

REFOCUSING ON LIFE'S PRIORITIES

Ron Christian, Compiler

Growing A Godly Life - Devotional Series

Book 7 - "Priorities"

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‘GROWING A GODLY LIFE’ - Series (13 Books)

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INTRODUCTION

By

Ron Christian

Men are breaking their health and selling out their honor to make more money. ‘Success’ in a secular culture is determined by a materialistic standard. The quantity of one’s bank account is more important than the quality of one’s life. Notes Evangelist Billy Graham: “A leading magazine carries an advertisement with this revealing paragraph: ‘Is automation, the use of electronics to run machines, going to fill your home with pleasant surprises? Will magic eyes light each room? Will you own a portable piano, cordless electric clocks and a telephone you can answer without lifting the receiver? Discover how this exciting new development can make your life happier’.” Asks Billy Graham, “Has happiness been reduced to portable pianos and the blinking of magic eyes?” (World Aflame; page 46)

Notes Mavis: “Modern man has a clear vision for secular goals, but dull vision for spiritual goals. It seems that some evil spirit, to use Kierkegaard’s figure of speech, has put a pair of glasses on the nose of this generation. One of the lenses is a powerful magnifying glass; the other is an equally strong reducing glass. Our generation looks at the secular things through the strong lens and at the spiritual things through the reducing one.” (Psychology of Christian Experience; pg. 103)

“In 1923, a very important meeting was held at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. Attending this meeting were nine of the world’s most successful financiers.” It is noteworthy to recognize what happened to these persons 25 years later. “Charles Schwab, the president of the largest independent steel company, died bankrupt and lived on borrowed money; Samuel Insull, the president of the largest utility company, died a fugitive from justice and penniless; Howard Hopson, the president of the largest gas company, went insane; Arthur Sutton, the great wheat speculator, died abroad insolvent; Richard Whitney, the president of the New York Stock Exchange, was finally released from prison; Albert Fall, a member of the President’s Cabinet, was pardoned from prison so he could die at home; Jesse Livermore, the greatest ‘bear’ on Wall Street, died a suicide; Ivar Krugar, head of the world’s greatest monopoly, died a suicide!” (A Challenge to Men From Proverbs; Foster; pg. 11)

The great British preacher, William Sangster, once said: “Material things are regarded as the chief good in life only by those who do not have them.”

‘Everything has its price. Money can buy anything. Unhappiness is caused because of economic deprivation.’ This is the sentiment of many Americans. Too many think that more money would some way solve their problems. The wealth of America is the cause of envy in other lands, but it is revealing to know that the American best-sellers are books on how to be happy.

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It was Hannah More who noted that “the soul on earth is an immortal guest, compelled to starve at an unreal feast; a pilgrim panting for the rest to come; an exile anxious for its native home.” Man’s soul, unattended and ignored, becomes shriveled and starved. The materialist is one who values temporal things more than spiritual things. Materialism may fatten the body, but it starves the soul. It may gratify the senses, but it will rotten the fiber of moral character. It may outwardly give fame and fortune but inwardly it imprisons the poverty-stricken spirit. The result of conforming to cultural standards is mediocrity. To be squeezed into the word’s mold is to be formed into a stunted, dull and manufactured person.

The greedy materialist, who has grown fat on the accumulation of material goods, remains dissatisfied because of the leanness of his soul. To his bitter disappointment he learns that life does not consist in the abundance of things that a man possesses. His riches have only given ulcers to his stomach and taken peace from his mind. His false friends stand by to mock him, and his sad delusion turns to suicidal despair. The crackle of the dollar and the glitter of the coin have lost their appear, for he finally learns that everything does not have its price and there are qualities that have no monetary value. Sliding down the slope of life on his bed of perpetual pain, caused from his indulgent living, the disillusioned secularist realizes that he has been the subject of a cruel tyrant. The sweet wine of frivolous living has left a bitter taste in his mouth. The swinging music of his youth remains as a strange echo in his mind to mock him as a fool. Too many learned too late that “the lover of money shall not be satisfied with money nor the lover of wealth with his gain; this, too, is futility.” (Ecclesiastes 5: 10)

Rev. Harold Brockhoff spoke one time on the nationwide ‘Lutheran Hour’ on the subject of ‘Authentic Life’. He noted, “A minister in our neighborhood was out making calls one afternoon and he rang the bell of a certain house and a woman came to the door, her apron on, flour on her hands - she was holding a can of cherries. She very shortly told him that she didn’t know anything about what he had come to talk about and that she wasn’t interested in finding out either. Then after a few minutes of conversation, as she was about to close the door, the minister asked ‘Do you mind if I ask you what you have in your hand?’ And she answered ‘A can of cherries’. He said, ‘Do you mind if I ask you where you got them?’ She said, ‘Down at the corner, at the store’. And then he asked “Do you mind if I ask what you’re going to do with them?’ Still polite even after this third question she answered ‘Why, I am going to put them into a pie.’ And then the minister said ‘If you don’t mind the observation, those cherries are in a better shape than you are. We know what they are - they are cherries. And we know where they came from - they came from the store. And we know where they are going. And from your conversation you have no idea of who you are, you don’t understand your roots and where you came from and how you got here, and why you’re here and you don’t know where you are going, or why you’re going there.’ After a short moment of stunned silence, the good woman said ‘Won’t you please come in’.”

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Are you, like the woman in this story, living only for this life? Are you so preoccupied with the trivial things of time that you have forgotten the weightier matters of eternity? ‘Only one life to live, t’will soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last.’

The road of materialism is a dead-end road, first, because of the inheritability of laboriously-gained riches. Solomon, in the book Ecclesiastes, bitterly proclaimed this fact when he wrote, “*And I am disgusted about this, that I must leave the fruits of all my hard work to others. And who can tell whether my son will be a wise man or a fool? And yet all I have will be given to him - how discouraging! So I turned in despair from hard work as the answer to my search for satisfaction.*” (Ecclesiastes 2: 18-20, Living Bible)

The road of materialism is a dead-end road, secondly, because riches cause sleepless anxiety. “*He who loves money shall never have enough. The foolishness of thinking that wealth brings happiness! The more you have, the more you spend, right up to the limits of your income, so what is the advantage of wealth - except perhaps to watch it as it runs through your fingers! The man who works hard sleeps well whether he eats little or much, but the rich must worry and suffer insomnia.*” (Ecclesiastes 5; 10-12, Living Bible)

The road of materialism is a dead-end road thirdly, because riches can be easily lost. “*There is another serious problem I have seen everywhere - savings are put into risky investments that turn sour, and soon there is nothing left to pass on to one’s son. The man who speculates is soon back to where he began - with nothing. This, as I said, is a very serious problem for all his hard work has been for nothing; he has been working for the wind. It is all swept away. All the rest of his life he is under a cloud - gloomy, discouraged, frustrated and angry.*” (Ecclesiastes 5: 13-17, Living Bible) Paul instructs us not to set our hopes “*on the uncertainty of riches.*” (I Timothy 6: 7, NASB)

The road of materialism is a dead-end road, fourthly, because money cannot be taken with you when you die. “*Do not be dismayed when evil men grow rich and build their lovely homes. For when they die they carry nothing with them! Their honors will not follow them. Though a man calls himself happy all through his life - and the world loudly applauds success - yet in the end he dies like everyone else, and enters eternal darkness. For man with all his pomp, must die like any animal.*” (Psalm 49: 16-20, Living Bible) “*We didn’t bring any money with us when we came into the world, and we can’t carry away a single penny when we die.*” (I Timothy 6: 7, Living Bible)

It is time that you pray: “God, help me to be a wise investor, laying up treasures in heaven, not on earth; living for eternity, not for mere time. Then my life shall be worth living!” Remember: There is a way that seemeth right unto man - Materialism - but the end thereof is futility and utter frustration. The road of materialism is a dead-end road, fifthly, because material possessions do not have the ability to satisfy the inner longing of the human soul. Man is searching for reality. Earth’s riches do not satisfy the questing soul of man. Said Jesus, “*Beware! Don’t be wishing for what you don’t have.*”

For real life and real living are not related to how rich we are.” (Luke 12: 14, Living Bible)

Listen to the following testimony of a young businessman, seeking satisfaction in earth’s wealth, while all the time realizing that God alone can really satisfy him. “In my life the process goes on. My faith is in frequent conflict with my obsession to participate in the consumption of this world’s fruit. I often feel like a child in a candy store. I wander past the fields of sweet delight, gazing at the vast assortment of choices. All the while in my mind the echoes of my mother’s words warn me against the consequences of over-consumption. Yet, the warnings go mostly unheeded, and I continue to confidently, if not somewhat guilt-tinged, select items which I feel sure will satisfy my desires (‘surely this one will be the last...Oh, just one more’). It’s only when the toothache attacks or the stomach revolts that I consciously pursue my mother’s care, knowing that her caring arms and infinite wisdom will sooth my injuries. Her loving character will forgive my errant ways and soon everything will be alright again. In chagrined humility I wish I could follow her will, knowing full well that if I don’t give in to her will and wisdom completely, I will soon make the same mistakes again. Oh, the tribulations of being an undisciplined child! Fortunately my life is not always this way. I do feel growth frequently. I truly believe God has a plan for me, and even now his works are taking place. I long for greater understanding of his will here on earth. It’s as though I smell the scent of a flower and am trying anxiously to find it. I’ve only seen glimpses of it, but the fragrance is so strong and satisfying that I must continue to pursue. When I possess it (and I will), I will share its beauty with the world. I will promote it vigorously with the pleasure of knowing that it is truly right for those receiving it. In my heart I know that flower is worth pursuing even though the search is trying.” These words, written to me in a personal letter, represent the ‘heart search’ of many young businessmen, financially successful but nevertheless ‘spiritually hungry’ for ultimate reality which material wealth cannot satisfy.

Man is built for eternity! There is within every person a ‘God-shaped vacuum’ which seeks to be filled with God! Man cannot live by bread alone, but by the eternal Word of the eternal God. Man is restless until he finds his rest in God. Man is overbuilt for time; he is built for eternity.

**“And here at last we find
Strict diagnosis of our malady,
Which is, in short, that man is heaven-starved
- Men are born thirsting for infinity.”**

Inherent in every man is a basic desire to live-and to live happily and permanently. A well-known atheist in France confessed his most deep-seated urge: “I have in myself a great need of permanence. I mean a need of believing that there are products not subject to decay and degradation, works on which temporal changes have no influence.”

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Notes William Sangster: “Earth does not satisfy us. I cannot help but feel that is an impressive fact. I warn you against supposing that, if only you had more of this or that, you would be completely satisfied. It is an illusion. Earth cannot satisfy you. William Watson - in his poem ‘World Strangeness’ - asked:

**In this house with starry dome,
Floored with gemlike plains and seas,
Shall I never feel at home,
Never wholly be at ease?
Never! You weren’t meant to.”**

(Daily Readings; William Sangster; pg. 104)

Materialism is a perversion of the God-given acquisitive urge with which humans are born. The Creation Story (Genesis 1-3) talks about God’s will for man to oversee and to manage. Sin has turned this basic urge into the desire to possess and to own, rather than to manage. Sin blinds man to the meaning of material things, causing man to forget that he is steward of material possessions and God alone is the owner of all things.

Faith in God is the only answer to the ‘challenge’ (threat) of materialism. ‘Christian Faith’ (the teaching of the Bible) accepts the ‘challenge of materialism’ and provides solid and ‘balanced’ answers.

The Bible teaches, first, that contentment does not depend upon the abundance of material things which a person possesses. Jesus said, “*Watch out, and guard yourselves from all kinds of greed; because a man’s true life is not made up of the things he owns, no matter how rich he may be.*” (Luke 12: 15, Today’s English Version). Wrote Paul to young Timothy: “*We should be well satisfied without money if we have enough food and clothing.*” (I Timothy 6: 8, Living Bible) The writer to the Hebrew believers gave this command: “*Stay away from the love of money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, ‘I will never, never fail you nor forsake you.’*” (Hebrews 13: 5, Living Bible) In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul shared his ‘secret’ to contentment: “*I have learned how to get along happily whether I have much or little. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of contentment in every situation, whether it be a full stomach or hunger, plenty or want; for I can do everything God asks me to with the help of Christ who gives me the strength and power.*” (Philippians 4: 11-13, Living Bible)

The Bible teaches, secondly, that earthly resources are to be used, not selfishly, but unselfishly to help others. Wrote Paul to the Ephesian church: “*If anyone is stealing he must stop it and begin using those hands of his for honest work so he can give to others in need.*” (Ephesians 4: 28, Living Bible) Paul instructed young Timothy to give the following ‘counsel’ to wealthy persons: *If anyone is stealing he must stop it and begin using those hands of his for honest work so he can give to others in need.*” (Ephesians

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4: 28, Living Bible) Paul instructed young Timothy to give the following ‘counsel’ to wealthy persons: *“Tell those who are rich not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which will soon be gone, but their pride and trust should be in the living God who always richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. Tell them (the wealthy) to use their money to do good. They should be rich in good works and should give happily to those in need, always being ready to share with others whatever God has given them. By doing this they will be storing up real treasure for themselves in heaven - it is the only safe investment for eternity! And they will be living a fruitful Christian life down here as well.”* (I Timothy 6: 17-19, Living Bible)

The Bible teaches, thirdly that believers are not to worry about ‘things’; rather, they are to trust God to supply all their needs. Said Jesus: *“So my counsel is: Don’t worry about ‘things’ - food, drink, and clothes. For you already have life and a body - and they are far more important than what to eat and wear. Look at the birds! They don’t worry about what to eat - they don’t need to sow or reap or store up food - for your heavenly Father feeds them. And you are far more valuable to him than they are. Will all your worries add a single moment to your life?”* (Matthew 6: 25 - 27, Living Bible) Wrote Paul to the Corinthian church: *“Of course, I don’t mean that those who receive your gifts should have an easy time of it at your expense, but you should divide with them. Right now you have plenty and can help them; then at some other time they can share with you when you need it. In this way each will have as much as he needs. Do you remember what the Scriptures say about this? ‘He that gathered much had nothing left over, and he that gathered little had enough.’ So you also should share with those in need.”* (2 Corinthians 8: 13 - 15, Living Bible) *“For God, who gives seed to the farmer to plant, and later on, good crops to harvest and eat, will give you more and more seed to plant and will make it grow so that you can give away more and more fruit from your harvest. Yes, God will give you much so that you can give away much, and when we take your gifts to those who need them they will break out into thanksgiving and praise to God for your help.”* (2 Corinthians 9: 10 - 11, Living Bible)

The Bible teaches fourthly, that believers are to focus on heavenly treasures, not on earthly treasures. Great are Jesus’ promises to His faithful followers: *“Let not your heart be troubled. You are trusting God, now trust me. There are many homes up there where my Father lives, and I am going to prepare them for your coming. When everything is ready, then I will come and get you, so that you can always be with me where I am. If this weren’t so, I would tell you plainly. And you know where I am going and how to get there.”* (John 14: 1-4, Living Bible) Wrote Paul: *“No mere man has ever seen, heard or even imagined what wonderful things God has ready for those who love the Lord.”* (I Corinthians 2: 9, Living Bible)

**“A tent or a cottage, why should I care?
They are building a mansion for me over there!”**

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And yet, even though we Christians have ‘no difficulty’ in singing these words (and others like them) in our ‘hymns and spiritual songs’ in our churches, there are few of us who would be willing to live in tents or small cottages here on earth! We (American) Christians want the ‘best’ - the ‘best’ food, the ‘best’ clothes, the ‘best’ vacations, the ‘best’ jobs, the ‘best’ cars, the ‘best’ furniture and appliances and televisions and computers, the ‘best’ (and very expensive) houses! Not only has ‘mammon’ (money) become the ‘God’ of millions of materialists (non-believers) in our society, but many ‘Christians’ are also highly valuing money, treating it with a near ‘worshipful veneration’! And yet, Jesus often warned his followers and His ‘would-be followers’ about the terrible dangers of money! In his excellent book “Money, Sex & Power”, Richard Foster carefully and Biblically deals with the relevant subject of ‘Money’. Notes Foster: “For Christ money is an idolatry we must be converted ‘from’ in order to be converted ‘to’ him. The rejection of the God mammon is a necessary precondition to becoming a disciple of Jesus. And in point of fact, money has many of the characteristics of deity. It gives us security, can induce guilt, gives us freedom, gives us power and seems to be omnipresent. Most sinister of all, however, is its bid for omnipotence. Behind money are invisible spiritual powers, powers that are seductive and deceptive, powers that demand all-embracing devotion...there is no kind of evil the person who loves money will not do to get it and hold onto it. Dr Karl Menninger once asked one wealthy patient, ‘What on earth are you going to do with all that money?’ The patient replied, ‘Just worry about it, I suppose!’ Dr. Menninger went on, ‘Well, do you get that much pleasure out of worrying about it?’ ‘No,’ responded the patient, ‘but I get such terror when I think of giving some of it to somebody.’ Now, this ‘terror’ is real. When we let go of money we are letting go of part of ourselves and part of our security. But this is precisely why it is important to do it. It is one way to obey Jesus’ command to deny ourselves (Luke 9: 23)”. (Money, Sex & Power by Richard Foster; pgs. 28-30, 43)

In the chapter entitled ‘Kingdom Use of Unrighteous Mammon’ (in the above-mentioned book), Richard Foster offers solid, Biblical, and practical ‘steps’ to help the sincere believer who seeks to ‘conquer’ the ‘giant of materialism’ which regularly plots the overthrow of Christians. “We are to be absolutely clear about the venomous nature of money. But rather than reject it we are to conquer it and use it for non-economic purposes. Money is to be captured, subdued, and used for greater goals. We are called to use money to advance the kingdom of God. What a tragedy it is if all we do is use money in the ordinary ways and not make any greater use of it. One way we lay up treasures in heaven is to invest in the lives of people. That kind of investment we will indeed take with us. Money invested in people is the best possible investment. Of course, we need to keep a certain amount of money in order to carry on the day-to-day business of life, but we want to free up as much as we possibly can in order to place it where the return is eternal.” (Ibid; pgs. 54, 55)

Recently I attended a concert in which about 150 of some of the world’s greatest

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musicians performed. This group of outstanding musicians were all from the Ukraine (a country which, before the ‘fall of communism’ in 1989, was part of the ‘Soviet Union’). The director of this professional group of musicians was from the United States and had gone to the Ukraine in 1992 to live and to organize (recruit) this outstanding group of singers and instrumentalists. The director (who had spent most of his life in America) asked (at one point during the performance) all of the Ukrainians who owned a car to raise their hands. There were only three persons who held up their hands! Then he asked the several hundreds of Americans (in the congregation) to hold up their hands if they owned a car. Needless to say, almost all (if not all) persons in the American audience raised their hands. The director shared that in the Ukraine (a very large and populous Country) there is widespread poverty. One of the members of his musical group - a surgeon who is also a ‘professional’ musician - receives more money each month than the ‘average’ doctor; this highly-trained surgeon receives \$70 per month! When this committed Christian ‘director’ started a church (after being in the Ukraine a few months), he challenged his newly-formed congregation to give to ‘the poor’. They responded: “We are the poor!” But the new pastor (the director of the newly-formed ‘professional’ music group) replied: “As a congregation, let’s give to those who are ‘more poor’ than you are.” And so this ‘poor congregation’ (of Ukrainians) took up an offering to be given to the starving widows (whose ‘allowance’ from the government is \$7 to \$10 per month!). Widows who have no relatives to help care for them, literally starve to death!

Notes David C. Egner, “Jesus didn’t insist on luxury nor seek for the possession of material things. In fact, He didn’t own or possess any property except for the clothes He wore. Compared to our day of investment portfolios, luxury homes, and Platinum Visa cards, Jesus was ‘dirt poor’.” (Our Daily Bread; May 20, 2000)

In the above-mentioned chapter from Richard Foster’s book (“Money, Sex & Power”) Foster notes: “The Christian is given the high calling of ‘using’ mammon without ‘serving’ mammon. We are using mammon when we allow God to determine our economic decisions. If money determines what we do or do not do, then money is our boss. If God determines what we do or do not do, then God is our boss. J. Hudson Taylor would never have launched the great chapter in mission history called the China Inland Mission if he had let money decide. He was an ordinary person with few resources, yet once he had determined that God wanted him to go, he went. God had made the decision, not money. His master was God, and it was this master that he served. Over the course of his effective ministry, God channeled very large sums of money through Hudson Taylor, enough to care for the needs of well over a thousand missionaries. But from his earliest days in the slums of London, Taylor had learned to understand money in the light of the cross. He had learned to use money without serving it.” (Ibid; pgs. 56, 57)

One cannot live a victorious Christian life until he learns how to ‘master mammon’! The

degree of a Christian’s commitment to Christ is revealed by the degree of ‘generosity’ as shown in his ‘check book’! Among several steps which Richard Foster shares in his helpful book, the following are some of the ‘steps’ which believers must take in order to ‘master money’. “Bring the ministry of prayer to bear directly upon money matters. Money is a spiritual issue, and prayer in our chief weapon in the life of the spirit. Let us learn to pray for each other for the binding of greed and covetousness and the releasing of liberality and generosity. In prayer, through the imagination, let us see the power of money broken. Let us picture the spiritual powers behind money brought under the lordship of Christ. Let us visualize money being channeled into needy lives, providing necessary food and medical supplies. Let us imagine Christians in business controlling, investing, and channeling money in new, creative, life-enhancing ways. Let us see the governments of the world diverting their vast resources away from bombs and into bread.” (Ibid; pgs. 59-60)

What should a Christian’s attitude be towards money? A Christian must see that money is a ‘wonderful servant’, but a ‘terrible tyrant’. Is money your ‘servant’, or is money your ‘tyrant’? Notes Richard Foster, “Money is too high on our list of values. As Thomas Merton observed, ‘The true ‘law’ of our day is the law of wealth and material power.’ For Christians, this giving of high priority to money is not just unfortunate, it is idolatry. For the sake of faithfulness to Christ, we need to find ways to shout ‘No’ to the God money. We must dethrone it. One of the best ways is by showing our disrespect of it. When we trample it under our feet we remove its power. When Paul ministered the word of God in Ephesus, many people who had practiced ‘magic arts’ brought their books and other objects and made a huge bonfire. Luke calculated that the estimated value of that act came to ‘fifty thousand pieces of silver’ (Acts 19: 18-20). What they had done was profane something that in their world had become sacred. Without question, money has taken on a sacred character in our world, and it would do us good to find ways to defame it, defile it, and trample it under our feet. So step on it. Yell at it. Laugh at it. List it way down on the scale of values - certainly far below friendship and cheerful surroundings. And engage in the most profane act of all - give it away. The powers that energize money cannot abide that most unnatural of acts, giving. Money is made for taking, for bargaining, for manipulating, but not for giving. This is exactly why giving has such ability to defeat the powers of money.” (Ibid; pgs. 60, 61)

What do you, as a believer, value most in life? There are only two ‘entities’ which have ‘eternal value’ (i.e., that will ‘last forever’) - the Word of God (Bible) and the ‘soul’ (spirit) of a human being. When you spend your money to purchase bibles to distribute to ‘lost people’ who are ‘spiritually hungry’ and who are ready to accept the salvation message of the Bible, you are receiving ‘eternal dividends’ from the investment of your ‘earthly dollars’! Notes Richard Foster, “There are many things we can do to declare that we value people above things. We can be willing to lose money rather than a friendship. We can side with the ‘use’ of church facilities over the ‘preservation’ of facilities. We can provide wages that respond to human need as well as human

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productivity. We can always remember that the child who breaks the toy is more important than the toy. We can give up a major purchase to feed hungry people. The possibilities are endless.” (Ibid; pg. 62)

The Christian must guard against the temptation to manipulate or to intimidate people through the ‘power’ of money. The Christian must never ‘court’ the wealthy person, to gain favors of any kind. The ‘wealthy believer’ must never ‘advertise’ his giving, either in society in general or in the church in particular. The Christian must never use money to exploit others or to gain position or power in his own life. Notes Foster, “For believers, money can never be a bargaining tool or a way to gain status. In the world money means access to the corridors of power; in the Church money should mean nothing. Money should not make people think better of us, for we are part of the fellowship of sinners. Money should not win us leadership roles, for those are determined by spiritual giftedness alone. Money should not make us more necessary to the fellowship, for our dependency is upon God, not money. In the fellowship of the church money should mean nothing.” (Ibid; pg. 63)

The following is a ‘Prayer For Liberation From Materialism’ (written several years ago by the Chaplain of the United States Senate, Peter Marshall):

“Forbid it, Lord, that our roots become too firmly attached to this earth, that we should fall in love with things.”

“Help us to understand that the pilgrimage of this life is but an introduction, a preface, a training school for what is to come.”

“Then shall we see all of life in its true perspective. Then shall we not fall in love with the things of time, but come to love the things that endure. Then shall we be saved from the tyranny of possessions which we have no leisure to enjoy, of property whose care becomes a burden. Give us, we pray, the courage to simplify our lives.”

“So may we be mature in our faith, childlike but never childish, humble but never cringing, understanding but never conceited.”

So help us, O God, to live and not merely to exist, that we may have joy in our work. In Thy name, who alone can give us moderation and balance and zest for living, we pray. Amen.” (The Prayers of Peter Marshall; compiled and edited by Catherine Marshall; pg. 51)

‘Refocus on Life’s Priorities’ - God, the Bible, the saving message of Jesus Christ, the Church (the Body of Christ), human relationships, never-dying souls for whom Christ died! Make your life ‘count’ - for time and for eternity! “Seek first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness!”

CHAPTER ONE

ESTEEM PEOPLE ABOVE 'THINGS'

Matthew 6: 33; Psalm 37: 4; Matthew 19: 29

HAMBURGER FOR THANKSGIVING

It was the afternoon before Thanksgiving and I was planning to make meatloaf and instant potatoes for dinner the next day. I would bake biscuits and make gravy. We still had a package of raspberry kool-aid left from last summer.

My husband was pastoring a very small church in Elizabeth, Colorado, and the last three months had really been rough. Our two year old Daniel had been in the hospital to have his heel-cord lengthened, so he was in a cast. This was cast number 27; the other 26 had been corrective casts.

Our new baby, Laurella, had been in the hospital with a terrific case of bronchitis. My husband had fallen in the bathtub, gashing his forehead open and turning on the hot water. This required an ambulance trip to the hospital fifty miles away in Denver to receive plastic surgery. We had no health insurance.

We were all on the mend now and pretty excited about Thanksgiving. Six year old Cassandra and four year old John had decorated napkins with their crayons. We would spend the afternoon singing, playing games and giving thanks.

The then the telephone rang. A friend in Denver wanted to know if we could come in and pick up a box of groceries and a turkey. The youth group from the church we had previously attended had gathered the food for a family who lived near the church. When they arrived to make the delivery, however, they discovered the occupants had vacated during the night.

Happily, the six of us made the fifty mile journey to Denver. Our hostess fed us cake and ice cream. Then I started complaining about all the troubles that had come our way recently. She quietly listened for quite a while as I dressed the four children in their pajamas; si knew they would go to sleep on the way home.

Our wedding vows had included the phrase, “for richer, for poorer,” and I knew I was marrying a man who wanted to be a pastor. I had claimed Matthew 6: 33 as my life verse. I was always pleasantly surprised at the various methods God used to supply our needs. And I really did thank Him. But I rehearsed every detail of our recent trials to her.

Finally, my friend looked at me and said, “Laura, I would gladly give you all the money I have if I had four beautiful, healthy children like yours.” She and her husband had only one child, a beautiful girl who was retarded.

I looked at my two girls and two boys and my wonderful husband and decided that I should start praising God instead of complaining. Suddenly, I realized how rich I really was and how many blessings had come my way. On the way home we sang, “Count your blessings, name them one by one,” and I said, ‘Bill, Cassandra, John, Daniel, and Laurella.’ “Count your many blessings, see what God has done.”

I have often thought about that night and the wonderful turkey dinner God supplied for us for the next day. Most of all, I learned to be thankful for the blessing God bestows on us daily through out friends and family. Every Thanksgiving, I remember how God taught me to refocus on life’s priorities that year.

“Father, help me to trust you to supply our needs. Help me to name my blessings one by one, and to focus on thanking you rather than complaining.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Life’s priorities include delighting in the Lord’s presence, in spite of the circumstances.

- Laura Drewer -

NOTES:

Proverbs 3: 1-6

TURNING ‘INTERRUPTIONS’ INTO ‘APPOINTMENTS’

Interruptions are divine appointments made by God. This week has been filled with interruptions. Of course, an interruption is only an interruption when you are trying to accomplish something else. You can always tell how important a task is by how you feel when you are interrupted. If you are angry, obviously your task at hand is more important. If, however, you welcome the interruption, it may mean that you are bored with the task. Interruptions are just a fact of life.

I was settling into work on a project when a friend came over. We sat and visited for about an hour. I enjoyed the talk far more than I would have the work. Besides, work can wait. Such interruptions kept happening all week long.

The list of “to do” items is not getting any shorter. In fact, there are still more things to do than what has been crossed off my list. Rather than become extremely frustrated, I decided to evaluate the interruptions and have drawn two conclusions.

First, those people who interrupt us consider us very important. We are important enough for them to want to come to us. Perhaps they just want our opinion about something or to talk through a problem regardless of the motive, we are important to them.

Second, interruptions are opportunities to experience the presence of God. We may think that our tasks are very important, but to God, relationships always come first. This is illustrated by the way Jesus handled interruptions. Relationships always came first. No matter what the request, he always had time for others. Jesus turned those interruptions into appointments. He used them as opportunities to help others reach out to God...and to find God.

Perhaps it is time for us to reconsider our priorities. Tasks are never as important as people and rarely as regarding. When we learn to esteem interruptions as appointments made by God, we will find ourselves looking forward for the next interruption. Mine just came. My son just made us some root beet floats. I think I’ll go enjoy the interruption!

“Keep me aware, O God, that You may be setting people in my path because You want me to minister to them. Make me aware that people are more important than tasks. As I love You, Lord, let me show Your love to others. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: With God there are no interruptions...only divine appointments.

- Thomas Duckworth -

NOTES

Proverbs 10: 7

HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED?

At time of family reunions, members often asks: “Do you remember when...?” “Yes, I remember...” This may be followed by laughter. In the remembering we are recalling events from the past - some painful, may joyful.

Memory is associated with remembrance, recollection, and reminiscence. The path down memory lane is crowded. This is the way it should be. In the context of a close family, we honor and memorialize those who have preceded us. At the same time little treasures are being tucked away in the closet of memory for the following generation.

Edith Schaeffer in What Is Family? Asks:

“Hat is a family meant to be? Among other things, I personally have always felt it is meant to be a museum of memories - collections of carefully preserved memories and a realization that day-by-day memories are being chosen for our museum.” (Pp. 190, 191)

How do you want to be remembered? What comes to mind by others about you? What word of two summarizes what people would say about you? I am more concerned with who you really are rather than events, although these are closely related.

Dr. Donald M. Joy writes about his grandmother Carrie Hulet Joy who, with her family, homesteaded south-west of Dodge City, Kansas, in 1904. The mother of seven children, she and her husband spearheaded the construction of the Cave Free Methodist Church in 1927. He says: “It seems fair to say that the grandchildren and great-grandchildren are overwhelmingly in the debt of Carrie Joy for their spiritual heritage...Her indomitable drive, sparkling humor, and boundless love combined to sweep us all toward Christ and the church.”

In tribute tot he same person, G.M. Cottrill wrote: “She was a dedicated, cheerful Christian, devoted to her family, faithful to her church. Her wholesome Christian influence touched many lives. She has left her family a rich heritage of Christian faith.

Yes, there were the events on the bleak plains of Kansas, but character and those deeper things answer the question: How do you want to be remembered?

At my wife’s family reunion (the Schufeldts) I gave the following tribute of the father, Paul Estes Schufeldt, and mother, Cecile Mae Marshall Schufeldt:

- **the endured hardships of life only tendered their hearts,**
- **the discomforts of life only enabled a preparation of their heavenly home,**
- **the denial of society’s register only opened the door of their home and hearts to varied and numerous friendships across the years,**
- **the endurance of life’s trials caused people to look with favor upon their name.**

Each one of us is writing memories, not only of what we visualize of others, but others are writing on the tablets of their hearts, memories of us.

“O Lord my God, may I live in such a way that the memories people hold of me will be an inspiration and blessing to them. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Today by God’s grace I will so live for the glory of God, that some day, after I am gone, I might be a blessed memory to others!

- Floyd Cooper -

NOTES:

Deuteronomy 6: 7-9

INSURING OUR VALUES LIKE WE INSURE OUR VALUABLES - Part I

“These insurance bills just keep growing and growing! I wonder if all this “stuff” is worth paying all this insurance!???”

Do those questioning thoughts sound familiar?

In today’s climate and culture, insurance has become almost an absolute necessity. In fact, many types of insurance are required. In most, or perhaps all states and provinces, automobile insurance is required. Mortgage companies require insurance on all mortgaged property. Many loans require life insurance on the person responsible for the loan. Certain types of insurance are required for businesses with employees. This would include Worker’s Compensation, Social Security, and other mandatory programs.

In addition to insurances that are required, there are those that are highly necessary if one is to maintain fiscal stability. These would include health insurance, liability, insurance, and at least some life insurance to protect your family’s financial future.

A further category of insurance is more discretionary but often considered very important. In this category might be included long-term disability insurance, accident insurance, insurance on valuables such as jewelry or other special possessions. You can insure for nursing home care, insure your credit cards, your collections, your travel, and almost anything else you can imagine. If most of us would do a detailed analysis of the cost of all insurance we carry, we would probably be amazed at the total annual outlay. For many families it will range from 10 - 20% of their income.

Why are we spending so much to insure our valuables? To put it simply, our current North American culture and lifestyle have become extremely cash-dependent. Our lifestyles have created hand-to-mouth existence which allows for very little margin when there is a loss of income. There is also the very real potential of catastrophic loss from which many in North America could never recover, much less handle with current assets. For example, a major illness can easily cost as much as many families will earn in a lifetime.

Consequently, we feel compelled to protect our valuables through the acquisition of a myriad of insurance plans which require huge portions of our income. It has become the norm.

The question that we need to consider is this: ‘HOW ARE WE INSURING OUR VALUES?’ What are we doing to protect our selves from a catastrophic loss of

“values” which will have disastrous consequences for life on this planet and eternal consequence for those deprived of those values? These are sobering questions. Our scripture for this day outlines of God’s plan for the perpetuity of values. Deuteronomy 6: 7-9, will help se the perspective.

The primary resource in God’s plan for the perpetuity and maintenance of values is the family. Is your family working to insure your values.

“Dear Lord, help me to plan my family life in such a way that I am consistently teaching and modeling eternal values.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Teaching God’s values to my family is the only way to insure those values will be lived.

- Edward Rickman -

NOTES:

Deuteronomy 6: 7-9, Ephesians 6: 1-4

INSURING OUR VALUES LIKE WE INSURE OUR VALUABLES PART II

Over time there has been a continual and increasing transfer of responsibility for “insuring our values” from the family to various other agencies and entities. The teaching of values has been assigned to schools, churches, children’s clubs, youth programs, the government, and the media.

With all of the current cultural discussion about values, many have begun to recognize that transferring responsibility from the family to many of the other entities for teaching “Values” has been a colossal disaster. We are realizing that there is a catastrophic loss of values in process. What can we do?

Let me suggest a few of the ways we can begin to “insure our values”:

1. **We need to model and practice our values.**
Perhaps the simplistic way of saying it is: “We need to practice what we preach.” For example, we decry the subtle, creeping materialism of our culture while acquiring more and more things we need to insure. Is there any wonder our youth are embracing materialism instead of a simple lifestyle?
2. **We need to support the agencies and institutions which are responsibly insuring our values.**
We recognize that our churches and many ministries are actively and aggressively trying to fulfill the task of teaching and encouraging the values we hold dear. At the same time, these ministries have less than adequate resources to fulfill their assigned task.
3. **We can evaluate where our “values insurance” dollars are being spent.**
There are unlimited requests for funding a myriad of causes. But not all of these causes are perpetuating the Biblical values we hold dear. They need to be evaluated.
4. **We need to be reminded occasionally that God placed the primary responsibility for “values insurance” on the family and the church.**
These two entities must be working together to accomplish the desired goal, but the family has the first responsibility.

“Lord, my family is valuable to me. Please help me assure that scriptural values are passed along to all members of my family.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I must insure my values at least as well as I insure my valuables!

- Edward Rickman -

NOTES:

John 3: 16

I GOT NOTHING FOR CHRISTMAS! - OR DID I?

It was far from a normal Christmas for my family and me. Even though all of the elements for Christmas were very visible and the music and celebration of the season were very much alive, for our family there was a greater concern.

In the fall of 1954, my sister had become very ill while away in college. The illness was not properly diagnosed. Consequently, she experienced a ruptured appendix, and even then, it was nine days later when surgery was finally performed. Her life hung in the balance for several days. In fact, during this initial surgery, the work could not be completed due to the seriousness of her condition.

In December, she had to return to the hospital for additional surgery to complete what could not be accomplished in the first surgery.

Since I was only 14 years old at the time, I have relatively few memories of those days except the concern we had for her life. I do recall that on Christmas day, we visited her in the hospital. Following our visit, we walked down the street where a “boarding house” was advertising Christmas dinner at a very low cost. I recall a bit of embarrassment in eating Christmas dinner with a group of people I didn’t even know. Beyond that, I have little or no memory of either the day or the season. I do know that my sister recovered to the great joy of the entire family!

About 35 years later, while enjoying the celebration of Christmas with my sister and her family, she asked me a very interesting question. She said, “Do you remember the Christmas when I was in the hospital and the only person in the family who got a present was me?” Mother had sewn a pair of pajamas for her out of material she had available. She took them to her at the hospital as her Christmas gift. She went on to say, “You and Carolyn (my younger sister) got nothing for Christmas that year.”

Now that came as a total surprise and shock to me. I got nothing for Christmas and for 35 years didn’t even realize it! Surely that would have left some kind of scar or warped my emotional being. Surely I would have felt bad about this injustice all those years. But none of these things were true. I got nothing for Christmas and didn’t even realize it! Or did I?

Perhaps out of those financially lean years (our family was no doubt below the poverty line), I received the greatest gift possible. Because of our circumstances, our attention was totally focused on the one gift that would bring joy to our family. It was the gift of LIFE for one we loved. In fact, it is obvious now that we were so totally focused on that

priority there was no room for self-centered concern about personal gifts.

I shall never forget that it was she who encouraged me to go to Bible College and it was she and her husband who gave me \$200 to start Bible College. It was money they could not really afford but was given out of love and concern for the direction of my life. Even though it was the only financial assistance I ever received during my college years, it totally changed the course of my life. I shall be eternally grateful to God for sparing her life to be an encouragement to me and be at least partially responsible for steering my life in the right direction.

“Dear God, please help us focus on the greatest gift of life instead of all the materialistic celebration of Your coming.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: The gift of Life - Eternal Life - is the greatest gift we will ever receive.

- Edward Rickman -

NOTES:

Matthew 6: 33; I Timothy 4: 8

THE STARS CONFIRM.....

In the complexity of our day it is easy to become enchanted with things, and place improper value upon objects.

Andre Malraux, in his book Felled Oaks, tells of visiting Charles de Gaulle in retirement at Colombey on a snowy day in December, 1969. The two men spent a day together talking in de Gaulle’s study, over lunch with Mme de Gaulle, and on into the evening. When the conversation ended, Malraux prepared to leave, and then writes: “We reached the entrance. The General gave us his hand, and looked at the first stars, in a great hole of sky, to the left of the clouds. He said, “They confirm the insignificance of things...”

The stars “confirm the insignificance of things.” If we could stand upon a star and look at our “Valuable things”, would they not seem insignificant? The chorus sings: “...may I do each day’s work for Jesus, with eternity’s values in view.”

Jenny Lind left the stage at the zenith of her powers. Sitting one day where the gentle tides come rolling in at Ostend, a Bible in her hand and her eyes on the glories of the setting sun, someone asked her why she had stepped down from her throne in the day of her coronation. She laid her hand on the open Bible and said, “It made me think little of this, and (pointing to the great sun) nothing of that; and so I gave it up without regret for a greater life.”

What are the valuables of life? Note: not valuable things! Things such as wheels (cars, trucks), boxes (houses, business places), stuff (possessions), \$\$ (money), are all so dispensable - here today, gone tomorrow. Natural disasters or carelessness snatch them away. They are gone!

Robert M. Fine said: “Don’t fret about the man who delights in things. He may not be satisfied. He may want something better. If you find your highest in God, then your life is lived with satisfaction” (Light & Life, 9/7/77). Let me hold lightly the things of this earth.

Health, time, friends, hope, family, love, good books, uplifting, music, faith, peace with God and others, is a partial list of life’s valuables. Most of these cannot be purchased at a garage sale where things are being discarded or at a costly price in a department store. The intrinsic are more often unseen but known, known inwardly.

As cameras must be in focus for clear pictures, so the valuable - our soul, time, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and friends - may get out of focus in our lives. Watching, praying, and keeping, committed to God, will enable us to keep values in

proper perspective.

“Dear Father, help me not to become side-tracked with the trivials, but to keep focused upon those values which are lasting. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Today, by God’s grace, I will not allow my heart to become fixed upon things but upon God’s kingdom and all that pertains to it.

- Floyd Cooper -

NOTES:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Amidst your ‘troubles’ and ‘tribulations’, are you learning to ‘focus’ on God’s blessings in your life rather than on life’s ‘losses’ and ‘hurts’? What benefits accrue (to you, to others, to the Lord) when you ‘focus’ on life’s blessings instead of on life’s hardships? Have you experienced exceleration of ‘counting your blessings’ (naming them ‘one by one’) and “being surprised” at all the great things which God has done for you? Have you ‘noticed’, when you are going through ‘hard times’, that someone else (close or far from you is going through ‘harder times’ then you are?**
- 2. From your own life (or from your observation of the life of someone whom you know well), give an illustration which demonstrates the truth of the following statement: “Interruptions are divine appointments made by God.”**
- 3. When you ‘accept’ interruptions (from people who unexpectedly call you or who come to see you) without anger or excessive frustration, does this demonstrate that you “value people above tasks”? Do you think that it is especially difficult for “task-oriented” and “highly-motivated” and “perfectionist-minded” persons to “accommodate” persons who unexpectedly “interrupt” their busy schedule? As a Christian who works hard to attain your ‘goals’ and to complete your ‘tasks’ and to fulfill your ‘mission’ in life, how have you learned to accept ‘interruptions’ from ‘needy people’ who need to ‘pour out their hearts’ to someone who will give them ‘a listening ear’? Tell to what extent you agree (or disagree) with the following statements: “Tasks are never as important as people and rarely as rewarding. We may think that our tasks are very important, but to God, relationships always come first.”**
- 4. In considering the ‘stewardship of influence’, what ‘qualities’ do you most desire to develop in your character that will make your life worth being remembered, long after you have died? How do you want to be remembered? What do you want your family and close friends to say about you (as a ‘person’) and about your accomplishments (in terms of your ‘life mission’)?**
- 5. In light of the fact that you spend so much money on various insurances (to protect your valuables), what are you doing to protect your self from a catastrophic loss of ‘values’ which will have disastrous consequences for life on this planet and eternal consequences for those deprived of those values? What specific ‘steps’ are you taking to teach God’s values (standards) to your family? What are you doing to ‘resist’ worldly influences which seek to ‘squeeze you into its own sinful molds’? (Note Romans 12: 1-2)**

- 6. What are you specifically doing (in terms of actions, projects, expenditures of your money) to demonstrate your strong (Christian) conviction that “people are more important than things”, that “eternal values are more important than temporal values”.**
- 7. Give your interpretation of the following statement: “The stars ‘confirm the insignificance of things’.”**
- 8. Is it possible for a believer to fully “embrace” the ‘good things’ of this earth, and, at the same time, to live for the ‘values’ of eternity and for the ‘concerns’ of heaven? Why or why not?**
- 9. Make a partial list of “life’s greatest valuables” to you. Do you value in life what God most values?**

CHAPTER TWO

REJECT CORRUPTION OF 'WORLDLINESS'

Joshua 10: 1-24

WINNING GREAT BATTLES

As our years advance, we should be able to identify, in our lifetime, a critical event or series of events that was of great significance in determining how one lived from then on. I remember one such ‘sea change’ in my life.

At age 18, I was working in the field with my father, and he, quite unexpectedly, asked me what my plans for the future might be. When I hesitated, he urged me to consider deciding for myself which path I would follow, whether for good or ill, for Christ or the world.

I could not answer immediately, but over the next few days, the challenge was always before me. A battle ensued for my soul’s destiny. Would I live for Jesus, or take the path of worldly gain and pleasure?

Bible history is set in primitive times, when what we would call ‘proper procedures’ for overcoming an opposite view were not available to Joshua and his forces. For them it was defeat or be defeated, and they were being attacked.

Joshua had the book of the law of Moses, (Joshua 8:31) which embodied spiritual truth as revealed on Mount Sinai; he had the concepts of truth and righteousness, of morality and religion; and he was bound by loyalty to establish them in the land to which God had brought them.

The five kings of Canaan had no revealed truth, and were devotees of false gods. Their culture was corrupted by polytheism, idolatry, fertility cults, immorality and barbarism. These kings attacked the forces of Israel, intending to destroy them, and the battle raged at Bethoron. Historians tell us it was a decisive battle comparable to other great encounters, such as those that turned back the spread of error at Milvian Bridge, Portiers, and Tours, in the Middle Ages.

The defeat of wrong meant the establishment of right. Israel became a nation which would produce men like David, Isaiah, and in a few centuries, Jesus Christ.

I believe every person comes to a defining moment when error is seen for what it is, and right action may be chosen. It is then that the course of that, and the next, generation is selected! It is never an easy decision but we are not alone as we face it. God, through His Holy Spirit, is our helper, and by His help we find the strength and courage to make the right decision and take the right path.

“O Lord, as the years pass, I often find myself in need of the divine direction. Will You stand at my side as the forces of evil make their attacks on me?”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: With your Book in my hand and your Spirit in my heart, I will choose the right and defeat the wrong that would deflect me from serving you with honor.

- Eugene Stewart -

NOTES:

Acts 2: 36-40

“SAVE YOURSELVES FROM THIS CORRUPT GENERATION”

While serving as a Missionary in Alaska, I lived in a coastal village along the Bering Sea. On one rather foggy and blustery morning, as an Eskimo friend invited me to go along for checking his salmon nets along the shores of the Sea. I was hesitant because of the unfavorable conditions, but decided to go. As we left the river and moved out into the Sea, the waves were uncomfortably high. About a half-mile out into these choppy waters, the engine on the boat stopped. There was no back-up engine, no oars for rowing, I can't swim, and even if I could, the temperature of the water would allow me to live only about 5 to 7 minutes. I began to sense some degree of panic.

You remember that Jesus once said: *“You are in the world but not of the world.”* At that moment I realized I was in the Bering Sea, but desperately hoping I would not be of the Bering Sea.

A very important question is in order - just how important was it that I maintain a separation between myself and my environment? Simple answer: it was a matter of life and death!

It is just as important that we maintain a separation from the corrupt world in which we live. The world is trying to squeeze us into its mold and the only way to survive is to maintain the purity of our life and soul from this corrupt world. How do we do that?

That day in the boat, I learned some valuable spiritual principles that relate to saving ourselves from the corrupt, wicked, and dangerous environment. Think about these principles:

- **Stay in the Boat!** That's the right place and the right position. Be sure to maintain the integrity of your spiritual position.
- **Keep the water out of the Boat!** That's the right perspective. If you let sin in, you sink.
- **Throw everything unless overboard!** That's the right priority. *“Let us lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us.”* Hebrews 12: 1.
- **Use anything and everything you have to row!** That's the right stewardship.
- **Try to get the power motor going!** That's the right use of our resources.

- **Keep your eyes on the shore! That’s the right goal. If you lose sight of the goal, you’ll invariably go the wrong direction!**
- **Recognize the security of boat! That’s the right sense of peace. Our only security is Christ.**

All of these principles applied to our spiritual life can help us “save ourselves from this corrupt world.”

“Dear Lord, I need your help today to maintain the purity of my life and to maintain a spirit of saving myself from the corrupt environment surrounding me.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: God has provided a place of safety and security even when your environment is wicked, cold, and dangerous.

- Edward Rickman -

NOTES:

Hebrews 13: 1-6

THE ESSENCE OF CONTENTMENT - Part I

The “Quest for Contentment” may be the most illusive quest in life. Indeed, contentment is one of the most desired qualities in life. Everywhere you turn, there is a symbol of “contentment” which leads you to believe that it can be acquired through the acquisition of certain products, visits to the right places, vacations in the most modern resorts and environ, and a host of other possibilities.

For example...

- **A baby wearing the right disposable diaper.**
- **Sipping a certain brand of iced tea.**
- **Wearing a particular brand of clothing.**
- **Watching the sunset from a beautiful beach.**
- **Lying in a hammock with the right brand of sunglasses.**

You get the picture!

The advertising world has discovered that the depiction of “contentment” will sell a multitude of products. The public proves them right by working hard to acquire enough resources to purchase the products that will produce the “contentment.” Invariably we discover that the contentment is very illusive:

- **The right diaper doesn’t prevent a stomachache.**
- **The iced tea needs more ice.**
- **The right clothing doesn’t match.**
- **There are mosquitoes on the beach that spoil watching the sunset.**
- **The sunglasses don’t help when it rains.**

Others have hoped that contentment would come with reaching a certain age. Retirement is often pictured as the epitome of contentment when all our cares are in the past and our days are filled with blissful contentment and no responsibilities. Of course, I’m not there yet, but some of my friends who are have confidentially told me that it isn’t as blissful and as unhindered as they might have hoped.

Still others have hoped that a certain status in life would produce contentment. When we get to the top of the mountain, all will be contented.

However, it is again discovered to be illusive. As someone has written: “When you climb the ladder of success and get to the top, you usually find out the ladder is leaning against the wrong building.”

Yet others have expected the acquisition of wealth to produce contentment. But the illusive “contentment” is always hiding around the corner of “I’ve got to have more!”

Now, contentment is a virtue which Christians are supposed to experience:

“Be content with what you have”	Hebrews 13: 5
“I have learned to be content”	Philippians 4: 11
“I have learned the secret of being content”	Philippians 4: 12
“Godliness with contentment is great gain”	I Timothy 6: 6
“...Be content with your pay”	Luke 3: 14

It’s an important and much to be desired virtue, but how do we get it? Where can we get it?

Contrary to the materialistic and acquisitional approach to achieving “contentment,” it is to be described as “a state of being” rather than a “state of possessing.” A “state of being” relates to an inner quality of character or spiritual disposition. Consequently, it is normally only achieved through a change in our malleable moral nature, i.e., a spiritual transformation.

“Dear Lord, please take away the desire for more material things and help me to learn the peace and joy of contentment.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Contentment is the only route to true peace.

- Edward Rickman -

NOTES:

Philippians 4: 11-19

THE ESSENCE OF CONTENTMENT - Part II

Paul makes it clear that his own personal contentment was not related to the state of his environmental circumstances. In fact, no matter which extreme of circumstance existed in life, he declared he had found the secret of being content. The secret is summed up in his great declaration that *“I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.”* It was a state of spiritual understanding, dependence, and trust in the sufficiency of God’s strength to see him through any eventuality in life.

Over the years, I have come to believe that the essence of contentment can be summed up in just three words: **“I have enough!”** Think about it! There is no other state of mind whereby contentment could be experienced. Beyond that, I have come to believe that the essence of JOY in contentment is summed up in the words: **“I have enough, TO GIVE!”**

When Jacob succeeded in robbing his brother Esau of not only his birthright but also of the blessing of their father Isaac, a long-term grudge was established between these two brothers. But, as often happens, the exigencies of life finally brought Jacob to the realization that his own greed, deceit, and “me-firstness” had to end and a reconciliation with this brother Esau was extremely important. The first thing Jacob did was to send major gifts of his herds ahead so that Esau would accept him. When the two finally met in an emotional and tearful embrace, there was an interesting exchange between them.

Esau inquired why Jacob had sent all the gifts. When Jacob replied that it was *“to find favor in your eyes,”* Esau said, *“I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself.”* (Genesis 33: 9) Jacob replied: *“No, please!...if I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, not that you have received me favorably. Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need.”* And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it.

After all the years of struggle, a reconciliation revealed a spiritual transformation in both brothers, which is expressed in **“I have enough”,** and **“I have enough to give.”** Contentment came with the realization that relationship surpasses all the benefits of acquisition of wealth and that relationships require **“giving”**.

To find **“contentment”** will require each of us to reach a point of spiritual affirmation and transformation which creates in us an expression of **“I have enough.”** **“I even have enough to give.,”** will produce joy in my contentment.

To hold any other attitude such as **“I’ll soon have enough,”** or **“I almost have enough,”**

Some of the happiest, most contented, and most generous people I have ever met have been those who had few possessions but had learned the secret of contentment which recognizes their total sufficiency in the strength of Christ. The expression of their contentment is “I have enough to give.” Contented JOY is their reward. Joyful giving can only emanate from this attitude of “I have enough to give.”

“Lord, help me to understand that I have enough, even enough to give. Let me single-minded in gratefulness for what I have and be content.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: It’s almost impossible to be a generous giver without being “contented.” It’s almost impossible to be contented without being a generous giver.

- Edward Rickman -

NOTES:

Matthew 12: 1-6, 38-42

JESUS AND JUST PLAIN FOLKS

My wife and I were in San Antonio for our 32nd wedding anniversary. Her favorite write is Max Lucado, who pastors a church in that city. We decided to attend the church where he preaches. Also, he was away that Sunday. One of his young associates brought a very fine message. We were, however, a bit disappointed. After all, we had come to hear Max Lucado.

Shortly before the service began, two young children in front of us became very excited and began pulling on their mother’s arm. “Look, mommy, look! It’s him! It’s him!” They were pointing to a very tall man walking toward the front row with his family. At first I did not recognize the man seated four rows in front of us. Then it registered “The Admiral”, David Robinson of the San Antonio Spurs! My first reaction was one of surprise and delight. I secretly began to plot how I might meet him without being intrusive. Other people seemed to have the same idea. It was then that I wondered how things would be if Jesus had walked into the auditorium. What kind of awe would register on the faces? Would children be excited? Would adults be delighted? Would our collective breath be taken away, and would we as one body drop to our knees in wonder? At that moment I was reminded that we did not come to church to hear Max Lucado or to be impressed by David Robinson. Someone Greater was present. We came to worship Jesus, and that we did.

As I followed the text of the choruses on the video screen, Mr. Robinson was in my line of sight. Along with the rest of us, he was singing, “I Exalt Thee”, “Majesty”, “Mighty Is Our God.” Like many other parents, fifteen minutes into the service he had to take one of his boys to the restroom.

As we pulled out of the parking lot, my wife wondered, “Why do you suppose David Robinson walked all the way to the front row to be seated?” I answered, “That’s the only place with room for his legs”. We concluded that there was a more worthwhile reason. He wanted to bear witness to his faith and to testify that his life is not governed by the accomplishments of his career but by his walk with the Lord. In all of life, Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The rest of us are just plain folks.

“Grant me grace this day to acknowledge Someone Greater in my life.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: As I am nurtured and inspired by the plain folks who cross my path, I will remember that Someone Greater is among us.

- William Jenkins -

Matthew 6: 19-34

THE URGE TO SPLURGE

The word “splurge” means to spend money self-indulgently, especially on something luxurious and showy. A splurge is a buying binge big enough to create an adrenaline rush, a physical surge which is exciting, and if we create a big splash of attention from other people, especially if we can cause a few people to envy us, it’s even better!

It is the self-indulgence of a splurge that makes it a problem. Whenever we operate on the basis of pride, such as lavish pampering of our bodies, or causing other people to feel inadequate, the benefit of our cheap thrill comes with considerable cost - we injure our relationships with others and put our future welfare at risk. So, splurges are expensive in more ways than just their cost in dollars.

It is natural to want to have a good. We know that Jesus wants that for us because he said, *“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”* (John 10: 10). Jesus wants us to have an interesting, pleasurable, meaningful life, but sometimes we create problems for ourselves by the way we go after the good life. The most common mistake is to seek to get pleasure by pursuing it directly. That doesn’t work.

Splurging, whether in the form of throwing money around foolishly, or in the form of gluttony, lust or promiscuity, drug or alcohol addition (which can be thought of as splurges of eating, sex, or substance use), or any other form of excess, doesn’t bring lasting gratification. There are two strong reasons why it doesn’t: 1. Too much of anything becomes repulsive. Says Proverbs 25: 16: *“If you find honey, eat just enough - too much of it, and you will vomit.”* 2. When some parts of life are given too much attention, other part are ignored. Life gets lopsided.

Here in Jesus’ words, are the instruction on how to get the full life he offers: *“Seek first his (God’s) kingdom and his righteousness, and all things will be given to you as well”* (Matthew 6: 33). What things? Our needs (6: 25-32) *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks find; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened”*. (7: 7) What things? Good gifts (7: 11).

When we go straight after what we think is good for us we end up with the wrong stuff, inferior stuff, too much of this and too little of that, and a trail of mistakes that hurt other people and boomerang back to hurt us. But when we go straight after knowing, serving, and enjoying God - doing so with the respect he deserves - we receive God’s help. He *“works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose”* (Philippians 2: 13). As we offer ourselves to God, sin shall not be *our* master because we are under grace (see Romans 6: 11-14).

What a difference! What a deal! What a Savior! What wonderful love and never-ending care!

“Heavenly Father, again and again I treat myself to tacky, physical and social over-indulgences that are disgusting to you. I repent. I want to know you and have a sense of your presence and participation in my life. You are my Creator; you are Lord of all things. You are worthy of praise and honor, which I offer as I ask:

**Breath on me, breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what you do love,
And do what you would do.
Edwin Hatch, 1886**

I pledge myself to live for you in every way I know how, and I praise your blessed, holy name. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: God is with me, teaching me about Himself, and increasing my self-control.

- Richard Walters -

NOTES:

Exodus 20: 1-11

GARAGE SALE

We are in the process of building a Family Life Center. After the building had been “dried in”, the ladies of the church wanted to have a giant garage sale and donate the proceeds to the building fund. As we are making plans for this big event I innocently asked, “What time will it start?” One answered, “Seven o’ clock”. I responded with “Isn’t that rather late?” A few of the ladies looked at me as if I were an alien from another planet, completely devoid of earthly understanding. “That’s seven o’clock in the morning, Brother Bill,” replied a lady in a tone that implies, “Don’t you know anything?” The truth is I didn’t know anything about garage sales; had never been there, had never done that. I had seen signs that advertised them. I had even driven down streets and seen them in progress...between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. I had no idea they could start at 7:00 a.m. Curiosity drug me out of bed at 6:15 on the Saturday morning of the garage sale. I arrived at the church before 7:00 and was greeted with, “Well, it’s about time you got here.” My mind was rebelling against this early Saturday insanity; I saw people like trees walking in the early dawn. They were lined up to get into the building and spend their money on GARAGE SALE.

Later in the week I looked in the ad section of our local paper under “GARAGE SALES”. START TIMES WERE LISTED AS 7 a.m. or 8 a.m. (There was one sensible ad that announced 9 a.m.) I couldn’t help but wonder about people who go to garage sales. Why don’t these people sleep in on Saturday morning? Do they go to bed early on Friday to be rested and on time for GARAGE SALE!?! How die GARAGE SALE become such a dominate motivation in their lives? What do these people give as an excuse for not going to Sunday School or Church? “I’m too tired!” “I don’t have time!” “I only have Sunday to sleep in!” “It starts too early!” What do they say when asked to give to the church: “I can’t afford it”!

It is perplexing to observe how people relate differently to their other activities than they do to their church. There appears to be a loyalty and a devotion to other things that is greater than loyalty and devotion to the church of their Savior and Lord. Has GARAGE SALE attained the status of a religion?

There is a word that describes how we make decisions about where our loyalties will be. It is the word “PRIORITY”.

“Dear God, help me to recognize and to resist the foreign gods, that clamor for my attention.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I will give first class loyalty to my first class Savior.

- William Jenkins -

NOTES:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you ‘identify’ one critical event (or a series of events) which was of such great significance that it changed how you lived from that time on? Describe a “crossroads decision” in your life which ‘changed the direction’ of the rest of you life - for ‘good’ and for ‘God’, instead of for ‘evil’ and for ‘self-centered living’.
2. Give an illustration from your own life (or from the life of someone whom you know well) - which demonstrates the truth of the following statements: “I believe every person comes to a ‘defining moment’ when error is seen for what it is, and right action may be chosen. It is then that the course of that, and the next generation, is settled.
3. Why is it so important for you (as a believer) to maintain a “separation” from the corrupt world in which you live? Is it possible for you to be “in” the world (of human relationships) and yet not be “of” the world (of sinful practices and sinful attitudes)? (Note John 17: 11-26)
4. Put a ‘check’ beside the following ‘correct influences’ which you have directly encountered, as you have sought to serve Christ in the context of “everyday living”:
 - _____ a. Secularism (living life with no ‘eternal perspective’).
 - _____ b. Materialism (valuing material things as all-important).
 - _____ c. Sensualism (believing that humans are essentially ‘sexual creatures’).
 - _____ d. Hedonism (seeking pleasure to gratify man’s physical senses is all that is ultimately important in life - ‘eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die!’)
 - _____ e. Scientism (science is to be ‘worshiped’, for science alone is able to answer man’s questions and to satisfy man’s needs).
5. Tell with what degree of conviction you believe (or disbelieve) the following statement: “Our only security is in Christ.”
6. What are some of the “foreign gods” which clamor for your attention? (Note 1 John 5: 21)
7. Tell what ‘answer’ (response) you would give to people who offer the following ‘reasons’ (‘excuses’) for not going to Sunday School or church: (a) “I’m too tired!”; (b) “It starts too early!”; (c) “I don’t have time!”; (d) “I only have Sunday to sleep in!”; (e) “I can’t afford it!”. Do you find it “perplexing” to observe how people relate differently to their other activities (such as “Garage

- Sales”) than they do to their church? Has “Garage Sale” attained the status of a ‘religion’?**
- 8. In the “American context” of Materialism, share how you (as a sincere believer) have learned to live a ‘simple lifestyle’ (free from the ‘clutches’ of hurtful greed and the ‘lust for things’).**
 - 9. Have you (as a believer_ ever had “the urge to splurge” (i.e., the desire to spend money foolishly and self-indulgently on material things, or the desire to enjoy legitimate things like food and drink and vacation and sex in excessive ways)? Tell what you have done to exercise personal ‘self-control’ and ‘wholesome restraint’ in a hedonistic and materialist and self-centered society. Is it possible for you (as a believer) to enjoy life “to the full” (John 10: 10; 1 Timothy 6: 17), and at the same time, to live a selfless and sacrificial and compassionate life of service? Why or why not?**
 - 10. What does the “world” (of unconverted persons) usually consider to be the “essence” of contentment (i.e., how does the “world” usually describe ‘contentment’)? Why is the world’s quest for contentment a most “illusive quest”? If “contentment” is “a sate of being” rather than “a state of possessing”, how is such a “state of being” which brings contentment to be found? (I Timothy 6: 6)**
 - 11. Do you believe that it’s possible for you to experience a “state” of spiritual understanding, and a “state” of dependence and trust in the sufficiency of God’s strength to see you through any “eventuality” in life? (Note 2 Corinthians 3: 5; 2 Corinthians 6: 1-10; Philippians 4: 11-13)**
 - 12. Tell with what degree of conviction you agree (or disagree) with the following statement: “Contentment comes with the realization that having relationships with other people surpasses all the benefits of personal acquisition of wealth, and that having and maintaining relationships requires generous giving of one’s time, resources, and material possessions.”**
 - 13. Have you ever considered that “ecclesiastical idolatry: (i.e., the near-worship of religious leaders and all-consuming passion for ‘church growth’) is a form of ‘worldliness’ which must be forsaken and rejected? Can a Christian be genuinely spiritual and, at the same time, have a deep respect for spiritual leaders and a fervent desire for ‘Kingdom Growth’ (reflected in numerical growth in local church membership)? (Note the Devotional entitled “Jesus and Just Plain Folks”)**

CHAPTER THREE
EMBRACE 'SIMPLICITY' OF SPIRITUALITY

Isaiah 40: 31; II Corinthians 4: 16

THE FRESHNESS OF SIMPLICITY

There’s something fresh and exciting about “things” or “people” newly born. A long list of adjectives accompany our exclamation of a week-cold colt or calf frolicking in the pasture. Smiles mark our faces at the wobbly, uncoordinated puppy as he wrestles with other members in the litter.

Yet all these remain in the shadows when compared to a person who has just recently experienced the new birth of Christ; - whose life is transformed from an existence of futility to hope, of frustration to peace, of fear to courage.

The new person in Christ has a fresh simplicity which is contagious. Here are a few observations I have noticed.

Observation Number One. THE NEW CONVERT TELLS IT LIKE IT IS! H/she does not know all the euphemisms or Shibboleths of the theological language, but simply testifies fro the heart what God has done for him/her and what Jesus Christ means to them. The spontaneity and matter-of-factness are refreshing. How wonderful to retain this childlike nature as we mature spiritually. It can be. A person is saved initially by Christ’s death, and daily but Christ’s life (Romans 5: 10) - His life within us.

Observation Number Two. THE NEW CONVERT PRAYS AS IF JESUS IS VERY PRESENT. Christ is approached confidently by this new person who simply believes that He is a friend who will meet the need of his/her life. There is no straining or struggling or stretching to get Christ to come near in prayer. He/she believes that if “I come to God, He is, and He is a rewarder.” There is no “build-up” or “cover-up” when approaching God. This new person comes just as he/she is - honestly minus pretense.

Observation Number Three. THE NEW CONVERT DESIRES TO SHARE WITH OTHERS WHAT CHRIST HAS DONE FOR AND IN HIM. This is expressed in varied ways. Charles Wesley on the first anniversary of his spiritual birth wrote till of the wonderfulness of that day -

**O for a thousand tongues to sing,
My great Redeemer’s praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of His grace!**

Andrew found “his brother Simon, and said to him, ‘*We have found the Messiah.*’ He brought him to Jesus.” Reminisce for a moment. When you first met Jesus Christ, didn’t you earnestly desire to tell others what had happened to you? As the years of our

walk with the Lord multiply, that freshness will remain if we regularly tell others how precious Christ is and how powerful He is to transform human nature. All of us like new things. But “new things” wear out and are cast upon the junk pile of time. But let me hurriedly say that our spiritual freshness and simplicity can be retained. How? *“They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.”* (Isaiah 40: 31) *“The inner nature is being renewed everyday.”* (2 Corinthians 4: 16)

“Dear Jesus, as I grow older may the freshness and simplicity of what you did for me never fade, but continue. Amen!”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: By prayer and by telling others, the simplicity and the freshness of Christ within will not go stale. I will pray and I will speak for Christ!

- Floyd Cooper -

NOTES:

Matthew 6: 24; Psalm 40: 6; Psalm 119: 59

IN TUNE AND IN STEP

While in Grand Island, Nebraska, in the fall of the year to attend a church business meeting, it was my privilege to view a portion of the Harvest of Harmony. This is a gathering of high school marching bands. The brilliant uniforms, the rhythmic music, and the marshaled parading were all spectacular.

And then I noticed something - something beyond all this! One band was totally out of step with the music. The music was vigorous, but how could the band be so far “out of step” in their marching? To myself I thought: “It’s too bad; the judges will certainly give near zero points for such a performance.

And then I noticed something else! Me - the observer! I was listening to the band directly before me as it passed, and viewing the band that was coming. Then, I realized both bands were in step and in tune with their own music.

In life’s field, to be in tune and in step with God’s will is so important. “I’ll go where you want me to go, dear Lord...I’ll say what you want me to say...I’ll be what you want me to be...” Any attempt to coordinate our marching with Jesus Christ to the drums of the world’s ethics and attitudes is impossible. Some Christians try it, resulting in discordance from a half-hearted commitment. Christ meant it when He said: *“No man can be a slave of two master; he will hate one and love the other; he will be loyal to one and despise the other.”* (Good News Bible) Jesus Christ knew the impossibility of serving two masters!

Our ears are to be tuned to the Almighty God (*“thou hast given me an open ear”* Psalm 40: 6). Our feet are to be in step with Christ (*“I turn my feet to thy testimonies”* - Psalm 119: 69). When there is such correlation, what beautiful melody flows from our lives to bless the Lord and to be a blessing.

John Henry Jowett (1886-1923) wrote in Springs in the Desert upon the theme 0 The Soul’s Harmony - “Perhaps the most difficult of all things is to get unanimity to soul. To get the soul to pass a unanimous resolution! *‘All that is within me’ at one!* (Psalm 103: 1) My soul is often like a tumultuous meeting, with interruption, and disturbance, and opposition, and I cannot get a unanimous decision. Or my soul is often like a disorderly orchestra, where each member is pursuing his own desire independently of all the rest...How are we to get this desired unanimity, so that “all that is within me; may “bless His holy name”? An orchestra must have a strong and dominant conduction, to whom every member must render the tribute of obedience. What a transformation takes place when the conductor appears, and raises his baton, which is the scepter of his realm, the symbol of his authority...all the members become as one member, and they

wait the will...of their leader.”

“Dear Lord and Father of mankind, ‘Forgive our foolish ways; Reclothe us in our rightful mind, in purer lives thy service find, in deeper reverence praise.’ Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Today, by God’s enablement every aspect of my being shall be brought into harmony with His will for the issuance of praise to God and the good of others.

- Floyd Cooper -

NOTES:

Luke 10: 39; 11: 13

IF GOD HAS A WINDSHIELD, HE SEES...

Here is the short version of a chapel talk I heard long ago while attending a Christian college: When driving we can focus our eyes on the dirt and splattered bugs on the windshield. This is not good. Or, we can look farther ahead and focus on the road. Doing so, we see where the road goes, avoid obstacles, and travel with safety. This is much better.

That was a good advice. A job colleague some years ago put this principle another way. “A hundred years from now it won’t make any difference.” This is often true. A hundred years from now it won’t make any difference if we staple the papers together or use a paper clip. It won’t matter if we got paid on Friday or Tuesday. Looking down this longer perspective simplified many decisions and helped us avoid conflicts. It was useful advice.

but some decisions have consequences for several generations of people who come after. Some decision have consequences for our own eternity.

Many of us have learned to not be distracted by the ugliness that is directly in front of us - the bug on the windshield. But it is possible to go off the road while looking close up at something worthy. We are inclined to get so caught up in activities that are close at hand and clamoring for attention, that we fail to do the things that are the most important. Here are three principles for safe travel down the road of life.

Moderation. If I installed a gorgeous stained glass window as the windshield of my car, I could sit there and look at beauty and maybe even gain a mood of worship, but I would crash into everything in front of me, go nowhere, and get hurt. Even good things, in the wrong place, are dangerous. Excessive attention to good activities can be harmful. (See Proverbs 25: 16-27)

Plan ahead. Eternity will not begin for you when you die; you are already in it. When we die we don’t change time zones, we change locations. We are in eternity now. Do you have the same plan as David when he said: “*I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever*” (Psalm 23: 6)? Think of it this way - we’re on God’s porch right now. Is your behavior that of a guest in his home? If not, consider Paul’s challenge to Timothy: “*take hold of the eternal life to which you were called*” (I Timothy 6: 12). The way to do that, Paul said was to “*flee from all this (evil) and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.*” (I Timothy 6: 11)

Seek first. We tend to go where we look. Police are taught that when pursuing a drunk driver they must consciously watch the road, not the car ahead, or they may follow the

other car into danger. Again, the longer view and the careful priorities. Jesus’ counsel is *“Seek first his (God’s) kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”*. (Matthew 6: 33)

“Perfect Lord of All, thank you for creating me so that I need you, and for giving me the opportunity to know you. Forgive the many occasions when I look at trivia or evil instead of at you. Forgive me for the times I have put my interest on worthy things, but pursued them to excess. Help me to not crowd you out, but to put you first in my enthusiasms. I need you, and I want you to be number one in my life. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I will put God first through all this day.

- Richard Walters -

NOTES:

Matthew 6: 19-24

DOWNWARD MOBILITY Part I

2:04 p.m. - Phone rings.

“Hello”

“Mr. Jones, your wife is on the phone.” Click.

“Hello dear”.

“Hi! Are you sitting down?”

“Yes”.

“Well, let me tell you the worst first! The washing machine just broke down in the middle of washing some things I must have this evening. Would you have time to come home and see if you can fix it? Oh, by the way, the dishwasher overflowed again this morning. Can you call a plumber? You need to come home a little early anyway because my car is in the shop and we need to go pick it up before 5:00. On your way home, could you stop and pick up some gags for the vacuum cleaner. It won’t run and I must get the floors done before we have guests this evening! Oh! By the way, how’s your day going?...”

Wow! Isn’t it great to have all those timesaving machines! What would we do without them?

Now, that’s an interesting question. Most of our lives we have been drawn into the pattern of conformity to the great dream of prosperity. It is often called “upward mobility” which, roughly defined, means getting a bigger piece of the “economic pie.” Then we can afford to buy more material things which will enhance the quality of our lives and save us time. This is supposed to result in more leisure time to enjoy our hobbies or other entertaining pursuits.

However, to our dismay, we have discovered that all the frustration of maintaining all those “things” often outweighs the advantage of time which was supposed to be saved.

There are times when I long to go back to the days when I didn’t have many “this” but life was simple and more pleasurable.

Many people are discovering the futility of upward mobility. Many Christian people are sensing the frustration of chasing the elusive dream which is supposed to be produced

by having more “things”. Perhaps it’s time for us to set a new course of action. Perhaps we should start thinking more about “downward mobility.”

At the heart of this concept of “downward mobility” would be the words of Jesus when He said: *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.”* (Matthew 6: 19-20)

Do you have a storehouse of treasures which have claimed all your time, resources, and commitment?

“Dear Lord, I give You my treasures today. Help me know I can use them to lay up treasures in heaven.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: When I build a treasure storehouse for myself, it’s my responsibility. When I give them to God, they are His responsibility.

- Edward Rickman -

NOTES:

Luke 12: 1 3-21

DOWNWARD MOBILITY - Part II

The first step and most critical reason for “downward mobility” is the reshaping of our financial priorities to match our spiritual priorities. The spiritual commitments we make are based on the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. We submit to that Lordship and determine to follow His precepts in order to maintain our spiritual integrity. However, it is recognizably difficult to change the patterns of our financial habits. Jesus clearly delineates the difference between laying up earthly treasures and laying up heavenly treasures. He does so to help us see the futility of many of our expenditures in comparison to heavenly investments. The obvious solution is a change in priorities. Instead of dreaming of what I can further enjoy with my resources, my attention is turned to what God can accomplish with my resources when they are given for His purposes. What a difference!

The second step in “downward mobility” is to measure the margin between your real needs and your actual income. When we live in a world where a very high percentage of the population does not have access to even basic needs, how can we justify the use of so many of our resources for “beyond need” consumption?

I recently read of a church that has set a seven-year plan for its membership to participate in reprioritization of their financial resources. Perhaps we would be amazed at the number of people who are feeling the “pressures of prosperity” and would be blessed by a plan for “downward mobility”.

A third step in the process is the mental and spiritual commitment that says, “I have enough.”

In Luke 12, Jesus related the story of the prosperous man who had more resources than he had storage. So he determined to tear down his old barns and build bigger to assure that he would have plenty for retirement.

“But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”

Recognizing that “I have enough” and God deserves the rest, will be a liberating step. Trusting God to supply all our needs as He has promised to do can only happen if I plan to be faithful in how I use His supply.

“Dear Lord, forgive me for being careless in the use of my resources. Help me evaluate my lifestyle in relation to kingdom needs.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: “You can’t take it with you, but you can send it on ahead!” How much are you sending on ahead?

- Edward Rickman -

NOTES:

Matthew 12: 45, 46

THE GOOD, THE BETTER, THE BEST!

Shopping via means of the Montgomery Ward catalog is included in my pleasant memories. In late summer, just before the start of school, an order for school clothes would be sent. The article number, color, and size were all carefully recorded. It was a joyful day when the package arrived.

Those catalogs offered a choice of merchandise quality - good, better, best. (You remember, don't you?) Naturally, the good was good, but the better was better than the good, and the best was tops!

(In a high school class, I chose the letter “q” with which to write a sentence concerning economics. “When buying, always remember quality and quantity,: I wrote. I don't believe I ever explained to Mr. Hard's satisfaction what I meant.)

The “best” in the MW catalog cost more than the others as to rated qualities. So the one ordering must decide; Would it be the good? The better? The best? With three growing boys in the family my parents had to consider several factors when ordering.

And isn't it true, that throughout life we are constantly making choices in the quality of our lives? Too often we are content to accept and settle for the “good” when God wants us to have the “best”.

Again, often the “Good” become the enemy of the “best”. The “good” and “better” can lull us into the plane of mediocrity where we are content to live out our lives. The horizon becomes blurred in the near-sightedness of things, and the upward call of God is not heard. Our peripheral vision becomes narrow, thus canceling out the beautiful things along the roadside.

The merchant of pearls (Matthew 12: 45, 46) should not settle for “a pearl”. No, he sought for “goodly pearls”. One day he found “one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.” It was the “best”. The disposing of all his property to purchase “the pearl” seemed so foolish to the neighbors. But as a seeker after the “best” he knew what he had found, thus his decision. Jesus seems to have approved of the merchant's decision. Jesus likes the serenity, and courage, and knowledge, and expertise of this man.

How different is the rich man who had time, talent, and treasure but he invested in that which was selfish instead of service and blessing to others. The result was that he eventually lost all that he had gained.

There is the Apostle Paul who testified: *“For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Jesus Christ.”*

The hymnist wrote: “since mine eyes were fixed on Jesus, I’ve lost sight of all beside; so enchained my spirit’s vision, looking at the crucified.”

Exchange a religious profession for a deep Christian experience - the best. Move from the shoreline into the ocean of God’s unmeasurable grace - the best.

“Thank you, our Heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ the pearl of great price. Thank you for the Holy Spirit - Counselor, Guide, Revealer, Teacher. Amen!”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: Today I will not settle for anything mediocre in my life but will seek God’s best.

- Floyd Cooper -

NOTES:

Matthew 5: 37; Matthew 6: 1-4; Ephesians 6: 1-4

HALFHEARTED YES OR PURPOSEFUL NO?

The phone rings and I leave what I am doing to answer it. The voice at the other end inquires about me, my family, the weather, and whatever else is current. ‘What is the call really about?’ I wonder. I soon find out. The preliminaries have been icebreakers to soften me up. The purpose of the call is to ask me to participate in something which will require time, energy, money, or all three.

If I believe the cause is worthwhile, possess the time, energy, and /or money to help, and want to get involved, fine. Often I do, for God’s work requires much self-giving to flourish. But what about the projects which seem meaningless to me, or for which I lack the needed resources? I know inside that I have no business getting involved, either for my own well-being or, ultimately, for that of the cause. Questions may flood my mind: Will she be hurt if I don’t? Might she even retaliate somehow? Will she think I’m lazy and talk about me? Will I feel guilty if I don’t?

It’s easy to feel pressured to make a quick commitment, but I may find I didn’t have all the facts and regret my hasty decision. It’s easier for me to make the right decision when I refuse to give an immediate answer. I can always think it over, decide I can’t or shouldn’t, and call back to refuse.

I can go ahead and accept because “I have to”, whether or not I want to (and feel irritated). Or, I can create a vaguely positive attitude and get the project over with (feeling a vague sense of resentment).

On the other hand, I could and, in fact, can be honest and say, “I’d rather not, and I don’t think it would be fair to myself or the project for me to take it on.” I can even be more brief and say, “I think I’d better pass on this one”, or simply, “No, thank you”. To say no when the best response is no, is to pay the compliment of honesty, or speaking the truth in love (see Ephesians 4: 15).

Are you saying deep inside, “But I wouldn’t want to hurt anyone by refusing”. What if you hurt yourself by taking on the overload of an unwanted task laid upon you by someone else. You are someone; is it better to hurt yourself? Are you of less value than someone else?

I am learning to say no when I believe it’s for the best. Sometimes this even gives someone else a chance to serve who may not have been considered had I halfheartedly said yes.

“All-wise God, You who know me perfectly and who loves me immeasurably, give me discernment to know when I should lovingly respond with a ‘No’ to human requests for my time, energy, finances, and talents. Give my your wisdom that I may be aware of my ‘place’ and my ‘purpose’ in Your ‘Master Plan’.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: As I take positive control and place myself in God’s hands to be guided by the Spirit of Christ rather than by this world, some of my answers will be firm, friendly ‘Nos’.

- Kay Kline -

NOTES:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Have you ever personally known and ‘associated’ with a New Convert to the Christian Faith? If so, how has he/she manifested the exhilarating “freshness of simplicity” to you?**
- 2. Share what it was like (in terms of your new awareness of your environment and your fresh responses to people around you) when you “first accepted Christ”. When you first met Jesus Christ, did you have a desire to tell others what had happen to you? Why is it that, all too often, Christians grow ‘dull’ and ‘insipid’ and ‘less excited and less enthusiastic’ when they grow older in their “Christian Life”? How can you maintain the “glow” of freshness and simplicity and excitement in your Christian life, regardless of the length of time you have been a “Christian” and regardless of how many hardships and losses and disappointment you have endured? Has your “Christian life” and experience been able to “stand the test of time”? (Note Isaiah 40: 31 and 2 Corinthians 4: 15)**
- 3. Is it your supreme desire to be fully ‘in tune’ and ‘in step’ with Jesus Christ, the Master of your soul and life? When you realize t hat you are ‘out of step’ and ‘not fully in tune’ and your Master’s will and way, what do you propose to do in order to bring yourself into ‘full compliance’ with the Almighty Lord (to avoid ‘discordance from a half-hearted commitment’)?**
- 4. Is it possible for Christians to get so ‘caught up’ in activities that are close at hand and that are clamoring for attention, that they fail to do the things that are the most important? If so, give a concrete example of how ‘immediate good things and activities’ can distract one from pursuing the ‘ultimate better things and activities’ which have lasting and eternal benefits. (Note Luke 10: 38-42) Is it your supreme desire to ‘flee the evil of this world’ and to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness? (Note I Timothy 6: 11)**
- 5. What is meant by “upward mobility” in contrast to “downward mobility”? (Note the devotional articles entitled ‘Downward Mobility’ Part I and Part II)**
- 6. What does it mean for you to reshape your financial priorities to match your spiritual priorities? Have you found it difficult to change the patterns of your financial habits in such a way that your generous giving will reflect the Lordship of Christ in your life?**
- 7. When we live in a world where a very high percentage of the population does not have access to even basic needs, how do you think (American) Christians can justify the use of so many of their financial resources for “beyond needs” (luxury)**

consumption? How would yo distinguish between your “Basic needs” and your “beyond basic needs” consumption? If there is no strict (legalistic) standard established in the Bible to guide Christians in the expenditure of their financial resources, how do you personally decide what percentage of your total income you are ‘justified’ to spend on ‘luxury’ items in your life? How do you decide when you personally “have enough” money to sustain your basic needs (and some luxuries), and how much to give away to charitable and Christian ‘causes’?

- 8. Tell to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements: “Too often we are content to accept and settle for the ‘good’ when God wants us to have the ‘best’. The ‘good’ and ‘better’ can lull us into the plane of mediocrity where we are content to live out our lives.”**
- 9. What ‘qualities’ of life would you describe as the ‘best’, which you desire to cultivate in your inner life (heart, mind, soul, spirit)?**
- 10. Tell to what extent you agree (or disagree) with the following statement: “Exchanging a mere ‘religious profession’ for a deep fellowship with Christ, and moving from the shoreline of were morality and human achievement into the ocean of God’s immeasurable grace, constitutes the very ‘best’ in human experience!”**

CHAPTER FOUR

APPROPRIATE POWER OF 'KINGDOM' RESOURCES

Luke 12: 22-34

THE FOCUS OF LIFE

Several years ago my wife and I led a ministry team composed of sixteen college and career young adults around the world. Because I wanted a record of the ministry that we would be doing, and pictures of some of the sights we would be seeing, I took along a very good camera. Among the places visited would be two of the seven Wonders of the World, the pyramids in Egypt and the Taj Mahal in India. Since I took what I thought were pretty good pictures of these places and events, you can imagine how excited I was when I took the film to be developed. You can also imagine my disappointment when I received the pictures and found that most of them were out of focus and fuzzy. Later I found the answer to what had caused this. A colleague of mine had used the camera on a previous trip and had dropped it on the lens. This, of course, jammed the mechanism so that sometimes it operated properly and sometimes it didn't. Some of the pictures were alright, but most of them weren't.

In life there may be many jarring circumstances which get us out of focus. The grit and grime of sin will also do it. But often our spiritual camera gets out of focus because of neglect or other things receiving our attention.

Photographers tell me that every picture should have a focus. So should every life! Focus means “center of interest.” The center of interest of a picture may be a person, a building, an animal, a tree or anything toward where the attention is drawn.

We all have a “center of interest.” It is where we focus our energy, our activity and our time. The dictionary definition of focus is “a central point of attraction, attention and activity.” The question that faces us in today's devotional is, “Where is your focus?” What has your attraction, attention or activity? What is your center of interest?

If we are to live fully in this new century our focus must be on kingdom of heaven. That is what Jesus teaches in the lesson today. Jesus says that we must put our attention and activity upon his kingdom because he must be the central attraction of our lives. When we don't focus on the kingdom of heaven we are out of focus. And if our focus is unclear, fuzzy or cluttered with trying to focus on too many things, we will miss what God has for us. We must also remember that Jesus is the only one who can make kingdom living possible. He alone has the power to bring all of life into focus.

So right now, in prayer and reflection, open your heart to the Holy Spirit as you consider, “where is my focus?”

“Lord God, I confess I sometimes let my life get out of focus. Today I pray, ‘Search me, oh God, and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any

offensive (out of focus!) way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting’ (Psalm 139: 23-24).”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: I desire more than anything else that Christ and his kingdom will be my focus in life.

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

Luke 12: 1-31

WHERE YOUR FOCUS SHOULD NOT BE

When our children were young our family traveled to Pennsylvania for a church family camp. It had been a long day and the travel on that back road was boring. While I was driving, my young son from the back seat pointed out something to the left. I looked to where he had suggested and concentrated on it. Consequently, I did not see the car that stopped on the highway in front of us. Though no one was seriously hurt, our car was disabled as it plowed into the back of the stopped car. This is what happens when our focus is in wrong places.

In our lesson today Jesus mentions three things about where our focus should not be. The first is that we should not focus on showing off spiritually (vss. 1-3). This happens when we want to appear better than we are, doing religious activity to get attention, or by seeking places of power in the church. Jesus had some of the strongest words for the strictest people. He condemned the religious leaders because they concentrated on keeping rules and regulations. There is no place for pride in the Christian life. Our works do not count for salvation. We are to be humble and authentically transparent persons.

We live in a culture which is saturated with “wanting” and “getting.” Success is measured by how much money we make or how much we possess. The temptation is to climb this ladder of success the world sets up. And we can get caught up in this spirit. So Jesus says we’re not to focus on material things in life (vss. 15-21). The lie is given to the bumper sticker that reads, “He who has the most toys wins.” I believe it was Billy Graham who said, “I’ve never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul!” We can’t take our possessions with us, and we also discover they do not fill the longing in our hearts. When the focus is on the kingdom of things it is on the wrong things!

Finally, Jesus says we’re not to focus on the cares of this life (vss. 22-31). I suspect this speaks to many of us. I know it does to me. It is legitimate to be aware of our needs, but they’re not to be the focus of life. Jesus says we’re not to worry about food or clothes. But there are other things that we fuss over as well. Many people are caught up in worrying about their children, their work, their finances and even their aches and pains. Here Jesus uses a very descriptive word, “fussing.” We know when children are fussing. How about adults who worry, complain and fuss? *“If God can take care of the birds and flowers can’t he take care of you who are more valuable than they?”* Jesus asks. Then he declares, *“Your Father knows that you need such things. But seek first his kingdom, and these things will be given you as well.”*

“Lord Jesus, I admit that I often get my focus on the wrong things. It is so easy to want things I don’t need, and to get caught up in ‘the cares of life.’ Forgive me Lord! Help

me trust you for everything I need, knowing that you care for me. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: By God’s grace, I will keep my focus off the wrong things and put it on that which is eternally important.

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

Luke 12: 27-34

HOW TO FOCUS ON THE KINGDOM

Self-help books and “How To” manuals are best sellers in today’s society. People want to know what they can do to make life better, have better health, get a better job, become more attractive, and the list could go on and on. The same is true for the spiritual life. You and I want to know if it really works. If focusing upon the Kingdom of God is as important as Jesus says in verse 31, then we want to know how to do it. In the scripture today Jesus gives four clues.

The first suggestion is to re-order, or to refocus on the important priorities of life (verses 31-34). You probably think you have too much to do. We all have our plate of life full of activities and responsibilities. The answer is not more time, but the wise use of the time we have. In conversation with a professional photographer about composition of pictures, he described what he called, “selective focus.” Many things may be worthy of attention in a picture, but only one should be selected. This is true in life as well. There may be many things demanding our attention but only one is important at that moment. We need to periodically consider if we are making the Kingdom of Heaven a priority and giving it the attention it deserves. I know I am happiest when I keep the priorities God has given me.

The second is to simply relax in the Son! Trust yourself to God (verses 27-28). What do you fuss over? Why worry? A doctor friend told me that approximately 85% of the patients he sees are there because of worry. Most things we worry about never happen! Relaxing in Christ begins with relinquishment, letting go and letting God. Richard Foster likens spiritual relinquishment to the old Nestea ad which features a man standing near a swimming pool on a hot day with a glass of frosty ice tea in his hand. Then he sips the tea, falls backward into the pool and exclaims “Ah!” Are you there spiritually?

Next, Jesus says, is to respond to what God is doing in your life (verses 29-31). You see, God is initiating his will for you. “For it is God who works in you to *will* and to *do* his good pleasure” (Philippians 2: 13). What is God trying to accomplish in your life? Are you responding to the prompting of the Holy Spirit?

The last suggestion is to receive what God is giving you (verses 32-34). Jesus admonishes you not to be so taken up with getting so that you miss God’s giving! In fact he wants to give you the very Kingdom itself! The truth is that Jesus is “Kingdom come.” When you have the fullness of Jesus in your life you have the Kingdom of Heaven. I know God has great things in store for you. Reach out in faith and claim the promises he offers, take them and act on the grace given you.

“Lord Jesus, you have called me to follow you, forsaking other things that would distract me. Help me to constantly seek your will for my life. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: By God’s grace I will seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, believing that everything else I need will be mine as well.

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

Romans 14: 17-18

LIVING FULLY IN CHRIST

A popular song in my youth was “Let Me Live, Live, Live Until I Die.” On the surface it sounded pretty stupid, for we all live until we die. But that was not the emphasis; what the song suggested was that we are to live life fully until we die. Now, it was the right idea, but the wrong emphasis. We are enjoined by God not to “live it up”, but to “live it out”!

People today was feverishly attempting to prolong life, to find the fountain of youth. But to the Christian our objective is not only to be “the years of our life”, but “the life in our years”! Even a short life can be filled with blessing and make an impact for Christ. Remember, Jesus said, *“I am come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”* (John 10:10)

As a pastor I sat in the living room of a parishioner who poured out her grief and disappointment. Plans had been made for what she and her husband would do when he retired soon from his job. As he neared that day, he took ill and died. Now all their carefully laid plans lay in ashes at her feet. Through her tears, she looked up at me and said, “Take time to live...we waited too long.” How sad!

If we are to *live* and not merely exist, we must focus on Christ and his Kingdom. And he makes that possible. Eugene Peterson in The Message has put today’s scripture into contemporary English as follows:

“God’s kingdom isn’t a matter of what you put in your stomach, for goodness’ sake. It’s what God does with your life as he sets it right, puts it together, and completes it with joy. Your task is to single-mindedly serve Christ. Do that and you’ll kill two birds with one stone; pleasing the God above you and proving your worth to the people around you.” (Underlining mine.)

When I read these words (as I was having my devotions) they really gripped me. Christ alone can make me righteous and give me peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. He died to give me life and he lives to help me live my life fully. That day I penned in my Personal Journal this great affirmation: “By God’s grace, I will not let the past bind me, the present unsettle me, or the future intimidate me.”

This is made possible only by God’s grace, not my works. And it does speak to my past, my present and my future. In any of these situations I could be thrown out of balance, and therefore out of focus as it relates to the Kingdom of God. But as I put the scripture, especially the underlined words, together with the affirmation, I sensed God speaking to me. Here was a theological basis and some practical instruction on living

life fully as a Christian. The next few days we will look at this idea more in depth. For today, I encourage you to reflect on the scripture and the following prayer and affirmation.

“Lord, with your help may I fully live all the days of my life for You. Help me understand how I can do it. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: “By God’s grace, I will not let the past bind me, the present unsettle me, or the future intimidate me.”

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Philippians 32: 12-16

A FORGIVEN PAST

A godly woman over 50 years of age came to me, her pastor, for counseling. She was so bound and crippled by her childhood experiences that she could barely function. Because she needed more expert counsel than I could give she was referred to a Christian counselor. Several weeks later that counselor called suggesting the three of us meet in my office for prayer. I will never forget that day when this woman was miraculously delivered from her childhood bondage. She experienced what many have called a “healing of the memories.”

Today there seems to be a great emphasis upon memory and memory training. But just as important as good memory is a good forgettery! We’re not to forget all the past, but rather those things that keep us from living fully in the present. We are to forget the past that paralyzes the present. This we can do by God’s grace. The Apostle Paul said in Philippians 3: 13, *“Forgetting what is behind...”*

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale was asked by a governor at a convention: “What is the greatest thing in the world?”

“Well, Governor, suppose you tell me,” countered Dr. Peale.

And he did. He said deliberately: “The greatest thing in the world is that you can walk away from your yesterdays.”

We can too! And we must. We can walk away from our hurts, our resentments, our heartaches and failures. Dwelling on the mistakes or the problems of the past will only make us ineffective in our Christian walk today.

Louisa Fletcher Tarkington expresses the longing of most of us in one of her poems: “So I wish there were some wonderful place called The Land of Beginning Again, where all our mistakes and all our heartaches and all our poor selfish grief could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door, and never put on again.”

This is made possible through Calvary. The Atonement of Christ has made us righteous; that is, right with God. *“It’s what God does with your life when he sets it right...”* (Romans 14: 17, The Message). We are no longer separated in our relationships: we’re right with God, self and others.

A question every Christian needs to ask occasionally is this: “Am I presently bound by anything in the past which keeps me from being a victorious Christian in the present?” As you read this you may sense your need for a “healing of the memories.” If so, confess

your old wounds, and let Christ dress them. Take the hurts, the disappointments, the shattered hopes and dreams and let him set it right! What a wonderful thing it is to have a past that is forgiven!

“Dear Lord, I confess that I have often held on to some hurt, failure, loss or grief in the past when I should have let you take it. Forgive and heal me, I pray, so that I can be victorious today. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: By God’s grace, I will not let the past bind me, because I am right before God.

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

Psalms 23; Luke 12: 22-26

A SETTLED PRESENT

Someone sent me the following prayer by e-mail: “Dear God, so far today I have done all right. I have not gossiped. I have not lost my temper. I have not been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, proud or overindulgent. I am very thankful for that...but in a few minutes God I’m going to get out of bed!”

The problem of living generally occurs when we start the day. I often face situations in life where it is easy to experience stress, get out of balance, upset, obsessed, or even depressed. You may be facing health problems, a move, the loss of job, fractured relationships, or some other troubling thing.

Recently I was talking with an elderly gentleman, a retired pastor. He shared with me how he was feeling somewhat depressed. Knowing his situation, I reminded him that he had within the last few months lost his wife, a son, and a brother-in-law by death. In addition he had retired from his part-time ministry job and was also experiencing severe health problems. I said, “You would be right at the top of a stress scale!” He had reason to be slightly depressed! Many experiences of life, especially crises and trauma, really get us unsettled, out of balance.

It is during times like these that we must remember Who is in charge. God is at work in this present situation for our good and his glory. I remember a woman in my first pastorate who faced several situations like this. She was a widow whose only son was in the Army overseas. She often testified in church, “The Lord and I are a majority!” She realized that even in unsettling circumstances God was with her in a special way.

She may have also been the one who met a friend on the street one day and asked, “How are you?”

“Oh, all right under the circumstances,” replied her friend.

To which this godly woman responded, “God doesn’t want you under the circumstances; he wants you on top of them!”

Christ made it possible for us to be on top of every unsettling circumstance and bewildering happening. The one who created the world out of chaos, can take the broken pieces of every situation and make us whole. It is our Lord who “puts it together”! (Romans 14: 17, The Message). We can trust him to know what is best and to keep us in his care. And to the storms of life, whether within or from without, Christ speaks, “Peace, be still!”

If you are experiencing anything unsettling just now, put it in the hands of the One who cares for you. The fruit of righteousness is peace, the peace Christ came to give. Read and meditate on the following prayer and affirmation. Let Christ speak to you.

“Dear Lord, remind me that you love and care. In every unsettling circumstance, may your peace flood my confused mind. Your presence makes the present situation one I can handle by your grace. In Jesus’ Strong Name, Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: By God’s grace, I will not let the present unsettle me, for God puts it together, and I am at peace.

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

Matthew 6: 34, James 4: 13-17

A PROMISED FUTURE

The future can be pretty intimidating especially as one grows older. In our world there are health problems and diseases. The environment with hurricanes, flooding, earthquakes and global warming is a concern. Then there is the economy; inflation can erode savings, and there is always the possibility that Social Security and Medicare will go bankrupt. It is easy to begin worrying about what’s going to happen tomorrow. So what is a person to do?

In the comic strips “Peanuts”, Linus observes to Charlie Brown, “I guess it’s wrong always to be worrying about tomorrow. Maybe we should think only about today.”

Charlie Brown replies, “No, that’s giving up. I’m still hoping yesterday will get better!”

Sometimes neither yesterday nor tomorrow gets better. There seem to be too many problems facing us. When we don’t see much of a future we become anxious, fret and worry.

The story is told of a poor, anxiety-prone person who didn’t have enough faith to go to church. Instead, he went to a fortune teller, who told him, “In your future, I see poverty, bad luck and failure, until you reach the age of 40.

To which the person asks, “Then what?”

The fortune teller looked at him and said, “Oh, after that , you’ll get used to it.”

But we don’t “get used to it.” What we need is a word of hope. We need to hear the word of the Lord speaking to us about our future. Jeremiah 29: 19 promises: “I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” It is not a trite statement to say, “I don’t know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future!” We are in good hands with God the Creator and Sustainer.

I have no crystal ball to see what the future holds for you or for me, but I know that it will be better than all of our yesterdays, for in God the best is yet to be! Our confidence is in a God who has proved himself over and over again. That is the reason Jesus reminds us our Father knows what we need; “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow...”

Whatever the future holds we will be surprised by joy. I know that I will not only make it, but I will make it with victory. God will help me to complete my journey with joy,

and that step begins tomorrow. That tomorrow, whatever it holds, is promised by God. I can count on that! And so can you.

“Lord, sometimes I get anxious about tomorrow. I can’t see the future, and sometimes it looks bleak. Please forgive me, and help me to trust you and your promises. I want to complete my journey with joy. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

AFFIRMATION FOR THE DAY: By God’s grace, I will not let the future intimidate me, for God will complete my journey with joy.

- Robert A. Crandall -

NOTES:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Can you think of a ‘jarring circumstance’ (troubling personal experience) which caused your life to “get out of focus” (for a short or a more lengthy time)? When a person (Christian) sins, is one of the consequences an “out-of-focus” view of life? Does “preoccupation” with life’s legitimate concerns and daily responsibilities and stressful relationships tend to take your (Christian) life “out of focus”? What ‘steps’ have you taken (i.e., what disciplines have you personally exercised) to keep your life “in focus”, during times of crisis or change?**
- 2. As a believer, where is your ‘focus’? What has your attention, attraction, or activity? To what do you commit much of your time and energy and concentration of thought? What is your ‘center of interest’?**
- 3. According to Luke 12: 22-34, what should be the ‘focus’ of your life, your ‘center of interest’?**
- 4. Do you think that Christians sometimes appear to be better than they really are, that they sometimes do religious activity to get attention from others, that they sometimes seek places of power in the church? (Note Luke 12: 1-3)**
- 5. Why do you think that Jesus often ‘condemned’ many of the religious leaders of His day? (Note Matthew 5: 20; Matthew 23: 1-33)**
- 6. Have you (as a believer) learned to ‘restrain yourself’ from worrying about the basic concerns of your life (such as food, clothes, children, job, finances, physical health), and instead ‘focus’ on God and God’s Kingdom and Church (the Body of Christ)? (Note Luke 12: 22-31)**
- 7. Have you (as a Christian) learned to respond positively to God’s ‘grace initiatives’, to reach out in faith and claim the promises which God offers to you? What would a ‘prayer of relinquishment’ mean to you and do for you? Is “Christianity” primarily a ‘legal code of laws’ and ‘moral demands’, or is “Christianity” primarily an offer of forgiveness and new life, with a ‘reservoir of divine resources’ for victorious (supernatural) living?**
- 8. Have you ever known a person who experienced many “damaged emotions” from past hurts (abuses), whose life and whose memories were miraculously and divinely healed?**

- 9. Is it possible for you legitimately (and justly) to walk away from your past hurts and resentments and heartaches and failures and mistakes and sins? If so, how? When is it ‘right’ and when is it ‘wrong’ for you to ‘forget’ your past mistakes and sins? Is it possible for you to be ‘right’ in your relationships with yourself, with others, and with God? How?**

- 10. Are you presently ‘bound’ by anything in the past which keeps you from being a victorious Christian in the present? Have you personally experienced a “healing of the memories”? Are you willing to surrender all of your past (with both its successes and failures) to Almighty God?**

- 11. When you are experiencing times of great stress and heartaches and losses, does meditation on the great God of love and wisdom and power help you to regain proper ‘perspective’ and ‘balance’ and ‘motivation for living’? Share a time in your life when, amidst the ‘night of your soul’, you experienced the light of God’s comforting and cheering presence. (Note Romans 8: 28) Have you ever noticed (realized) that, during life’s most unsettling circumstances (like the death of a loved one, or the loss of a job, or the relocation of a dear friend, or the loss of personal health), God was with you in a very special way?**

- 12. Share your personal response (i.e., your inner thoughts and emotions) to the following words from the verse of a famous hymn:**

**“When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
For I will be with thee thy trials to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.”
(How Firm A Foundation)**

- 13. Does it give you ‘comfort’ and ‘encouragement’ to know that God is a “sympathizing God”, because He understands the ‘state of your earthiness’ as a human being and that He has promised to sustain and to strengthen you during your severe trials and temptations? (Read 2 Corinthians 4: 5-18; Psalm 103: 8-14; I Peter 5: 7; I Corinthians 10: 13; 2 Thessalonians 3: 3; Jude 1: 24, 25)**

- 14. When you find yourself beginning to worry about the future (and about the many possible ‘calamities’ and ‘losses’ of the future), what should you do? (Note Matthew 6: 33-34)**

- 15. As you face an “unknown future”, what reassuring words of hope are given to you by God in Jeremiah 29: 19? Tell why you, as a follower of Christ, can declare with confidence: “I know that I will not only make it to the end of my earthly journey, but that I will make it with victory!” Have you known any committed**

Christian who, as he or she was dying, manifested ‘joy and peace and assurance’ in the ‘face of death’? (Note Psalm 23: 4)

- 16. Tell what the following popular statement (from a song) means to you: “I don’t know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future!”**
- 17. Share your personal response (i.e., your inner thoughts and emotions) to the following words from the verse of a famous hymn:**

**“Even down to old age all my people shall prove
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;
And when hoary hairs shall their temple adorn,
Like lambs, they shall in my bosom be borne.”
(How Firm A Foundation)**