved. If I am going to commit to someone for a lifetime, I want to know as much as I can about her before I say “I do.” Likewise, Jesus tells us to count the cost before we become his disciples.

In Colossians, Paul gives us a stunning description of our incomparable Bridegroom.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. (Col. 1:15—24)

Jesus is more awesome and beautiful than anything else in creation! When we see him as he is, why would we want to give our affection to any other? This portrait of Christ provides a magnificent list of names, character qualities, and roles that help us to see and adore him for all he is worth:

1. He is God. He manifests the glory of God because he is God.
2. He is the Firstborn over all creation. He is the preeminent one.
3. He is the Creator of all things. Everything owes its existence to him.
4. All things were created for him. He is the center of the universe.
5. He is eternal (“before all things”). He is outside of and over creation.
6. He is the Sustainer of all things. He holds everything together.
7. He is the Head of the body. He is the king and life-giver for the church.
8. He is the beginning and Firstborn among the dead. Without his resurrection, no other resurrection is possible.
9. He is supreme. Nothing else can compare to him!
10. He is the fullness of God. We need look nowhere else for fullness.
11. He is the reconciler of all things. His redemptive work leaves nothing in the universe beyond his scope.
12. He is the peacemaker. He brings the reign of God to earth and joins sinners to himself so that they can enjoy (and not be crushed by) his glory. This only happened because he set aside his glory to die and be raised for us!

Such an amazing person deserves to be preeminent in your life. He deserves nothing less than your pure and sincere devotion. He is your Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, your true husband. It may seem strange for Christians of either gender to speak of Christ in this way, but it is a spiritual reality. Human marriage is only an illustration of our union with Christ. God ordained marriage to help us understand what it means to be in relationship with him.



Is Christ the center of your life? Do you demonstrate a sincere and pure devotion to him in your family, career, friendships, marriage, eating, sexuality, ministry, thoughts, pleasures, time, and money?

Jesus is our Bridegroom/husband par excellence. What does he bring to this union and what do we bring? Colossians 1:21—23 and 2:1—15 add specifics to this picture.

### **The Blessings of Our Union with Christ: Colossians 1:21—23 and 2:1—15**

When my wife and I got married, we did not fully understand what we were getting ourselves into. Yet we took a step of faith based on what we did know. We entrusted our decision to the grace and mercy of God, believing that he would enable us to grow in our marriage. Over time, we have discovered the strengths each of us brought to the marriage. We also discovered each other's sins and weaknesses. Our marriage to Christ is different. Christ brings the assets. We bring the liabilities. Yet Christ still joins himself to us!

When couples get married, they sometimes wonder how their new spouse will react when they really get to know each other. Marriage becomes what it is meant to be when your spouse gets to know the real you and loves you anyway! It is the same with our marriage to Christ. We cannot fully appreciate the blessings Christ brings until we see ourselves as we truly are. Then we are amazed at how gracious and merciful Jesus is. In Colossians 1 and 2, Paul's description of Christ and his gifts to our relationship is set against a sobering description of who we are.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. (Col. 1:21—23)

Paul continues,

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is. So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not

with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Col. 2:1—15)

What a contrast between what Christ brings to the marriage and what we bring! We ought to ask, “What did Christ ever see in us to make us the object of his love and grace?” The obvious answer is, “Nothing!” He showered his mercy on us simply because he chose to!

What do we bring to this marriage?

We are guilty of sin and alienated from God (see Col. 1:21—23). Two very strong words describe our position before God: we are alienated and enemies of God. Sin alienates us from God and sets us in opposition to him. We dig in our heels and rebel against him.

We are foolish and blind (see Col. 2:1—5). Sin makes us fools. We are easily deceived, attracted to hollow and deceptive philosophy, and enticed by arguments that lead us away from Christ. Sin blinds us to our sin! We think we are fine. We think we have insight and power to live life. But the opposite is true!

We are powerless and enslaved (see Col. 2:9—15). Paul uses the word “dead” to describe how trapped and helpless we are. When you are dead, you can’t do anything. You cannot improve yourself. Even if we wanted to do what God requires (which we don’t because we are alienated enemies), and even if we knew what pleased him (which we don’t because we are fools who suppress the truth in unrighteousness), we would do neither because we are incapable of doing anything that is pleasing in God’s sight. Yet, despite all this, Christ desires to be in relationship with us. As Paul summarizes it, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

In a way, this passage functions as a reality check on the eve of your wedding to Christ. If you accept the truth of the way it describes you, you could be filled with guilt and shame toward your future husband. You know you can’t be the spouse you need to be! You have two choices: You can run away, overwhelmed by the prospect of failure, or you can comfort yourself because of the character of the person you are about to marry.

Paul wants us to make the second choice. That’s why, in the middle of this passage, you are called to live in daily fellowship and friendship with Christ, to celebrate your union with him by pursuing him every day (see Col. 2:6—8). What Christ brings to our relationship perfectly meets the deficits, disabilities, and disqualifications we bring to the relationship as sinners.

Jesus justifies us. We are alienated, guilty, and rebellious sinners, but his life, death, and resurrection freed us from the guilt, penalty, shame, and alienation of sin. Paul says that we are holy in his sight, without blemish, and free from accusation (see Col. 1:22). This is hard to imagine, but it is past grace!

Jesus is our wisdom. We are foolish and blind. But Jesus gives us all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He frees us from captivity to our own foolishness and gives us wisdom. This is present grace.

Jesus is our power. We are powerless and enslaved. He gives us more present grace, a new ability to live as we were intended to live. We also have the promise of future grace as we look forward to the hope to which the marriage metaphor points (see Col. 1:5), the hope of heaven and an eternal relationship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We will be together with all the saints, minus the guilt, power, and presence of sin.

Why is it so important to highlight these comparisons? Because the Christian life is built upon the foundation of facing who you really are and trusting who Christ truly is. Everything you do will be shaped by the degree to which you act on the blessings that are yours in Christ.

If you only look at yourself and carry around a load of guilt, you will hide, excuse, blame, rationalize, and cover up your shame rather than enjoy the freedom of confession and the joy of forgiveness. You will not enjoy the lasting fruit that comes from following the wisdom that is already yours in Christ! Instead, you will reduce the Christian life to a simplistic list of rules and behaviors that never touch the real problems, and you will be blind to the gaps in your relationship to Christ.

Imagine a little boy who has been born into a very poor family. He grows up malnourished, poorly dressed, and seldom clean, the object of scorn among his peers. He has little education and few prospects. He leaves home and gets a job as a caddy at a luxurious country club. One day, he meets a young woman from an extremely wealthy family. Much to his surprise, she asks him to be her caddy. This begins a long relationship that, amazingly, culminates in their marriage. At the exact moment he says, "I do," his life changes forever! He is the recipient of new status, wealth, power, and prestige. Yet he has earned none of it. It is simply the result of his new relationship. His marriage changes who he is, what he has, how he experiences life, and how he will live the rest of his life.

This illustration cannot capture everything that is true of our relationship to Christ, our husband. One important element is missing. When you and I come to Christ, it's not just our circumstances, relationships, and status that change. We become different at the deepest spiritual level. Christ's grace transforms our inner spiritual natures. We were once dead, but now we are alive. Our hearts, once hardened by sin, become soft and teachable. We become "new creations" (2 Cor. 5:17).

This change is not simply the product of good theology and disciplined obedience. It is the result of our relationship to Christ. Because I am united to him, I am renewed daily by his Spirit. The evil in my heart is progressively replaced with a growing ability to love, worship, and rejoice. I become a peacemaker. I learn to be patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled as the Holy Spirit works in my life.

This is what the Christian life is all about. With joy I affirm that I am a new creation in Christ. With humility I confess that sin is still in my heart and I need God's grace today as much as I did when I first believed. The Spirit overpowers the things that once dominated my life. I am in him, though not yet completely like him, so I commit myself to the ongoing heart change that is God's loving focus.

### **Assets and Liabilities: Ways We Forget Christ**

What gets in the way of living out your new relationship to Jesus? What false lovers draw you away from a pure and sincere devotion to Christ? Paul recognized that the things he once considered assets became liabilities when they kept him from seeing his need for Christ.

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. (Phil. 3:4—9)

### **Perceived Assets**

In human relationships, each person contributes some strengths and gifts, but that is not true in this case. Paul had placed his confidence in the assets of his own achievements, pedigree, and morality. All of these things were blessings, but he wrongly put his confidence in a resumé of his own making. We can do the same thing. We can put our confidence in our performance and obedience rather than recognizing them as gifts and strengths that should lead to gratitude.

What strengths and assets pull you away from gratitude to pride? Whatever they are, they can be a liability that keeps you from seeing your constant need for Christ. Let's say you are a parent who faithfully raises your children in a way that pleases God. Could these marks of grace become liabilities? Yes! You may think you are so capable that you lose sight of your dependence on God. You become critical of parents who struggle to raise their children well. When you rely on your gifts instead of Christ, you fail to see them for who they are, and they blind you from seeing Jesus.

### **Christ's Assets**

Meanwhile, Jesus brings assets and no liabilities (Phil. 3:9)! Instead, he pays our debt! When we see this, it changes our perspective on the things that happen to us. If blessings come, they are opportunities to thank God for his goodness. If difficulties come, they are opportunities to grow more dependent upon him.

All of us respond to life based upon who we think we are and what we think we have. Suppose you are a homeless person trying to survive on the street by begging for spare change. One day you learn that a wealthy uncle has died, leaving you a fortune. All that belonged to him has become yours, though you haven't done a thing to deserve it. What would you do? It would be irrational to keep begging on the street! If your mind were clear, you would draw on those financial resources to buy a house. And you would probably find ways to help others you had known on the streets.

Christ brings enormous assets into your relationship. These assets are now yours as much as they are his. He has made you an heir of his assets. You are no longer a beggar on the street. Your bank account is full. You can begin living in a way that reflects who you really are now.

### **Getting Practical**

In 2 Peter 1:3—9, Peter says that many Christians live ineffective and fruitless lives because they have forgotten who they are in Christ. Consider the following examples of how our union to Christ shapes the way we live in difficulty or blessing.

#### **Loss of a Job**

In our culture, a well-paying job is important. For some it is the source of security and identity. The loss of a job not only brings financial stress, but it can rock one's entire world when people attach their identity and sense of security to something they have no guarantee will be there tomorrow.

In contrast, a believer can approach his career with a deep appreciation of his identity and security in Christ. The loss of a job may hurt, but the most valuable things in life are not at stake. Because of your marriage to Christ, you have resources that go far beyond your own wisdom, character, and strength. Your husband controls the details of your life and has your good as his goal. This protects you from discouragement and gives you courage and faith in a difficult time.

#### **Working at a Thankless Job**

When we look to relationships, circumstances, and accomplishments for a sense of fulfillment, it is difficult to be trapped in an unsatisfying job. But when our fulfillment comes from Christ, we do not approach life feeling needy. We can face each day with a contentment and joy no job could ever give. This does not mean that you will never be discouraged, tired, or bored, but it will mean that you have someone to trust who will help you through the difficulty.

We have been chosen from the mass of humanity to live in an intimate union with Christ. It is amazing even to be tolerated by God. It would be an honor simply to be invited to the wedding!

It is beyond comprehension to be the beloved bride of the King of kings and Lord of lords! When you understand this, you can't help but live life aware of the honor, privilege, and blessing that are yours. Yes, your job may bore you. Yes, you had hoped to do something more significant. Yes, you wish you could find a way out. But you do not go to work searching for fulfillment. It may give you a sense of dignity, but it does not define you. In Christ you are full, joyful, and satisfied. Although you have a thankless job, you know that Christ never forgets what you do in his name. As part of the bride of Christ, you are connected to the most important things in the universe. Your union with him gives meaning to everything you do and say.

### **Your Burden as a Single Parent**

You panic when you realize you have a job meant for two people: a husband and a wife. Impossible! Unfair! These reactions are rooted in a crucial mistake: we look to ourselves to see if we have the wisdom and strength to do what needs to be done. When we realize that we don't, we get discouraged, angry, and bitter. We have forgotten who we are in Christ. No single (or married) parent has the wisdom and strength needed to care for his or her children, but Christ is the source of all wisdom and strength and he promises to give it to his bride. No single (or married) parent has the godly character the role requires, but Christ has given us his Spirit so that we can do and say what is right and good. You may be a single parent but you are still married to Christ. He will provide for you fully in your admittedly difficult role.

### **Chronic Physical Suffering**

We tend to assume that we will always be healthy and that physical pain will be temporary. Physical suffering is made much harder if health has been a source of security and well-being. In a fallen world our bodies are always wasting away. It is not wise to place our hope in them. What a difference it makes to know that the most precious things in life are not physical. Although poor health makes life difficult, it cannot rob you of your identity, your meaning and purpose, your joy, or your sense of personal rest. When you respond to physical suffering with an awareness of your eternal union with Christ, you can say with Paul, "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16). No matter what our physical condition, we are strengthened by new mercies every morning, encouraged by God's love, and empowered by the Spirit. We would like to retain our strength and avoid chronic pain, but we can fix our eyes on the reality of our union with Christ and the resources he gives.

### **Earthly Success and Blessing**

Just as difficulties are to be experienced through our union to Christ, so, too, are good circumstances. They can be as much of a liability as difficulties. When things are going well, we can think we are more favored by God than those who suffer. We can get self-righteous and critical of others as well. God knew the temptation of blessing when he gave Israel a land overflowing with good things. He reminded them not to forget him as they entered the Promised Land:

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. 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. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, 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... You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." 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 forefathers, as it is today. If you ever forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the Lord destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the Lord your God. (Deut. 8:10—20)

It is tempting to forget God and to grow proud and independent in times of difficulty and blessing. But remembering your union with Christ reminds you that any good thing in your life is the result of his mercy and grace, not your own wisdom, goodness, and effort. Any effort we put into our lives began with the strength he gives us and continues because he is committed to us forever!

Christ gives us all we need to draw nearer to him and enjoy him amid difficulties and blessings. We may get tired, but not despondent. We will be sad, but not hopeless. We will endure pain, but we will not give up. We will enjoy blessings, but not grow proud. We see that our lives do not consist only in what we have, how we feel, or what we have accomplished, but in who we are in Christ. This enables us to stand where we would once have fallen down.

As we think about how change happens, we need to start at the beginning. We have a future because God is committed to finishing what he started in us; we have a Redeemer who has rescued us from our sins, given us his Spirit, and made us his bride. This is true of us as individuals, but we are also part of a much bigger community. We are members of the body of Christ. The bride of Christ consists of everyone who trusts in Christ and is united to him. This community is the context for change we will consider next.

## **Acting the Miracles: God's Work and Ours in the Mystery of Sanctification, Chapter 2 by Kevin DeYoung**

This also was a message Kevin delivered at Desiring God 2012 National Conference

### **Act the Miracle: God's Work and Ours in the Mystery of Sanctification**

My aim in this chapter is to correct a problem, and the problem is this: believing, preaching, praying, counseling, and self-diagnosing as if there was only one proper motivation for holiness. My concern is that as we try to help people on the journey of sanctification, we not unnecessarily limit ourselves. I fear we too quickly remove some of the tools from our sanctification tool belt. We set aside some of the weapons of our warfare. We flatten the promises and commands and warnings of Scripture, so we no longer allow ourselves to say all that the Bible would have us say.

Jesus is our great physician. Like any good doctor, he knows how to write different prescriptions for different illnesses. He has many doses at his disposal. He understands unique personalities and sins and situations. He is gracious to come at us in his Word — with all sorts of truth, for all sorts of people, from all sorts of angles — to keep us striving after holiness. Jesus has many medicines for our motivation.

### **Different Injuries, Different Applications**

When I'm away from home, my wife usually calls at night to fill me in on the day. One night not long ago, my wife called me to talk about bees. She said there were all sorts of bees outside chasing the children. She tried to get them out, but one bee had disappeared into our three-year-old son's shirt. Suddenly he started screaming, "The bee! The bee! It's in my shirt!"

So, like a good mom, she ripped off his little shirt, threw it down, and started stomping it with all her might. "Stupid bee!" my wife cried defiantly. "Stupid bee!" But the damage was done. Our youngest son, the one with lots of allergies, had been stung in the back. "I gave him as much Benadryl as the law allows," she related on the phone. That's what you do when your three-year-old gets a bee sting. You pump him full of allergy medicine.

I fear that, by flattening the promises, commands, and warnings of Scripture, we set aside weapons in the warfare of sanctification.

That's not what you would do on all occasions (though parents will tell you there are worse ideas than loading your kids up with Benadryl). When your child is stung by a bee, you give him some drugs, hold him on your knee as long as he likes, and whisper in his ear, "It'll be okay, love. It'll be okay." But when the same son storms in the house, apoplectic from a tiny scrape on his knee, you tell him to buck up and go back outside. Good parents, like good doctors, understand that different injuries call for different application.

I think back to the days when I ran track and cross country in high school. Whenever I had an injury, the student trainers would tell me the same thing. Whether I had a hip flexor or shin



splints or a sprained ankle or a lacerated spleen, they always told me to “ice it and take a couple ibuprofen.” That was that. I wanted an X-ray or a CT scan or a replacement foot or something. But they didn’t wander far from home. If you could be fixed with ice and ibuprofen, they had the prescription for you. If not, you were out of luck.

Good doctors know how to give different prescriptions to different patients. That’s my point. My fear, however, is that when it comes to the care of souls, we get locked into a solitary prescription and stick with it no matter what. We tend to find one true, good, helpful biblical motivation for holiness and make that the equivalent of ice and ibuprofen.

Let me give you a few examples.

### **Duty Is Not Enough**

Duty is one of the motivations that’s true but often unhelpful all by itself. It’s a biblical word, so we should not be afraid to use it. Jesus tells us in [Luke 17:10](#), “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” And [Ecclesiastes 12:13](#) concludes: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” We have an obligation to keep God’s commandments because he is God and we are not. That’s duty, *and* it’s not a bad word. But it’s usually not all God says. Normally, when God comes at us with commands, he says more than, “Listen up. I am the Lord your God. So start obeying.” He comes with a multiplicity of motivations.

Think of the Ten Commandments. God doesn’t simply give us a list of commands. He motivates with promises, threats, and theology.

- He starts by saying “I’m the Lord your God. *Your* God. I brought you out of Egypt. Do not worship anything or anyone else. I’m the God who saved you.”
- He says, “Don’t bow down to graven images.” Why? “Because I’m a jealous God. I will visit your sins to the third and fourth generation if you disobey, but show steadfast love to thousands of generations if you love me and keep my commandments.”
- He says, “Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for he will not hold you guiltless.” In other words, you’ll have trouble on your hands if you ignore this one.
- He says about the fourth commandment in Exodus, “Observe the Sabbath day because God rested on the seventh day.” And in Deuteronomy: “Take a break. Give your people a break because you were slaves once too. So don’t be treating your servants like they’re slaves.” Both iterations contain motivations for obedience.
- He says, “Honor your father and mother, that it may go well with you.” Here too we see God promising blessing for those who obey.

Even with the Ten Commandments, God does not resort to duty alone. He offers many reasons and incentives for obeying his commands.

### **Gratitude Is Not Enough?**

Gratitude is another one of the biblical motivations that should not be made the be-all and end-all of our sanctification. I belong to the Reformed tradition and embrace the Heidelberg Catechism, which is known for its three sections of guilt, grace, and gratitude. I believe that in [Romans 12:1](#) where Paul says, “I appeal to you . . . by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,” he’s harkening back to all of the promises in Romans 1–11 and inviting us to live a gratitude-informed life of faith.

We see in [Ephesians 5:4](#) that there should be “no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.” Gratitude helps to squeeze out what is mean and bitter and nasty. So whatever problems you may have as an angry person, one of your problems is a gratitude problem. It’s entirely appropriate to connect gratitude with the struggle for sanctification.

But gratitude by itself is not enough. It can quickly turn into a debtor’s ethic where we think, “All that I have has been given to me by God, so now I must live the rest of my life trying to pay him back.” If we talk only about gratitude, we end up looking backward at God’s blessings and never forward in faith toward his promises. Duty is fine. Gratitude is good. But they aren’t enough all by themselves.

### **Justification Is Not Enough**

Let me give you one final example, and this one may hit even closer to home. As important as justification is for the Christian, it’s not meant to be the only prescription in our pursuit of holiness. Without a doubt, it is gloriously true that we are accepted before God because of the work of Christ alone, the benefits of which we receive through faith alone, by grace alone. That ought to be our sweet song and confession at all times. Justification is enough to make us right with God forever, and it is certainly a major motivation for holiness. If we are accepted by God, we don’t have to live for the approval of others. If there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus, then we don’t have to fear the disappointment of others.

There’s no doubt that justification is fuel for our sanctification. But it is not the only kind of fuel we can put in the tank. If we only remind people of our acceptance before God, we will flatten the contours of Scripture and wind up being poor physicians of souls.

Think of [James 4:1](#): “What causes quarrels and . . . fights among you?” James does not say, “You’re fighting because you have not come to grips with your acceptance in the gospel.” He says, in effect, “You’re at each other’s throats because you’re covetous and you’re selfish. You want things that you don’t have. You’re demanding. You’re in love with the world. You’re envious. That’s what’s going on in your heart right now.” Now, we might try to connect all that

with a failure to believe the gospel, but that's not what James says. He blames their quarrels on their love of the world.

You have only to be a parent for a short time to see that people sin for all sorts of reasons. Lately we've been using the excellent book *Long Story Short* for our morning devotions with the kids. When we came to the story of Cain and Abel, the book suggested a little lesson where you hand a ten-dollar bill to one child but not to the others. Then you ask the kids, "What would your response be if I gave your sister ten dollars because she did something very pleasing to me, and I gave you nothing?"

The aim of the lesson is to relate to Cain's envy toward Abel. So I just asked the question, and my son, in whom there is no guile, replied without hesitation, "Daddy, I'd punch you in the stomach." Now what's going on in his heart at that moment? Is his most pressing need to understand justification, or is there a simpler explanation? I think that my son at that moment, like the people James was addressing, was ready to fight because of covetousness. He saw ten dollars, thought of the Legos he could buy with it, and was willing to do whatever he had to, to get what he wanted.

The problem with much of our thinking on sanctification is that we assume people are motivated in only one way. It's similar to the mistake some of those associated with Christian psychology fall into. They assume a universal-needs theory. They operate from the principle that everyone has a leaky love tank that needs to be patched up and filled up. If people could only be loved in the right way, they'd turn around and be loving people. Well, I don't doubt there is some commonsense insight there. But does the theory explain everyone? Is this the problem with Al-Qaida or Hamas — they all have leaky love tanks? Or are some other issues at play?

I have no problem acknowledging that sin is always an expression of unbelief. But there are a lot of God's promises I can disbelieve at any moment. Justification by grace alone through faith alone is not the only indicative I can doubt. I can disbelieve God's promise to judge the wicked or his promise to come again or his promise to give me an inheritance or his promise to turn everything to my good. These are all precious promises, each one a possible remedy for indwelling sin. To remind each other of justification is never a wrong answer. It is a precious remedy, but it is not the only one.

### **Colossians from the Sky**

I've tried to make the negative case that there is no single, solitary biblical motivation for holiness. Now let's see the positive case for the multiplicity of motivations.

In Colossians 3 we see a staggering array of motivations for holiness. The first part of the chapter, verses 1–17, gives a macro-level view of how God motivates us. It deals with general commands, foundational principles. And in the last part of the chapter — the household code in verse 18 and following — we get the micro-level view that zeroes in on the family and day-to-

day life. We'll start with the big picture before moving into the nitty-gritty where God gives specific motivations for specific commands.

### **Full of Imperatives**

The first thing to notice is that this passage is full of imperatives. Paul wants the Colossians to live a certain way. He doesn't assume that by telling them the good news of the gospel, life transformation will automatically happen. He tells them what a Christian life should look like. Just look at the commands in chapter 3:

- Verse 2: "Set your minds on things that are above."
- Verse 5: "Put to death . . . what is earthly." That means immorality, impurity, evil desire, idolatry, and covetousness.
- Verse 8: "Put them all away," which includes anger and wrath and malice and slander and obscene talk.
- Verse 9: "Do not lie."
- Verse 12: "Put on . . . compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."
- Verse 15: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts."
- Verse 16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you."
- Verse 17: "Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

The whole passage is a long series of statements with imperatival force. God wants us to live a certain way. He wants us to grow progressively into the holiness we already have positionally in Christ. God wants us to move from *here* — less sanctified, less obedient — to *there* — more like Christ, more like God.

And notice what he does to spur on that movement. He doesn't just give a long list of commands. He provides motivation. He offers incentives. In other words, God gives theology. If you don't care about theology, you don't care about holiness. Because what God does in chapter 3 is to give the Colossians lots of theology to stir them up to this new kind of life.

### **Do You Know Where You Are?**

Paul says in verses 1 and 2, "If . . . you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." Do you see the motivation? Set your mind on heavenly things. Why? Because you have been raised from the grave with Christ, and you have been raised in his ascension so that you now are seated in the heavenly places with Christ. Here's the

logic: if, in Christ, you now reside in heaven, why are you making choices as if you lived in hell? Our present placement with Christ is a motivation for our ongoing progress in Christlikeness.

“If you don’t care about theology, you don’t care about holiness.”

God wants to ask you a question: Do you know where you are right now? Yes, you are in your house or in front of your tablet or on a plane or wherever. But do you know *where* you are? You’re seated with Christ. You’re joined with him. You’ve been raised with him. You are where Christ is. Shouldn’t this make a difference in how you live?

I remember as a child never being able to enter the dining room of our house. One whole wing of the house was quarantined for holidays and special guests. The room had white carpet with vacuum tracks always showing. There were fancy chairs and fine china. It was a sacred room. It’s where we ate with missionaries or pastors, or where we had Thanksgiving dinner. There was something about being in that room. We knew as kids we were in a special place. When I sat in those tall chairs with the stiff high backs and stared at my salad and multiple forks, I knew I needed to be on my best behavior. Just because of where I was.

This is Paul’s point and the engine of our motivation. If we have been raised with Christ and are seated with Christ in a place of infinite holiness, what sort of people ought we to be? Why wouldn’t we live like where we live?

### **The You That Was and the You That Is Yet to Come**

Then we see in verse 3 that we’ve not only been raised, but we first died. “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” To turn from your past of sin and your unrighteousness, you have to do more than just turn the page. People might tell you to turn over a new leaf, but that’s not nearly drastic enough.

You have to consider your “old self” dead and buried. You have to picture Christ on the cross and see him hanging there, not only for the penalty for your sin but also for the power of sin. You have to see that on the cross with Christ is the you that was into drugs, and the you that manipulated people, and the you that was angry all the time, and the you that was filled with bitterness, and the you that lived from sensuality to sensuality. That you is dead. That’s what Paul is getting at when he says, “You have died.”

If we keep going on to verse 4, we see the motivation working in the opposite direction. “When Christ who is your life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory.” Instead of considering what we once were in sin, now Paul directs our attention to what we will become when Christ appears and we appear with him in glory. God is reminding us, “Look, there’s a better you that you’d better get used to. I’m going to make you like Christ, and that work starts right now.”

Sanctification and glorification are cut from the same cloth. The latter is the heavenly completion of the former. The process of making us perfectly glorified, fit for heaven for all

eternity, is underway now. God motivates us by having us think of what we will be when Christ, our life, appears. Think of who you will be without sin, without anger, without lust, without bitterness. Think of that you and live it out now.

When we want to meet a specific goal, we often visualize the completion of that goal. If you want to lose weight, for example, you get a picture of the skinny you in your mind. You hold up the picture of the muscular you you've always imagined. Whether it's a real picture or one you've made up, it's there and it's motivating. God, in a manner of speaking, wants us to visualize those spiritual jeans we are going to fit into on the last day and start squeezing into them now. "We are God's children now," the Bible says elsewhere, "and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is" ([1 John 3:2](#)). In other words, consider what you will be and start being that person.

### **The Grace of Fear**

We see a different kind of motivation in [Colossians 3:6](#). Paul tells the Colossians to put away earthly desires and then says, "On account of these the wrath of God is coming." Paul is motivating them by the grace of fear.

Some people have a very hard time understanding that threats and warnings are in the Bible for our sanctification. Of course, it's wonderfully true that God will keep his elect and preserve them to the end. But how do you think he accomplishes this work of preservation? One way is by warning them of what will happen if they do not persevere. In God's people, warnings like the one in verse 6 stir us up to love and good deeds. The Christian doesn't despair at these threats of judgment. He pleads, "O Lord, keep me in the love of God as you have promised." We ought to see the warnings in Hebrews and in passages like this as God's means of preserving the saints.

Sometimes in an effort to be gospel centered, we shy away from the warnings in Scripture. I understand the impulse. We know that many tender souls need to hear how much God loves them. We need to hear about our new identity in Christ. We need to know God is for us and not against us.

But there are also hard hearts in the church — maybe some reading this book — who need to know that the way they are living right now and the stuff they are into right now is why the wrath of God is coming. Some people need to be shaken from their lethargy and realize that the wrath of God will be poured out on the earth for the things they consider light and trivial offenses. Some people need the literal hell scared out of them.

"God, in a manner of speaking, wants us to visualize those spiritual jeans we are going to fit into on the last day and start squeezing into them now."

But you say, "Shouldn't we be emphasizing God's grace? Isn't it all of grace? Shouldn't our preaching and counseling be all about grace?" And, of course, it should be. But what makes us think that the warning of God's wrath is not his grace to us? We are not giving to our friends, or

to ourselves, or to our people, all the grace that God has for us if we do not make known that the wrath of God is coming. God is nothing but grace to his children, but this grace can come to us in brighter and darker hues.

### **Speaking the Truth into Us**

Paul goes on in verses 9 and 10 to describe who we are as new creations in Christ. Then in verse 11 he explains that Christ is all and in all. That's why, according to verse 12 and following, we ought to bear with one another, love one another, and maintain unity with one another. God wants us to know who we are and then live like it.

I love what these Colossian Christians are called: chosen ones, holy and beloved. Don't pass over this deliberate language. God speaks to us in this way for a reason. When I was in junior high, I played one year of football, which was one too many for me. I had kind of a gruff coach who smoked a lot and encouraged very little. The only thing I was good at was the warm-up laps. I would be way out in front of the big guys. But it didn't help all that much when we had to actually run into people during a game. Coach would sometimes say "helpful" things to me like, "Wow, DeYoung, where'd you get all them bruises?" Not quite inspirational. In high school, my cross country coach was known to say things like, "Hey, DeYoung, don't let the girls beat you." Also very encouraging.

But the best coaches know how to motivate their players, even when they need correction. He might pull you aside and say, "Look. I picked you for this team. You are as good as anyone out there. We need you in the game. Now listen, you gotta get your head in the game." That's what I picture God, through the apostle Paul, doing here in verse 12. He's gently pulling us aside to point us in the right direction.

Good parents do the same thing. The way in which a father talks to his son, and the language he uses to address him, can make all the difference. You can bark out commands to your son, or you can say, "Listen, you are my son, and I love you with all my heart. You are my special boy. You are smart and bright, and I am so proud of you. You will always be my child, and I will always be your daddy. But we got to talk about some of the things you're doing." The language of naming and identification are sincere, but they are also instrumental in motivating the child to obey. In the same way, God reminds the Colossians that he chose them, set his affection upon them, and considers them holy in Christ.

We see the same approach in the next verses. We've been forgiven, so we ought to forgive (verse 13). We are beloved, so we ought to love (verse 14). We are one body, so we ought to be at peace with one another (verse 15). You don't slap your own face. You don't kick your own shins. You don't slander the other members of the body of Christ. God speaks the truth into us that we might live according to our true God-given identity.

### **An Angular Gospel**

Do you see the multiplicity of motivations coming from a dozen different angles? God doesn't just say, "Here's a list and do it." He says, "Let me give you the reasons to obey."

Now perhaps you hear that and think, *Okay, that's cool. I see a lot of motivations there. But, man, that's so much theology. I could never do that. I'm not Paul. I'm not a scholar. I don't think like that. When I get to talk to my children, or I got to preach a sermon, or I go to talk to my small group, I don't think of any of this. I can tell them what God commands, but I'll never come up with all these motivations.*

Well, step back and think for a moment about what Paul is doing here in Colossians 3. There are basically three prescriptions: Paul tells them what was, he tells them what is, and he tells them what will be. You died. You were raised. You're not your old self any more.

I heard an illustration one time of a pastor talking to a young man struggling with same-gender attraction. The young man called his pastor and said, "I'm feeling these things again. I'm going to go out tonight. I'm going to go to those places. I'm going to do the things I used to do." The pastor's response was extremely wise. "No, you're not going to do those things," he told him. "That's not you. That's not who you are anymore." He reminded the young man of what was.

Then we remind people of what is. You're in heaven. You're a new creation. You're in Christ. You're one body.

And finally, we need to remind each other of what will be. The wrath of God is coming. Christ is coming. A glorious appearing is coming. An inheritance is coming. You have to think of what was, what is, what will be. God uses all of it to motivate his people unto holiness.

### **Colossians on the Ground**

We've looked at the macro level; now let's get in closer to the ground. How does God motivate us to the specific activity of holiness? In 3:18–4:1 Paul addresses six kinds of people: wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves, and masters. We can boil down the instruction into one foundational command for each group.

- Wives, submit to your husbands.
- Husbands, love your wives.
- Children, obey your parents. \*Fathers, do not provoke your children.
- Slaves, be diligent.
- Masters, be fair.

Again, notice what we *don't* see. God doesn't give the list of commands in the way I just gave it to you. He doesn't tick off the commands like some kind of bookmark or bulletin insert. He gives reasons and provides motivation for these commands. Let's look at each of the six in turn.



## **Wives, Submit to Your Husbands**

There are dozens of reasons wives ought to obey this command, but Paul mentions only one of those reasons here. Wives should submit to their husbands because it “is fitting in the Lord” (verse 18). There’s an order in God’s design, a way rulers and citizens should relate to each other, a way for parents and children to relate, a way for elders and church members, and a way for wives and husbands. It is a beautiful design. Wives shouldn’t grit their teeth, swallow hard, and submit with a bitter heart because, well, “I guess it’s in the Bible.”

God wants us to see that his design for men and women is good. It’s fitting. Things work the way they should when wives are graciously, humbly, intelligently submissive to their husbands. Notice, the husband does not force submission; the wife freely gives it. God is not telling the husbands to be dictators. He’s telling the wives to embrace the way God made men and women. He wants wives to do what fits.

We bought a couch from IKEA last summer. IKEA is great because the furniture is so cheap, but one of the reasons it’s cheap is that it comes in big cardboard boxes. C.J. Mahaney was actually preaching at our church that weekend and was in town, so he went to IKEA with me to get the couch. Yes, it was quite a sight — the two of us walking through a maze of Swedish furniture and filling up my Suburban with cardboard boxes. Luckily for C.J., he left before I had to put the stuff together. What a pain.

I opened up the four couch boxes and realized the instruction manual contained not a single word. Zero. Not in any language. All they gave me was an Allen wrench and a lot of pictures. I can’t tell you how long it took me to put the couch together, but it was roughly equivalent to that of my seminary degree. I had legs pointing every which way and pieces upside down. Eventually, though, it all fit together. Just like the manual told me. Just as it was designed. Now it’s a great piece of furniture.

God gives us these commands for husbands and wives so we can have a marital couch to sit on. God wants wives to submit to their husbands because this is what’s right. This is his design. This is what’s proper and good and fitting.

## **Husbands, Love Your Wives**

Unlike the other five groups, no motivating factor is explicitly mentioned for the husbands. But there is an implicit appeal when Paul says, “Do not be harsh with them” (verse 19). God wants husbands to do what is good for their wives. He wants husbands to love their wives as Jesus commanded, by treating them as they would want to be treated themselves. He wants husbands to consider their wife’s feelings, which was a countercultural thing to do in the first century.

Some people look at these household codes and write them off as nothing but Greco-Roman patriarchy. But God’s standard is actually different in important ways. A wife existed for the pleasure and the service of her husband. Considering the feelings of your wife was not the

cultural norm. God says it should be. The husband must love the wife and love her in a caring, sensitive, considerate way. That's God's blueprint.

God understands the particular temptations of men and woman. In her fallenness, the wife is tempted to usurp her husband's authority, just like Eve did. So she is told to submit. The husband, in his fallenness, is tempted to abdicate his God-given headship, like Adam did, by becoming either a doormat or a dictator. So husbands are told to love their wives and not be harsh with them.

### **Children, Obey Your Parents**

In verse 20, Paul provides a very important motivation for children to obey their parents: it pleases the Lord. Sometimes Christians can give the impression that pleasing God is a sub-biblical motivation. "We're totally justified," someone might say. "We're totally accepted. If we tell our kids to please God, we are just giving them more law. We are training them to be little moralists. We're discipling them to think of God as a kind of Santa Claus keeping a naughty-and-nice list."

Husbands, like Adam, are tempted to abdicate their headship by becoming doormats or dictators.

Obviously (or maybe not so obviously), that's not how God wants us to parent, because that's not what God is like with his children. But don't let the potential abuse of this "pleasing God" language lead you to suppress what Scripture clearly says. One of the principal motivations for holiness is the pleasure of God.

- [Colossians 1:10](#): Those who bear fruit and every good work and increase in the knowledge of God are pleasing to God.
- [Romans 12:1](#): Presenting your body as a living sacrifice pleases God.
- [Romans 14:18](#): Looking out for your weaker brother pleases God.
- [1 Thessalonians 2:4](#): Teaching the Word in truth pleases God.
- [1 Timothy 2:3](#): Praying for your governing authorities pleases God.
- [1 Timothy 5:4](#): Supporting family members in need pleases God.
- [Hebrews 13:16](#): Sharing with others pleases God.
- [1 John 3:22](#): Keeping the commandments pleases God.

Over and over, more than a dozen times in the New Testament, we have this motivation. We ought to be generous. We ought to be godly. We ought to love and live a certain way *because it pleases God*.

Some of us have taken justification to mean we no longer have a dynamic relationship with our heavenly Father, as if God is indifferent to our sin and our obedience. But Scripture says we can grieve the Holy Spirit, and in Hebrews 12 we see that a father disciplines those he loves. God is not pleased when we sin. Or, as John Calvin puts it, God can be “wondrously angry with his children.” This doesn’t mean God is ever against us as his justified people. He is always for us. But just as a parent can be upset with a child, so God can consider our actions grievous and discipline us accordingly.

If that kind of dynamism discourages you, consider the flip side. We can also *please* God with our efforts. Through the finished work of Christ, our good deeds are rendered delightful to God. When we hear the language of “pleasing God,” some of us panic because we only relate to God as a judge. But he is also our Father. If you think, “I have to please God with my obedience because he is my judge,” you will undermine the good news of justification by faith alone. But you ought to reason this way: “I’ve been acquitted. The Lord is my righteousness. I am justified fully and adopted into the family of God for all eternity. I am so eager to please my Father and live for him.”

“One of the principal motivations for holiness is the pleasure of God.”

It’s good to want to protect justification, but don’t do it at the expense of a dynamic relationship with your heavenly Father. There is a difference between saying to your child, “God is watching over you, and when you don’t share your toys, you make baby Jesus cry,” and saying, “God is our Father, and when you listen to what Mommy and Daddy say and you try to do what they want you to do, it makes God really happy. He gets a smile on his face when he sees you trying to do the right thing.” That’s what Paul is saying here to the children at Colossae. It’s how God means to motivate all of us.

### **Fathers, Do Not Provoke Your Children**

In [Colossians 3:21](#) Paul issues a single command for fathers, along with one reason. Do not exasperate or needlessly upset your children lest they become discouraged. Isn’t it interesting that the two commands related to the men in particular have the same sort of motivation: *think of how your actions and attitude affect others*.

It’s as if God said, “Would you think about your wives and what it’s like when you’re such a harsh, boorish person? Would you think about your children when you provoke them to anger and see their countenance fall?” Paul is appealing to the welfare of those under their charge. I think he’s also appealing to the natural love they have as husbands and fathers. They should *want* to make their wives and children happy.

I say with shame as a father that I have fallen on the wrong side of this command many times. I have been quick to anger. I have lost my temper and my patience. I’ve tried to break the will of my child and ended up crushing his spirit. God would not have us parent that way. He wants dads to think before they bark.

## **Servants, Be Diligent**

Scripture is not promoting with these instructions the institution of chattel or race-based slavery, which we're familiar with today. The apostle Paul was simply regulating a very different kind of slavery prevalent throughout the world at the time. His instructions do not defend or advocate for the kind of institution that the word *slavery* brings to our minds.

In fact, the updated version of the ESV translates *doulos* as “bondservant” instead of “slave” because the context suggests that these men and women were not treated as absolute and lifelong possessions of another. Whatever the exact situation, Paul is merely trying to address a cultural institution that showed no signs of going away.

Remarkably, the motivation is the same for both the servant and the master. In both instances, Paul says, in effect, “Remember, you have another master.” He wants all those working for some mean, nasty boss to remember that ultimately they are serving God, a God who can punish and reward, a God who sees our quality. Therefore, we ought to work hard “with sincerity of heart” (verse 22). We ought to work “as for the Lord and not for men” (verse 23).

“It’s good to want to protect justification, but don’t do it at the expense of a dynamic relationship with your heavenly Father.”

In other words, God expects us to *transpose our work into a heavenly key*. We are working for our heavenly Master, not simply our particular master. And the Master in heaven knows our hearts. He sees our efforts. He knows our trouble. It’s not the master or employer down here that we need to impress, no matter what he can do to us. It’s the Master up there who matters. We will stand before him on the last day and give account for our labors.

## **Masters, Be Fair**

Paul reasons that same way for those in charge of others. He says in 4:1 that the master must treat his bondservants fairly and justly because he has his own Master in heaven. This is a good word for anyone with some degree of influence, some importance, some directional authority over others. God reminds us, “You may think you are a big shot down here, but remember there is a much bigger shot up there. And you’re answerable to him.

So treat your assistants and your employees and your junior colleagues and your interns justly and fairly.” God is fair to us, so we should be fair to others. He will not show favoritism because we are important in the world’s eyes. He oversees us as we oversee others. So let us exercise our authority on earth in such a way that we would be happy to be under the same kind of authority from heaven.

That’s how God motivates us in the nitty-gritty of life. Can you see how all of the specific nuanced commands of God come together from above and below and behind and in front to push and to pull and to prod us to holiness? God knows what we need to hear and how we

need to hear it. He speaks to us in many ways that we may make progress in the one way of Jesus.

### **Three Final Thoughts**

What's the take-home from all this? How should this macro and micro look at Colossians 3 influence our daily walk with Christ? How should we think about the multiplicity of biblical motivations for holiness? Here are three final thoughts.

#### **1) Don't try to be smarter than Scripture.**

You may be thinking at this point: "Yes, I see many different motivations. I see what you're saying, and I affirm Scripture speaks in multiple ways. But if we look at the reason behind the reason, and the reasons behind that, we'll see there's really only one motivation: we don't believe the gospel. We don't know how much God loves us and how accepted we are." You may be raising that objection in your mind. And yet, as I said at the beginning, I'm suspicious of reducing all our problems to one mega problem.

I'm suspicious not because the answers don't work, but because many answers can work. I have no problem saying that at the root of every sin is some misfiring of the gospel. I think that's true. But I also think it's true that at the root of every sin is some failure to recognize the lordship of Christ, or to believe the promises of God, or to accept the goodness of God's commands, or to trust the Word of God, or to recognize our union with Christ, or to celebrate the character of God, or to find satisfaction in Jesus, or to live by the Spirit. God gives us a variety of concrete motivations, and even if in a systematic-theology sort of way we could, by logical progression, show that behind every motivation is another motivation, that still wouldn't erase the particularity of the language in Scripture itself.

Augustine was converted by reading [Romans 13:12–14](#), where Paul says, "The day is at hand, so then let us cast off the works of darkness" (verse 12). This passage affected Augustine because it revealed to him his sin and that he could have relief from his wretched way of life. Yes, there is implicit good news in the text, but it hit Augustine with the *force* of warning and conviction of sin.

God counsels us in a hundred ways, and he exchanges a thousand truths for our lies. Let's not be hesitant to employ the full arsenal of scriptural threats and promises and examples and commands. Let's not be smarter than Scripture and say, "Well, I see a warning in the passage, but that doesn't seem to be gospel centered." Take Scripture; safeguard it with our theology; test it against one another. But let's understand that there is more than one way to skin a cat and more than one way to sanctify one too.

#### **2) You need to know your people and yourself.**

Wise counselors know when a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down and when something else is needed, like a strong tonic or a bitter pill. It takes maturity and discernment

to know whether this brother or sister needs the warm hug of truth or the swift kick of truth, because truth does both.

Sometimes we need the swift kick that says, “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters . . . nor thieves . . . nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” ([1 Corinthians 6:9–10](#)). And sometimes we need the warm hug that reassures us, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” ([Romans 8:1](#)).

The Bible is always giving us reasons, always telling us why we should pursue holiness. We have to realize that by virtue of our upbringing and our church tradition and our personality and all we’re reacting against, we will gravitate toward certain kinds of motivations. When some Christians try to help people, they have only one model in mind — Jesus in the temple. So you talk to people with a curled lip and a pointed-out boney finger and feel justified in blasting them all the time.

Somebody may try to say, “Hey, brother, you’ve got to restore people gently” (see [Galatians 6:1](#)). But all you know is that Jesus had a whip and flipped tables. And then there are other people who only think of Jesus with the little children. They figure the only way to speak to people is with a gentle, tender whisper and a warm embrace. But the language of Scripture allows us (expects us!) to approach people in different ways.

Just think of the different images for the people of God. Sometimes the Bible refers to us as weak little lambs that need to be gently carried across the river. Sometimes we are a bruised reed or a smoldering wick. And sometimes we are cows of Bashan. If you think everyone you’re talking to is a cow of Bashan, you’re going to hurt a lot of people. If you think everybody is just a bruised reed and a smoldering wick, you’re not going to have some of the edges you need to have when helping people. You need to know yourself, and you need to know your people.

### **3) Let us celebrate the all-encompassing grace of God in our sanctification.**

God has planned for your holiness. He’s providing for your holiness. And he helps you grow in holiness by pulling and pushing and prodding and provoking from one little degree of glory to the next. This is all of grace — grace to call you to a holy calling, grace to empower you for a holy calling, and grace that God would condescend to try to convince you to pursue this holy calling.

Have you considered the grace of God in condescending to *persuade* us to obey? It would have been well within his right to give us a list and make his demands: “Here are the commands. I’m God, and you’re not. I expect obedience. Now obey.” Have you ever considered what a grace it is that the Bible is so long and has so much theology? It’s God’s way of condescending to our weakness to help us toward holiness. Every promise, every reminder, every threat, every warning, every propositional gospel indicative is God’s grace to you. In one way, his grace has saved you, and by a thousand ways, his grace will lead you home.

