

THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY

A study of I Corinthians 13
(with grateful acknowledgment
of Jonathan Edwards' classic work,
Charity and Its Fruits)

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INTRODUCTION

“It is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Romans 10:10). In response to such Biblical teachings, many Christians have publicly confessed their sins and professed their acceptance of Jesus’ death as the payment for their transgressions. As the pastor of a church I have had the privilege of hearing the testimonies of many people, especially those joining our congregation. With their mouths they profess to believe the Gospel, and with their lips they own Jesus as Savior and Lord.

I have spoken such words. I have professed such faith. But how do I know the commitment of my heart corresponds with the profession of my mouth? Can I offer any proof to validate my claim that Jesus Christ is my Savior and Lord? Jesus said those who have embraced Him as Savior and Lord are known by their love (John 13:35). Scripture teaches if we love Him we will keep His commandments (John 14:15).

When asked to name the greatest commandment, Jesus quoted the Old Testament: “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, and mind;” and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). It might appear that Jesus could not make up His mind and therefore answered the question by suggesting two possibilities. “What is the greatest commandment? It’s either to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, or to love your neighbor as yourself. I’m not sure. Pick one.”

But, in truth He gave one answer to the question. These two commandments cannot be separated. If we love God with all our heart, soul and mind, we will love our neighbor as ourselves. If our confession of faith in Him is valid, we will love Him, and our love for Him will be seen in our desire and effort to keep His commandments. Our love for Him, as well as our desire and effort to keep His commandments, will be seen in our love for others for He has commanded us to “love one another.” Our love for others shows our desire to keep His commandments. Our desire to keep His commandments shows our love for God. Our love for God helps assure us of our salvation. Jesus set this pattern before us in Scripture. Our love for God and others validates the confession of our lips.

The focus of this book is love — love for God and one another. Because our love for God is demonstrated by our love for others and validates our claim to have exercised faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, the subject of love should be of great interest to us, and the first thing we need to do is define the term.

What is “love”? The answer to that question is far from obvious. The biblical understanding of love differs radically from that of our culture. Much of what the world calls love God would label “lust.” Most often, when the world uses the word love, it is speaking of positive feelings about those who please us and provide us with pleasure. When they no longer please or pleasure us, we “fall out of love.”

Several years ago on television, a famous sit-com couple exchanged wedding vows, but instead of vowing to remain together “as long as we both shall live,” they vowed to remain husband and wife “as long as love shall last.” Such “love” has nothing to do with biblical love.

What is the biblical idea of love? How can we know if our ideas about love correspond with God's? With a profound sense of our dependence upon the Lord we will examine 1 Corinthians 13 for answers. We will also frequently take note of Jonathan Edwards' comments on 1 Corinthians 13 in his book, *Charity and Its Fruits*.

Jonathan Edwards was a preacher/theologian from New England who was used by God in the early and middle 1700s to profoundly impact the American colonies with the truth of the Gospel. Of his many writings, *Charity and Its Fruits* is my favorite. His book has profoundly challenged, encouraged, and by God's grace, shaped my understanding of 1 Corinthians 13. I hope, by God's grace, it has also positively impacted my relationship with God and others.

In the opening words of his book, Edwards writes, “In [1 Corinthians 13] we observe . . . that something is spoken of as of special importance, and as peculiarly *essential* in Christians, which the apostle calls CHARITY [love]. And this charity, we find, is *abundantly insisted on* in the New Testament by Christ and his apostles — *more insisted on*, indeed, than any other virtue.”

To lay our burdens down, to be refreshed by the river of God's grace, we must embrace Jesus as Savior and Lord. If we have embraced Him as Savior and Lord, we will be eager to keep His commandments. If we are eager to keep His commandments, we will be vitally interested in

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understanding the biblical concept of love, for Christ commands us to love one another, and Scripture teaches that our love for others evidences our love for Him. Knowing we love Him, provides us with great assurance concerning the genuineness of our professed faith in Him as Savior and Lord. May God grant us clear minds and tender hearts as we carefully examine this *most excellent way*.

- Chapter One -

LOVE'S GLORIOUS IMPACT

“You are the light of the world. A City on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5.14-16)

The darkness is terrible.

It was an all too familiar story. In his late teens and early twenties, he willfully and repeatedly chose to live immorally.

He wanted to speak with me because the circumstances of his life were terribly dark. His second marriage was failing. He was angry with his wife, with his boss, with the church, and with me.

He thought I ought to know about the things he had done in his late teens and early twenties. He had asked forgiveness for what he called his “sins.” But he also wanted me to know that he didn’t really believe what he done was really all that bad.

He told me that for several years he had been involved with a girl much younger than himself. He knew they could never marry because her family didn’t like him. But they managed to find ways to be alone. As we talked it became obvious that he remembered fondly their times together. He told me, repeatedly, how much he missed the excitement and passion of those days.

He was angry because of lost pleasures. Angry with people who found him a less-than-desirable match for their daughter. Angry with a wife who didn’t meet his needs. Angry with people like me who dared to suggest that his previous affair was displeasing to the Lord, that his “confession” of sin was less than genuine, and that his present life was shrouded in darkness because he had never experienced the godly sorrow Paul writes of 2 Corinthians 7 – godly sorrow that brings repentance, leads to salvation, and leaves no

regret. He was not indignant or alarmed. And he certainly had no longing to be freed from the memories in which he so delighted.

Darkness had permeated and enshrouded his life. He loved the darkness, embraced it, and was unable to call evil, evil.

Eventually, he left his wife, left the church. The last time I saw him he had married for a third time and wanted me to know his relationship with the Lord was back on firm ground. I hope so. I never saw him again.

It's an all too familiar story.

The world is a dark place. Paul teaches in Romans 6.20 that we are born slaves of darkness. That is, we are enslaved by wicked passion and evil desires. We know these things are true.

Paul tells us in Titus 3.3 that as sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, we are "foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures . . . filled with malice and envy, hating and being hated" (Titus 3.3).

When did you last encounter an angry driver, or witness an angry shopper, or watch an angry parent, or hear an angry child? How long has it been since you were that angry driver, angry shopper, angry parent, or angry child?

Instinctively, we are selfish, self-centered, self-absorbed. Which is the reason for all the hatred and malice that are so much a part of our daily experience. James minces no words when he writes: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from those desires that battle within you? You kill, and you covet, but you cannot have what you want. And therefore, you quarrel and you fight" (James 4:1-2).

It's an all too familiar story.

Adam and Eve desired the forbidden fruit, and so they ate with little or no concern for Who God was or for what God had said.

Cain was jealous of Abel, and so he killed him.

Lot was angry with Abraham because the land on which they pastured their combined herds could not feed both of their flocks.

Jacob plotted and schemed to steal from his brother Esau their father's blessing.

Joseph, his father's darling, was so hated by his brothers they wanted to kill him, but instead sold him into slavery.

The book of Genesis displays the sins that have marred and ruined relationships ever since the fall because of the selfish desires that burn within each of us.

But, there's good news. In the midst of this darkness, followers of Jesus Christ are given the privilege, responsibility and opportunity to blaze with the Light of God's Truth. If Jesus is your Savior and Lord, and you are therefore striving in His strength to live in obedience to His commands, you're going to be hard to ignore. You will be a light blazing in the darkness.

And it is this light that God uses to rescue others from this terrible darkness.

In the winter of 1962 a northeaster pounded the New Jersey coast and pushed the waters of the Atlantic up and over Long Beach Island causing terrible destruction. Harvey Cedars Bible Conference is located at the north end of Long Beach Island. The home of the director, Al Oldham, was situated on the Conference grounds. Mr. Oldham and his wife were at home when the storm hit.

As the strength of the winds increased and waters rose, Mr. Oldham wanted to know how much damage was being inflicted upon the conference's buildings. He did what he later recognized to be a terribly foolish thing – he left his house and began to wade through knee-deep water in the direction of the main building. In the middle of the night with the moon and stars blotted out by the clouds, aided by the illumination provided by a flashlight, he set out on an inspection tour.

As he walked, a stray rowboat brushed against him, knocked him to the ground and jarred the flashlight from his hand. In water

up to his knees, with the wind and cold whipping all around him, he struggled back to his feet only to realize that he had lost all sense of direction. Without the aid of the flashlight, he wasn't able to see his hand in front of his face.

The waters of Barnegat Bay surround the grounds of Harvey Cedars on three sides. If you walk too far in any one direction, you will step off into the bay. Mr. Oldham stood there in the darkness, unable to see, with no idea which way to walk. With a sense of rising panic he looked around him, trying to gain some sense of direction. Finally his eyes caught the glimmer of a single candle.

When he left the house his wife had lit a candle and placed it in the living room window. With his eyes focused on that one candle he returned to the safety of his home. In the darkness of the night, in the midst of a storm, that one small light made all the difference in his world.

The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it (or overcome it). There came a man who was sent from God, and his name was John and he came as a witness to testify concerning that light so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not that light, he came only as a witness to the light, the true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world (John 1.9).

John's prologue to his Gospel proclaims that Jesus is "the light of the world." In Matthew 5.14-16, Jesus told His disciples, "You are the light of the world." He would soon return to His Father, but it would be through them that His light would continue to blaze. They were to become a city on a hill which could not be hidden. In Matthew 5.16, Jesus commands them to let their light so shine before men, that they might see their good deeds and glorify their Father in heaven.

Scripture speaks often about God's glory. The word "glory" suggests an awesome brightness. Several years ago my wife and I

viewed the Crown Jewels of England displayed in the Tower of London. Crowns and scepters sparkled in their cases. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds, amethysts, sapphires rested next to gold and silver dinner utensils used by England's kings and queens. Their wealth radiated the glory of England's history. But in comparison to God's glory, they are but rhinestones and fool's gold.

From our kitchen window we can watch the sun set behind Lookout Mountain. The sky fills with streaks of turquoise, lilac, rose, amber and gold. Softly framing this brilliance of color, the clouds glow with the variegated light. The Creator's glory is displayed for all to see. Yet this beauty is only a pale reflection of His full glory.

In Exodus 24 we are told God's glory covered the top of Mt Sinai. In chapter forty we learn the "glory of the Lord" filled the Tabernacle. In 2 Chronicles 7.1-2 the Temple in Jerusalem is described as being filled with a visible "glory." Covering Mt Sinai, filling the Tabernacle and Temple, the glory bore witness to God being in the midst of His people.

Seven hundred years before the time of Christ, Isaiah tells us:

In that day the Branch of the Lord will be beautiful and *glorious* and the fruit of the land will be the pride and *glory* of the survivors in Israel. Those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem, will be called Holy, all who are recorded among the living in Jerusalem. The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire. Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over all the *glory* will be a canopy. And it will be a shelter and a shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and a hiding place from the storm and the rain.
(4.2-6)

Matthew identifies Jesus as the Branch (2.23) who was to come. Matthew tells us Jesus was called "the Nazarene" in

fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Isaiah 4.2 may well be the Old Testament passage to which Matthew refers. The Hebrew word for branch, *nezer*, and the name for the city of Nazareth, are quite similar. Matthew appears to make a play on words, an inspired “pun” intended to instruct the reader about the person of Jesus. Jesus, the Nazarene, is the *nezer* of God, the Branch that has come, beautiful and full of glory.

In his prologue John tells us that Jesus, the Word, being God, became flesh and lived for a while among us. John writes, “We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1.14).

John was on the Mount of Transfiguration when Jesus displayed His glory — the glory that was and is His. John also saw the glory of the resurrected Christ. Jesus radiated the same glory that had appeared atop Mt Sinai and had filled the Tabernacle and Temple.

Isaiah tells us when the Branch of the Lord comes, He will be beautiful and glorious, washing away the guilt of the citizens of Jerusalem (4.4). Hebrews 12 teaches us that those who have exercised faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord live in the heavenly Jerusalem atop Mt Zion. If we name the Name of Christ, we are citizens of Jerusalem. (Eph 2.11-22)

The Branch has come. He has washed away our guilt. Furthermore, He has set over our heads a glorious canopy that provides us with shade from the heat and a shelter from the storm. The glory of God which blazed from Mt Sinai, filled the Tabernacle and Temple, and was manifested in Him whom Isaiah calls “the Branch,” now serves as a canopy beneath which we live.

Scripture speaks of another object that reflects God's glory, testifying to His beauty and greatness. It is the church. The new Israel of God. The people who live within the heavenly Jerusalem, atop Mt Zion, where the Temple had been located. God intends for His people to reflect His glory.

In John 17, Jesus prays for us. He first prays for Himself. Next, He prays for the eleven. And then, He prays for all of those who will believe in Him in response to the Gospel proclaimed by the disciples. That's us. We believe because the apostolic message has been proclaimed in our hearing, and He has blessed us with the supernatural ability to hear, understand, and exercise faith in Him as Savior and Lord.

Those who have embraced Jesus as Savior and Lord know that though He is God, He freely chose to become a man so He might take upon Himself the guilt of their sins and by His death on Calvary's cross pay the penalty for their transgressions. They also know that in exchange for their sins He has graciously credited to their accounts His righteousness and holiness. They know that though they were once enemies of God, they are now His sons and daughters.

These are the people for whom Jesus prays in the latter half of John 17, "Lord I have given them the glory that you gave me." How great was the glory given to Jesus by the Father? How brightly did His glory shine atop the Mount of transfiguration? How awesome was the glory that filled the tabernacle and temple? How glorious were the appearances of our Lord following His resurrection? It's hard to imagine.

This is even harder to fully comprehend. In John 17 Jesus prays, "Father, I have given to them the same glory that you have given to me." Jesus intends for His people to live lives that are glorious!

Paul, in 2 Corinthians 3.18, teaches that we who have embraced Jesus as Savior and Lord "are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory." It would have been awesome to see the glory of God atop Mt Sinai, blazing forth from the Tabernacle and Temple, manifested in the person of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 3.18 Paul tells us that God's people are also to be awesome, for they "are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory."

This is why Christians should have no problem standing out against the backdrop of sin, like a candle shining brightly against the blackness of the darkest night. If we are disciples of Jesus Christ, being recognized as such should be easy. We must understand who we are and Whose we are. We shine with the light of His truth. We live in a land enshrouded by the shadow of death, and to us has been given the privilege, responsibility and supernatural ability to reveal the glory of heaven to those overwhelmed by darkness.

Listen to the words of the Prophet Isaiah: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light [that's Jesus!] on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned" (9:2).

"Arise [now he's talking to us], shine, because your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. *Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn*" (60:1-3).

Many who name the Name of Jesus, who live in the western world at this moment in history, believe that the Gospel has grown weak and impotent. That's understandable when we look around and see the obvious signs of Satan's influence and control. But such a perspective is too narrow. When we look beyond our own borders, we find the Gospel is greatly impacting our world. The light of the Gospel is blazing in South America, on the continent of Africa, and in China.

More than fifty years ago the missionaries serving in China were forced to leave. For many years they had faithfully planted the seed of the Gospel. It is estimated that at that time there were around 50,000 believers in China.

Recently it has been suggested that there may be within China a church of some seventy-five to 100 million believers.

How can this be? Most probably for the same reasons the Gospel impacted the ancient world during first few centuries of

church history.

Stephen Neill in his *History of Christian Missions* lists several reasons for the spread of the Gospel in those early years. Neill writes that the Gospel spread because Christians were possessed by a burning zeal knowing their message was based upon the historical reality of the resurrection. Unique in relationship to the other religions of the world, the message of the Christian faith is tied to events that took place in time and space. The historical reality of the resurrection caused the followers of Christ to blaze with the Good News.

According to Neill, another cause for the spread of the Gospel was because the new Christian communities commended themselves by the evident purity of their lives. We wrong these early Christians if we idealize them. They were ordinary men and women like ourselves living in the midst of a corrupt society, exposed to all of its temptations. But in those days to be a Christian meant something, and the evident purity of their lives impacted all those that they came in contact with.

Furthermore, Neill states: "The Christians produced a society in which all were welcomed without distinction, from which the age-long discrimination between Jews and Gentiles, bond and free, Greek and Barbarian, man and woman, seem to have been banished."

Neill also offers this reason for the spread of the Gospel: "One noble feature of the Christians, was the elaborate development of charitable services. Their care and their love for one another" profoundly influenced those around them.

Evidence for the influence of Christian philanthropy upon the culture of that day comes from the writings of the apostate emperor Julian, who lived in the fourth century. Intent upon reestablishing the pagan religions of ancient Rome, Julian was finding it more difficult than he had expected to put life into the ancient religions which he wished to bring back and honor. He saw clearly that many were

drawn to the Christian faith by the love of those who claimed to be followers of the Christ. Julian, frustrated by the influence of the Christians, writes: "These Godless Galileans [Jesus was from Galilee and Julian's description was meant as an insult] care not only for their own poor, but for ours as well. While those who belong to us, look in vain for the help that we should be giving them."

Jesus said in John 13:35, "All men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Loving one another is not easy. We are sinners by birth and by choice. However, we are also redeemed, and therefore, we have the supernatural power to live as God would have us to live, the supernatural power to love as He has loved us. When we love in such a manner, we become, like our spiritual ancestors, blazing torches illuminating a dark, cold world.

Why should we strive to live lives that show the love of God to others? First, because we love Him! We want our lives to show His love to others in order that He might receive the glory and honor that is rightfully His.

Secondly, we should live as God would have us to live for the sake of others. God has given us the privilege and responsibility to serve as this world's only hope. When we choose to disobey God, we shroud the light of His truth in darkness. Our lives are meant to blaze with the glory of God. But when by our words, actions, or attitudes, we hide that light, we hide or malign the truth of the Gospel. When our lives reflect His love, they powerfully impact the world with a dynamic demonstration of God's true Truth.

In the early centuries, nothing could stop the spread of the Gospel. In those years the church was not "blessed" with various programs and methods; instead, it was a church blessed with people who loved the Lord. They made their love for Christ obvious and evident by their love for others. As a result their lives helped turn their world right-side up.

As believers, we are empowered by the One who has overcome sin, death, the grave and the Evil One. His purposes

cannot be stopped. As Martin Luther wrote, "And He must win the battle." The only question is whether we will have the privilege of knowing that He has worked in and through us to gain that victory.

So let's ask a few questions.

As parents, are our children awed by us? As young people who name the Name of Jesus Christ, are our schoolmates awed by us? Are those with whom we work in awe of us? As officers of the church, are the people awed by us? As members of the church of Jesus Christ, is the world awed by us?

Some of you do fill others with a sense of holy awe because your life reflects the glory of God. But for many who profess faith in Jesus, the answer is no.

Why is that? First, there is a fundamental problem — we are by nature a fallen people. Our name is Ichabod (1 Samuel 4.21). From us the glory has departed. We have lost the ability to perfectly reflect the Lord's glory. Because we are a fallen people, we do not love Him as we ought. In fact, we are in rebellion against Him and are alienated from Him. Jonathan Edward's observes that "sin has so contracted the soul to very small dimensions of selfishness that God is forsaken and others are likewise forsaken. We retire within ourselves, and we become totally governed by narrow and selfish principles and feelings."

Is that not exactly who we have become? We are a people who by birth do not care about God, or what He has said, or how He would have us to live. We are a people so focused on ourselves that we deeply resent anyone or anything that interferes with our pursuit of pleasure and ease.

A parent asks a child to do a simple chore, and the child, because of innate selfishness, resents it. We say the child is immature. Sadly, many of us never grow up. A child asks a parent for help, and sometimes the parent, busy with his or her own responsibilities, responds in a manner that can only be described as childish. A wife asks her husband for assistance, a husband asks his wife for help, or someone challenges us to live as Christ would have

us to live, and in response to all such circumstances, if it negatively impacts our pleasure or ease, we tend to become angry and resentful.

Then we meet Jesus and the impact of the Gospel is awesome, life-changing, and supernatural. The Lord takes an individual, dead in trespasses and sins, and changes this selfish person into someone who grows more and more Christ-like until he becomes someone – who like Mount Sinai, the tabernacle, the temple, and Jesus Himself – reflects the glory of God in all he does or says, producing within others a sense of holy awe.

God in His mercy redeems us, cleanses us from all of our sin, and removes from us our guilt. By the power of the Gospel He begins a new work within us. Paul describes it in this manner: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, and the new has come.” In the great hymn, “Rock of Ages,” the final line teaches that being cleansed from sin is a “double cure”: we are delivered from sin’s guilt and power. We are no longer in bondage to sin. Sin can neither condemn nor control us. We are by God’s grace and because of His mercy part of a new creation, having been re-created in His image as a people who reflect His glory with ever increasing greatness and wonder.

God delivers us from sin and restores to us those noble and divine impulses with which we were created. We now desire to love God, to love one another, and we have the supernatural ability to love gloriously. Delivered and restored, we now have the supernatural ability to reflect the glory of God to a watching world. He enables us to live as He would have us to live. We are enabled to shine like the stars of heaven on a dark winter night.

Satan still walks about like a roaring lion looking for those he can devour, and there is no one he desires to devour more than those who are threatening to shine with God’s glory. Satan hates and greatly fears those who live as image bearers of God.

This is why our lives remain a struggle. We live in a sinful world. God has rescued us from death, but He has not yet brought us into that final stage of glory where we will be unable to sin. For now, we are required to do battle. The war has been won, but there are still battles to be fought. Once the Allied troops had successfully landed on the beaches of Normandy, World War II was won. They had many battles to fight, but the war was won, even though they had to wait for Victory in Europe (VE) Day before they could lay down their weapons. At Calvary the war was won, but we still await the final declaration of Victory.

Likewise, the victory has been won, but we still have many battles to wage. Satan loves to fool us. He fools us into losing sight of who we are and Whose we are. He fools us into focusing upon our wants, desires, weaknesses, and inconsistencies. He fools us into seeking excuses for our sin. The last thing he wants is for us to call upon the Lord, confess our sins, know that we are forgiven, and trust in His enabling grace to supply us with the supernatural ability to live and love as God intends.

What does God intend us to be? God wants us to be like Mt Sinai, like the tabernacle, like the temple, like Jesus. God intends for us to be glorious. But that will only happen if being glorious is important to us. There are those who name the Name of Jesus Christ for whom it is not important. It is much more important to them to fritter away their time, to pursue the unimportant things of this world, to hold on to their excuses for why they cannot be what God would have them to be. So many things are more important to them than striving to be glorious. The church of Jesus Christ grows weaker and weaker when it is filled with people who name the Name of Christ and yet are anything but glorious.

Following the events of 9/11, we, as a nation, became focused. Four jumbo jets were hijacked, two smashed into the World Trade Center and one crashed into the Pentagon. The fourth jet dove into a field in western Pennsylvania. Thousands of our citizens

were killed. Our nation was outraged. We became focused upon a mission — bringing to justice those who masterminded such a dastardly deed.

But how quickly that focus was lost.

As Christians we fight against a far deadlier enemy, one who doesn't simply kill the body but also kills the soul. We need to be outraged. We need to be focused in doing battle against him who attacks us both physically and spiritually. We need to focus upon living glorious lives that attract others to the light of the Gospel which proclaims Him Who has defeated the Evil One and rescues His people from sin's curse and power.

And we need to struggle with the strength He supplies not to lose our focus.

I know people who are glorious. Seeing their love for the Lord and others, they evoke in me a sense of awe. A few years ago, a group of deacons in our church drove 600 miles on their time off to help move the household furnishings of a new church member who lacked the financial resources to transfer her belongings to her new apartment. They gave up their time and spent their energy in service to someone in need – someone they hardly knew. What they did was an expression of genuine love and compassion. What they did was glorious.

The Scripture does not set before us an impossibility. By God's grace and the supernatural empowering of the Holy Spirit, we can be the people that God intends for us to be. The importance of living gloriously cannot be overstated. The sword of God's judgment hangs over this world, and we are its only hope. We serve this world not by speaking platitudes, but by serving the Lord and living lives that are glorious – lives that reflect the glorious love of God.

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul teaches that our lives are to be characterized by a radical love for Him and others. The grace that saves is the grace that enables us to so love. And by such we reveal to a watching world the glory of the One Who is love (1 John 4.8).

- Chapter Two -

THE TEST

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."
(1 Corinthians 13.1-3)

As we walked through an aviary in Pittsburgh, a myna whistled at my fiancée and then spoke of his love for her. The meaning of his words was clear, and yet his words were clearly meaningless.

She was my fiancée. I wasn't in the habit of whistling at her, but I had told her I loved her. My words were more than simply words. I may not have yet known much about what it means for a man to love a woman, but I meant what I said. And now, some forty years later, I still tell her – almost every day – that I love her, and while I still have a lot to learn, I've also learned a lot about what it means to do more than just talk a good game.

John teaches that if our expressions of love for the Lord are genuine, they will be accompanied by demonstrations of the love we so ardently express. They won't just be words. The truth of our love for the Lord will be demonstrated by our love for others. Loving others is the necessary consequence of loving God.

Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love, does not know God because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love, not that we

love God, but that he loved us. And he sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4.7-11)

Our lives are scarred by hate. Ever since Cain lashed out against Abel, human relationships have reflected the broken relationship that exists between mankind and God. If we turn our backs on the Lord, we will find many justifications for turning our backs on one another. If we do not love Him, we will find it terribly difficult to love one another.

Many are desperately unhappy and full of anger. They strike out against others with hateful words and acts. When caught in traffic, forced to stand in long lines at the store, or overcome by the pressures of work or school, their anger and hatred boils to the surface. Far too often, we who profess to be believers are those people. Far too often the lives of those professing to be believers are inflamed by thoughtless words and acts – words and acts for which we have no regret, do not apologize, and if given the opportunity can fully justify. Such words and acts harm us, harm those we love, and deny the world a glimpse of God's glory.

For the sake of God's glory and the good of others we must strive in the strength that God supplies to love as He teaches us to love. If we belong to Christ, then He lives within us, making us the recipients of His love and supernaturally enabling us to love as we have been loved. 1 John 4.16 teaches that "God is love, whoever lives in love, lives in God and God in him. Love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like Him." Assurance of salvation and thus confidence on the day of judgment comes in knowing that God lives in us, that we are like Him, for we find that He has given us the grace to show to others the love of God.

John drives home his point in 1 John 4.19-20: "We love

because He first loved us. If anyone says, I love God and hates his brother, he is a liar. [Think about those words, 'He is a liar!'] Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And He has given us this command: 'If you love me you will keep my commandments.'" Our supernatural ability to love others shows that we love God, for it demonstrates that God is at work within us.

In the musical *My Fair Lady*, Eliza tells Freddie, "Don't talk of love; show me!" Like Freddy, we can talk about loving God, share our testimony with others, recite Scripture, demonstrate our knowledge of the Confession, and if anyone questions the genuineness of our faith, rebuke them for being presumptuous. "You don't know my heart! You can't read my mind!" But words are not enough. Scripture teaches if we love God, we will love one another.

In 1 Corinthians 13.1-3, Paul makes it clear that love is *the* Christian virtue that must characterize the life of a believer. It is as if Paul says to us: "Don't *talk* to me about how much you love the Lord. *Show me.*"

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

The most spectacular gifts we can possess in this world, without the grace of love, are worthless. The ability to speak in the tongues of men and of angels. The ability to speak the very words of God. The ability to understand God's deep and eternal purposes. What wonderful gifts! Although these gifts may be used by God to accomplish His good purposes, without the grace of love, we are nothing more than a resounding gong or a clanging symbol.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter, endowed with power from on high, preached in the streets of Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit used Peter's words to bring 3,000 people to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Acts 2.42 informs us that the church in Jerusalem was characterized by extraordinary zeal – they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and prayer.

Verse forty-three states that the believers in Jerusalem were filled with awe. They had a profound sense of the presence of God in their midst. Their love was made obvious. Voluntarily, many sold some of their possessions to provide for the needs of those in the church who lacked the essentials of life. The Romans heavily taxed Judea. Many who professed faith in Jesus found themselves ostracized by their neighbors and even deprived of employment. Many lacked food for their tables, clothes for their backs, and a roof over their heads. Because of political and religious realities, they were unable to provide for themselves or to pay the taxes demanded by Rome. Therefore, those who were financially able took steps to provide for the needs of their brothers and sisters.

Twenty years later Paul would ask the Corinthians to provide funds for the relief of the believers in Jerusalem. The Corinthians did as Paul instructed. In 2 Corinthians 9.12 Paul told the believers at Corinth,

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the Gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and everyone else.

While Acts 2 paints for us a wonderful picture of Jewish believers caring for the physical needs of one another, the efforts of

Gentile believers raising money for the relief of Jews living in Judea is stunning. It's one thing for a Jewish believer to care for other Jewish believers. It is clearly supernatural to find Gentile believers willing to meet the needs of their Jewish brothers and sisters. In the culture of the first century, Jews and Gentiles despised each other. But the Gentile (and Jewish) believers of the church in Corinth were coming to the assistance of their Jewish brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Such concrete demonstrations of love should thrill and challenge us.

During my childhood we lived with the thought "the Russians are coming, the Russians are coming." I kept imagining what it would be like when they finally arrived. I wondered what I would do, what I would say, and how bold I would be. I wondered just how courageously I would face persecution. I wasn't overly confident about my ability to stand up under the threat of torture.

Let me tell you about some who did face death for the cause of Christ.

Stephen was the first martyr of the Christian church, the first to die for the sake of His Savior, Jesus Christ. Tradition tells us of James' courage in the face of death, a courage that led to the conversion of those who brought accusations against him. Church tradition tells us that many others also suffered martyrdom. Matthew was run through with a sword. Mark was torn to pieces by a rioting mob in the city of Alexandria. Both Philip and Andrew died by crucifixion. The apostle Peter was also crucified, requesting that he be nailed to his cross upside down because he was not worthy to die in the same manner as His Lord. Paul was beheaded. Luke was hanged.

Near the end of the second century AD, Polycarp, eighty-six years of age, was brought to trial by the Roman government because he would not sprinkle incense on the altar used in the worship of the Emperor. Given one final opportunity to recant, sprinkle incense on the altar, and save his life, Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years I have served my Lord, and he has never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, who hath saved

me?"

In the 16th century Bishops Ridley and Latimer were arrested because of their refusal to submit to the restrictions placed upon those who wanted to preach the doctrines of grace. They were tried, convicted of treason, and sentenced to death. The night before they were to be burned at the stake, Ridley is recorded as having said to Latimer, "Our breakfast tomorrow morning may be somewhat sharp, but our supper is going to be pleasant and sweet." And then, for breakfast, they were tied to the stake and the fires were lit. As the flames began to consume them, Bishop Ridley leaned over to Bishop Latimer and encouraged him with these words, "Be of good cheer, Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day by God's grace light up such a candle, as I trust, will never be put out."

In our own day, at this moment in history, more people are dying for the cause of Christ than in all the previous generations put together. I remember as a young boy hearing about the deaths of Robert Youderian, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming, Nate Saint, and Jim Elliot. They were killed by those to whom they were taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Can you imagine the courage, conviction, and assurance that would be required to lay down one's life for a Lord one had never seen? Such historical events challenge us to examine ourselves. They cause me to pause and wonder if I would be willing to lay down my life for the cause of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as others have before me.

These thoughts of Christians sharing their material goods with those who lacked the necessities of life, and of others willingly laying down their lives for the cause of Christ and His Gospel, challenge us. But let me share with you an even greater challenge.

Paul wrote at the end of 1 Corinthians 12, "And now I will show you the most excellent way." In 1 Corinthians 13.3 Paul says to us, "If I give all I possess to the poor, if I surrender my body to the flames, but

I have not love, I gain nothing." What more could we do than the Corinthians did for their fellow believers in Jerusalem? What more could we do than Stephen or Jim Elliot?

What more *could* we do? We could show to others the love of Christ.

Obviously the Lord thinks it is important for us to provide for those in need. Obviously the Lord thinks it is important for us to be willing to lay down our lives for the cause of the Gospel. He repeatedly told His disciples that all who call Him Lord must be willing to take up their cross – an instrument of death – and follow Him. But what makes these things extraordinary is that they are demonstrations of the supernatural grace given to believers to love the Lord and to show His love to others.

Paul teaches that the ordinary expressions of the supernatural grace of love are greater proof that the Spirit is at work within us than selling what we own and giving the money to the poor, or of laying down our lives for the cause of the Gospel. Paul teaches that love is the greatest demonstration of God's supernatural power at work within us.

This supernatural ability to love is the grace that God gives to all believers. Not all believers are "gifted" in the same way. But to all believers has been given the grace to love as God has loved them. By grace we are saved. And by this same grace we are supernaturally empowered by God through the inward work of the Holy Spirit to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and to demonstrate our love for Him by loving others. God gives to individual believers different gifts. But every believer is saved by grace and empowered by that same grace to love as God has loved them.

There are many things we can do that look good and yet are not pleasing to the Lord. For example, we can pray, fast, and tithe. These are good things to do. And yet, the doing of these things may

not be pleasing to the Lord. For example, in Luke 18.11-12 we're told about a man who fasted twice a week, gave a tenth of all that he had to the Lord, and went to the Temple to pray. Yet Jesus said he was not acceptable to God because his life was characterized by self-centeredness and his heart was not broken before the Lord. He did not love the Lord with all of his heart, soul, strength and mind. We know there were some for whom he had little, if any, love for he despised the poor man standing near him in the Temple pouring out his heart to God.

We may take great pride in being members of a congregation, in our faithful attendance at services, in our willingness to do the work of the church. Obviously, those are good, important things. Paul testifies in Philippians that he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. As far as zealousness for the Law was concerned, he was a Pharisee. He was circumcised on the eighth day. He knew the Old Testament scriptures inside-out and backwards. But he was as lost as he could possibly be. Why? Because he did not have within his heart the reality of the love of God.

It is possible for us to exercise extraordinary gifts and yet still not please the Lord. God has on occasion given these gifts to those who are not His people. Balaam was an apostate and heretic, and yet God chose to speak through him (as well as his donkey). Even Judas Iscariot had the supernatural gifts of exorcism and healing.

It has been argued that what the church needs is the supernatural ability to exercise the extraordinary gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. If only we could do the things they did, we'd turn this world right-side up. That idea is wrong. What the church needs is not simply the ability to exercise the extraordinary gifts, but the supernatural ability to show to others the love of God.

Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 12.31 about the "most excellent way." Paul says to us, "I want to tell you what is of greatest importance. It is of such great importance that these gifts I have just listed are, by comparison, insignificant."

In the eighteenth century Jonathan Edwards wrote, "The ordinary influence of the spirit of God working the grace of love in the heart is a more excellent blessing than any of the extraordinary gifts of the spirit."

Love is the demonstration of God's grace at work in our lives. The ability to love Him with all of our heart, soul, strength and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves, is the greatest of God's supernatural blessings. The supernatural ability to exercise such love is a test of salvation. It is the most excellent of all

God's gifts. It is His greatest blessing. It is His most excellent way. The grace that saves is the grace that enable us to love as we have been loved.

The extraordinary gifts are a wonder to behold. They have been powerfully used by God to accomplish extraordinary things, and the possession and exercise of those gifts is viewed in Scripture as a great honor. But far greater than any of these gifts is the supernatural grace given to all believers, which empowers them to love others as God has loved them.

This is what Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 13. The supernatural ability to love, which is the consequence of God's grace at work in our lives, is far greater than any of the extraordinary gifts God gives to His people.

Loving the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind, so that your greatest desire and number one concern is to serve, follow and obey Him by loving and serving others, is far more excellent than the ability to exercise any of the extraordinary gifts that Paul speaks of in chapters twelve and fourteen of 1 Corinthians.

Paul wrote in Romans 13.9, "The commandments [which if you love the Lord you will desire to keep] are summed up in this one rule, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" James calls this "the royal law," that is, the King's law. If you love the King, you will keep the King's "royal law." If you love the King, you will love the King's subjects.

James taught “the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” Jonathan Edwards wrote:

That which is only a speculative faith is like light without heat; and that faith which lack’s spiritual heat or divine love, is vain and good for nothing. A speculative faith consists only in the assent of the understanding; but in a saving faith there is also the consent of the heart. Speculative faith is no better than the faith of the devil, for he believes, he believes that there is one God, and he trembles.

It is the grace of love that validates before others our profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. 1 Corinthians 13 defines for us this grace of love that adorns the lives of His people.

The world thinks of love as the desire to possess what is beautiful, or pleasing, or fulfilling. Biblical love is a willingness to love others even if they are less than attractive, are not pleasing to be around, and are unconcerned about our needs.

Biblical love is demonstrated by a willingness to serve others. Biblical love is a willingness to meet the needs of others within the parameters of God’s law. Biblical love is a willingness to pay any price, even the ultimate price.

We are to love as we have been loved. Christ chose to love us and willingly died for a sinful and ungodly people. He died for people like you and me.

Clearly, we struggle to love as we have been loved. It’s difficult. In fact, it’s impossible! In our own strength we cannot love in the manner prescribed by Scripture.

It’s difficult enough to love those who please us – or at least at one time were pleasing to us. Think of the vows that are taken as a

man and woman marry. They vow to love one another no matter what. To love in sickness and health, in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want. It's easy to say, "I love you." To make a vow of undying love is easy. However, true love requires a radical commitment and a determination to do whatever is required to prove the validity of what we so easily express with our lips.

It is easy for me to love my wife. She blesses my life and eagerly seeks to please me. But I do find it challenging to love those who treat me the way I once, and far too often still, treat my Lord.

To love our enemies, to love the unlovely, the unlovable, is a supernatural grace. The ability to love as God commands is the result of God's supernatural gracious work in our hearts. Paul teaches that love is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work within us. He says in Romans 5.5 that God has poured His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Biblical love is not something that simply wells up from within us. God pours it into us. Therefore, the ability to demonstrate the kind of love commanded by Scripture, a love that is the quintessential Christian virtue, is *an evidence* of genuine faith. It *evidences* the extraordinary fact that God is at work within us to will and to do His good pleasure (Phil 2.13).

Paul tells us in Philippians 2.3 that because of the supernatural grace God has poured into our lives, we will "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility we will consider others better than ourselves." Edwards writes, "It will check and restrain a bitter spirit, for love has no bitterness in it, but is sweet and gentle. It will prevent hateful arguments and quarrels and will incline men to peaceableness. It will incline men to forgive injurious treatment that they have received from others." In Proverbs 10.12 we are taught, "hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers over all wrongs." Paul says this supernatural love will result in acts of mercy and charity, the bearing of one another's burdens, a willingness to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice.

This is the bottom line: When the supernatural grace of love is

poured out by God into our hearts, it produces those good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do — those good works that are meant to benefit others and resound to God's glory and praise. Such good works are prompted by our love for God and thus for others. I John 3.16 emphasizes this truth:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our life for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in Him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence.

"If our hearts are full of love," Jonathan Edwards wrote, "then that love will find vents; you will find or make ways enough to express your love in deeds. When a fountain abounds in water, it sends forth streams."

How do we know that Jesus is our Savior and Lord? One way we know is by discovering that we have the ability to exercise a supernatural love. He gives us the ability to love as He would have us love. This is a critical truth. It is critical for us as individuals, as families, as a church body, and as citizens of this world.

- Chapter Three -

LOVE IS PATIENT

1 Corinthians 13.4

Paul says that the believers at Corinth are “sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy” (1 Corinthians 1.2). Sanctified. Already. Paul does not suggest that they are sinless. He isn't saying they've completed the work of dying unto sin and living unto righteousness. Paul uses this term to describe them as a people set apart by God to the privileged position of being able to call God their Father and Jesus their Lord.

Clearly he isn't suggesting that being “sanctified” they are not sinless, because in the same verse he tells them that God has called them to live “holy lives.” Therefore, Paul will command these sanctified and holy people to address several serious sins disrupting the church and besmirching their witness before a watching world. Paul will challenge them to do everything to the glory of God (10.31).

The Corinthians were a lot like us. By God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord we are saints (that is, sanctified) whom God calls to live holy lives. We still sin. But at the same time, the Holy Spirit enables us to live holy lives, to do those things that please our Lord and benefit others. That's the way it's been since the fall. That's the way it will be until Jesus comes again.

By God's grace and to the praise of His Holy Name, we are to do what Paul calls upon the believers at Corinth to do as he ends his first epistle. That is, to stand firm in the faith, to be courageous, to be strong, and to do everything in love (16.13). We are to strive in the strength God supplies to be the men and women He created us to be. The men and women He has graciously recreated us to be. We are to strive in the strength He supplies to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and to love our neighbors as we love

ourselves. We are to strive eagerly to live lives that glorify and honor our Lord and that benefit others.

1 Corinthians 13 helps us understand the many faceted aspects of this love that is to characterize all we do and say.

Many find the words of 1 Corinthians to be beautiful, but terribly idealistic and impractical. Who is capable of loving in this way?

Even believers can find the message of 1 Corinthians 13 frustrating. They desire to love as God instructs, but when they examine their lives in the light of 1 Corinthians 13, all they can think about is how miserably they've failed and what miserable sinners they are.

Other believers admit their failures, but are comforted by the idea that their inability to love as God instructs in 1 Corinthians 13 is because God's work of sanctification in their lives has not yet been completed. When it is, then they will love as God would have them. Meanwhile, they continue on their way, passively waiting for that great day.

Those who by grace through faith have embraced Jesus as Savior and Lord are sanctified. That is, they are saints of God. The words saint and sanctified are based upon the same Greek root. Believers are judged by the court of heaven to be saints, that is, to be sanctified. Jesus has taken upon Himself our sins, and in exchange has credited to our account His perfect righteousness. And thus Paul describes the believers at Corinth as sanctified. We stand forgiven and innocent of all charges before the Judge of heaven and earth, because Jesus has died that we might live.

But we are not yet perfectly sanctified, and will not achieve that status until we enter His eternal presence. And thus Paul tells the sanctified believers at Corinth that they are called to be holy.

1 Corinthians 13 is a call to holiness. In our own strength we

can never love as God would have us to love. But the teaching of 1 Corinthians 13 is not meant to tease us. Paul is not dangling before us an impossibility when he writes in 1 Corinthians 14.1, "Follow the way of love."

The love described in 1 Corinthians 13 is the love of God supernaturally reproduced by the Holy Spirit in the lives of *all* believers. The Holy Spirit implants in the lives of all believers the supernatural grace to love as God has loved them. Believers are empowered by the equipping and enabling of the Holy Spirit to love with the love that Paul sets before us in 1 Corinthians 13. While we continually battle against sinful temptations, and often fail to live as God wants us to live, we are to strive by God's grace to love as He would have

us love, knowing that God is at work within us so that we might both will and act according to his good purposes (Philippians 2.13).

Paul tells the Corinthians (10.13) that God is faithful and therefore He will not let them be tempted beyond what they can bear. Paul promises them that when they are tempted to sin, God will provide a way out so they can stand up under it. Now if God is going to provide all they need to resist sin's temptations, and is going to enable them to stand up to the attacks of the Evil One, clearly what He intends is for them to know that He will provide the strength and abilities they need to live as He commands.

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul does not say, "Love *should* be patient, love *should* be kind." Paul says, "Love *is* patient, love *is* kind." 1 Corinthians 13 describes the love that *will* be reproduced in the lives of believers by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. No one, in this lifetime, will love perfectly. But all believers will strive *eagerly* by God's grace to love as God wants them to love, and as they do, they will experience moments of astonishing victory and extraordinary beauty, that God will use to accomplish more and better things than they could ever ask or imagine.

In 1 Corinthians 13.4 the first thing on Paul's list is for me particularly stunning and challenging: "Love is patient."

I'm not a patient man. God forgive me; I tend to have a short fuse. I've struggled with impatience my whole life. And by God's grace, I will continue to battle against this terrible sin that too often mars my life and injures others.

Some people are more patient than I. I'm sure there are some somewhere who are less patient than I. But when Paul tells us that "love is patient," he isn't talking about a natural disposition. He's talking about the supernatural. He's telling us that by God's grace we have been given the ability to love with a patience that reflects the loving patience He has shown us.

In Exodus 32 the children of Israel are camped at the foot of Mt Sinai. Their God-given leader, Moses, has climbed to the top of the mountain, where God has given to Him the Law by which the lives of His people are to be governed.

But as Moses meets with God, the people camped below, grow restless. And in Exodus 32.7 God tells Moses he must return to them.

"Go down, because *your* people whom you brought up out of Egypt have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are our gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' I've seen these people," the Lord said to Moses, "and they are a stiff necked people. Now leave me alone, so that my anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them. Then I will make *you* into a great nation" (Exodus 32.7-10).
[Emphasis added]

God knew that He had been wronged. He delivered them out of Egypt. He rescued them from the land of slavery. But now they've turned away from Him. They are worshiping an idol. God will not share His glory with another. He is a jealous God. And those who make for themselves an idol, He will punish.

Therefore, in Exodus 32.10 God threatens to destroy them and promises Moses that He will make a great (new) nation through him and his descendants.

If I'm Moses, this sounds like a good idea to me.

These people have complained and griped since leaving Egypt, grumbling against God and Moses. They complained when they found themselves trapped between the army of Egypt and the waters of the Red Sea. They complained when their supplies of water and food ran low. They complained when they had only manna to eat. They complained when attacked by the Amalekites. But with loving patience, in each and every case, God delivered them and supplied their needs.

And yet, they continued to gripe and complain. If you were Moses, and God was offering to get rid of these people who have been for you a thorn in the flesh, and in their place, to make you and your descendants His new covenant community, how would you respond?

Moses' response was to plead with God not to destroy these people who had caused him so much grief. Moses pleads with God not to give the Egyptians an excuse to speak evil of Him. He pleads with God not to forget His covenant promises to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Listen as Moses prays.

O Lord, why should your anger burn against *your* people whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say it was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the

mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?
Turn from your fierce anger, relent and do not bring
disaster on *your* people. Remember *your* servants
Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom *you* swore by *your*
own self “I will make your descendants as numerous as
the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this
land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance
forever.” (Exodus 32.11-13) [Emphasis added]

Moses knew the people had sinned. They had sinned against the Lord. They had sinned against Moses. So what does Moses do? In Exodus 32.32 Moses asks God to pour out His wrath on him –Moses – instead of on the people. God had told to Moses, “I will pour out my wrath upon them, and then from you, Moses, I’ll raise up a new covenant people.” But, in Exodus 32.32 Moses prays, “[Lord], please forgive their sin – and if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.” Moses pleads with God to punish him –Moses – instead of the people.

Moses understood that God is a just Judge. A just judge cannot simply overlook evil. The moment a judge overlooks evil, he is no longer just. When a culture loses sight of Who God is, it becomes confused about justice, for it no longer has an infallible standard for determining the difference between right and wrong, between justice and injustice.

Many are stunned when told that God wanted to pour out His wrath on Israel. We think of wrath as an immature and unthinking response. But God’s wrath is not the result of a temper tantrum. God does not lose His temper. God’s wrath is His just and righteous response to those who reject Him and rebel against His holy purposes.

The children of Israel knew that God had declared and shown Himself to be their God. They knew they were His covenant people. They knew He had rescued them from the Egyptians, delivered them from the hands of their enemies, and provided for their needs. But

they chose to turn their backs on Him. They chose to go their own way and do their own thing without any thought or concern for Who God is or for how God would have them to live.

Moses knew God could, with perfect justice, pour out His wrath upon them. But Moses thought that perhaps God would accept his death in substitution for theirs. Moses did not understand that the death of a sinful man could not atone for sinners. In Exodus 32.33-34, God tells Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin."

And punish them He will. In Exodus 32.35 we are told, "The Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made." He punished them. But He didn't destroy them.

In Exodus 33.19 God tells Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." God chooses to deal mercifully and compassionately with Israel. In Exodus 34.6-7 God tells Moses that He, the Lord, is slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness – the God who maintains His love to thousands, and forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin.

God is just. The people have sinned grievously. They deserve to have Him pour out His wrath upon them. But instead, He chooses to be merciful and compassionate, to be gracious, loving and faithful to them. He chooses to deal with them patiently, for he is "slow to anger."

A thousand years later, Nehemiah paused to reflect upon the loving patience of God.

Ninety years before his own day, a remnant of those living as

exiles in Babylon had returned to their home in Judah. During those ninety years, the city of Jerusalem had been without walls. Now, under the leadership of Nehemiah, the walls had been rebuilt.

In Nehemiah chapter nine the people gather in Jerusalem to confirm anew their covenant relationship with God. There is to be a time for the public confession of sin. In verses thirty and thirty-one we find their prayer. "For many years, you were patient with [our ancestors]. By your Spirit, you admonished them through your prophets, yet they paid no attention. So you handed them over to their neighboring peoples. But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them, or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God."

What an amazing two verses! "O God, You have been patient with our ancestors," and yet "you have admonished them." He had admonished them because they had been disobedient and had rebelled against Him. They had put His law behind their backs, killed the prophets of God, and committed blasphemies. In verse thirty-five we are told that "even while they were in their kingdom enjoying your great goodness in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you, or turn from their evil ways, and so you have admonished them." In verse thirty-three the returning captives confess, "We have done wrong."

God had admonished His people for their sin. He had disciplined them. Yet, because of His loving patience, He had continued to bless them. When they continued in their sin, He handed them over to their enemies. As a result, their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren spent seventy years in captivity. But even while they were captives in a foreign land, God continued to be patient with them. In verse thirty-one we are told He did not "put an end to them."

What did they deserve? They deserved to be annihilated by God. They deserved God to judge them as He had judged their northern cousins, the *lost* ten tribes of Israel, who were annihilated by

the Assyrians whom God raised up to “put an end to them.”

But God did not “put an end” to Judah. With loving patience God admonished and punished them, did not “put an end to them.”

Now let’s jump back a thousand years and think about those encamped at the foot of Mt Sinai. They have freely chosen to worship a golden calf. God is angry with them. But in response to Moses’ prayers, God proclaims Himself to be “slow to anger and abounding in love.” He will punish them, but He will not put an end to them.

Now – are you ready? – jump ahead with me a thousand years, and listen to the people gathered in Jerusalem as they remember how God has dealt with His people in the past:

Because of your great compassion, you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet become swollen.

God did not abandon them. Because of His patient love, they did not get what they deserved. He admonished and punished them. But He did not “put an end to them.” The Israelites should have been sun-bleached bones scattered on the desert floor. Instead, they were a people protected and blessed by God.

He did not treat them as they deserved.

The good news is that God does not treat us as we deserve. The Greek word Paul uses for *patient* in 1 Corinthians 13.4 was

first used by the writers of the Septuagint, a third century BC Greek translation of the Old Testament. In Exodus 34.6 God is described as being “compassionate and gracious . . . *slow to anger*, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness.” The word translated *slow to anger* is *makrothymia*. *Thymia* is the Greek word for wrath. *Macro* is a Greek prefix that means “long in coming or duration.” Patience is the prolonged restraint of God’s anger. As we read in the KJV, God is “long suffering.”

Because of God’s “abounding love,” He deals patiently with a sinful and rebellious people who justly deserve for Him to pour out His wrath upon them.

This doesn’t mean that God’s love is wishy-washy. He doesn’t compromise His Truth or Justice. He doesn’t overlook our sins or fail to punish them. Instead, because of His great love for us, He graciously deals with our sin.

For example, in Hebrews 12.6 we are told He “disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son.” As a father, I disciplined and punished my children because I loved them.

When God punishes His people, it’s because He loves them. Because He is long-suffering, He patiently deals with us and does not “put an end to us” or “abandon us.” Instead, He promises us in Romans 8.38-39 that nothing in heaven or earth or hell can ever separate us from the love of God that is ours because of Christ Jesus! He loves us because He has *chosen* to love us. In His love, He pours out His blessing upon us. Because He loves us, He admonishes and disciplines us. In love, He never turns His back on us. In love, He is patient with us and slow to anger. In love, He never walks away. In love, knowing everything about us that there is to know, He chooses to love us and to call us His own. In love, He chooses to embrace us as His sons and daughters and to call us family.

Most importantly, God does for us what Moses offered to do — He takes upon Himself our sins and at Calvary pays the penalty for

our transgressions. In doing so, He is both just and the One who justifies. Our sins deserve the judgment of death. Christ suffered that judgment. For us He died. Because of Christ's life, death and resurrection, the penalty for our sins is paid. We are by the Judge of heaven and earth declared to be "not guilty." In truth, we are declared to be "innocent" of all the accusations Satan might hurl at us. By His death we are justified and declared to be just.

In response to His love, grace, and mercy, we love Him. And our love for Him is seen by our love for others. By His grace, we learn to love as we have been loved. We learn to love with a love that is patient. When wronged we learn not to wrong. We learn not to return evil with evil. We learn to love, to be compassion-nate, to be lovingly concerned for those who have wronged us. We learn to forgive as we have been forgiven. We learn to love as we have been loved.

This is radical! How is it possible for us to respond in such a manner, for us to show love to those who have misused, abused and attacked us? In and of ourselves it is impossible. In my own strength I read 1 Corinthians 13.4 and think, "Paul, you're such a pollyanna. You must not know anything about living in the real world. You obviously do not know what it is like to live with the kind of people I come in contact with on a daily basis."

The ethic that Paul sets before us in 1 Corinthians 13 is impossible – in our own strength. Only by the grace of God are we saved, and only by God's grace are we enabled to live as God would have us to live. Only by God's grace can we love with a love that is patient. Because of God's grace, we yearn to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, strength and mind. Because of His love, we strive to emulate Him in all we do and say. We put forth an effort to love as we have been loved – to love with a love that is "slow to anger," "patient," and "long suffering." We desire above all else to be like Him, Who Paul tells us, is "rich in kindness, tolerance and patience" (Romans 2.4).

Jonathan Edwards wrote: "If we consider the wickedness that

there is in the world, and then consider how God continues the world in existence, and does not destroy it, but showers it with innumerable mercies . . . we shall perceive how abundant is his longsuffering toward us.”

In I Timothy 1.15 Paul writes:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display [now note this carefully] his *unlimited patience* as an example for those who would believe on Him and receive eternal life.

One reason we do not always love others as we should is that we do not understand how we have been loved. When we find it hard to be patient with others, it is, in part, because we do not comprehend the patience that God has demonstrated to us. The apostle Paul understood the unlimited patience of God toward him because he knew that he was “the worst of sinners.” Is that our testimony? Do we understand and identify with what Paul has written in 1 Timothy 1.15? If so, then we will find within us the supernatural motivation and ability to humbly and gently be patient with others.

Listen again to the words of Jonathan Edwards: “They that love God as they ought will have such a sense of his wonderful long-suffering toward them . . . despite the many injuries that they have offered to Him. . . . that it will seem but a small thing to bear with the injuries that have been offered to them by their fellow-man.”

Furthermore, as we grow in our love for God and in our understanding of who He is and how He operates, we will grow in our ability to exercise patience with our circumstances. By His grace

we will find the supernatural ability to rest quietly in the knowledge that He allows us to suffer wrongs so that we might have the opportunity to show to those who are wronging us the awesome love of God.

In 2 Samuel 16 David is forced by his son, Absalom, to flee Jerusalem. As he and his loyal followers seek protection on the other side of the Jordan, a man named Shimei stands on the hillside and curses David as he passes by. Not only does he curse David, he picks up stones and throws them at David and his men. Abishai, David's military leader, wants to kill Shimei. I must confess, I like Abishai! That's what I want to see happen. How dare this man curse David, the anointed king! How dare he throw rocks at David, a man after God's own heart. How dare he!

Yet, notice David's response to Abishai. David, in the maturity of his advanced years, says to Abishai, "Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will see my distress and repay me with good for the cursing I am receiving today." (2 Samuel 16.11-12).

Romans 8.28 teaches what David knew a thousand years before the words were written. "In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." If we understand and believe what God is telling us, we will experience the supernatural ability to respond patiently when we are wronged. We can respond patiently even if it's a wrong so aggravating that we are ready to take off the gloves. If we understand and believe God is working all things together to accomplish His good purpose, and that His good purpose, as Paul tells us in Romans 8.29, is to conform us to the likeness of His Son, then we can respond with patience – even when mocked and pelted with stones.

Think about Jesus. Think of what He endured. He endured the people's contempt. He was despised and hated. He was called a

liar. Some thought Him mad. He was called the son of Satan. He was falsely accused, arrested on trumped up charges, deserted by His closest friends, abused and tortured. He died a violent death. Yet the Scriptures tell us that He opened not His mouth against His attackers, but instead asked the Father to forgive them because they did not know what they were doing.

Living a life that is characterized by patient love is the only way we can live successfully in this world – that is, to God's glory. If we cannot endure being wronged, then life is going to be terribly difficult. If we believe we must respond to every injury, reproach, or wrong, seeking to get even or to hurt others more than they have hurt us, we will be cursed to live lives of constant turmoil. We will never experience the peace and joy with which God blesses His people. His peace and joy are the fruit of the Spirit that is harvested in the life of one who rests in the Lord, knowing that He is working all things together for His good purpose.

In Acts chapters twenty-one through twenty-three, the Apostle Paul returns to Jerusalem, is falsely accused, arrested and unlawfully beaten. In Acts chapters twenty-four through twenty-eight, he is unjustly imprisoned. For two years he languishes in jail. Finally, he is sent as a prisoner to Rome. In Acts 28.20 Paul observes, "It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain."

Paul chose to act wisely. He chose to do what he knew was God's will for his life. He was focused on honoring his Lord. He patiently waited for two more years in a Roman jail, using every opportunity that came his way to share lovingly the Good News concerning Jesus Christ. He "welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 28.30-31).

These are Paul's circumstances as he writes 1 Corinthians 4.11: "To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless. When we are persecuted, we

endure it. When we are slandered, we answer kindly.”

In this world we are sinned against. It is our common experience. When children complain, “It’s not fair,” we welcome them to the real world. We know what it is to be treated unfairly, to have someone break their promises to us, to have someone we trusted prove unfaithful. We’ve all, at one time or another, been slandered by people who eagerly embrace the worst possible interpretation of what we’ve said or done. Obviously, our experiences of these things vary by degree. Some of us have been wronged more grievously than others. But we’ve all been sinned against.

Our response to such treatment demonstrates whether we are maturing in our faith and progressing in our sanctification. We must act wisely. We must remember that we possess the supernatural gift of love — the supernatural ability to love others with the love of God. God says to us, “I am abounding in love toward you. You are by nature sinners and ungodly. You have transgressed my holy law and sinned against me. But I choose to love you, to be patient with you, to be slow to anger, even when you sin against me. Because I love you, I am patient with you. And I have given you the grace to love others as I have loved you.”

When we remember to pause and ask God to help us to respond lovingly toward those who wrong us, then what they do or say will not exasperate or provoke us, or rob us of our peace and joy. If we understand and believe that Jesus is King and rules sovereignly over all of life, we will be at peace.

What others do to us may be horrible. They intend it for evil. And it is evil. And why God would allow such things to happen is beyond our ability to say. But this we know: He uses all the circumstances of our lives to make us more and more into image bearers of Him. And though the pain be real and the damage terrible, we can still experience His joy and peace as He

supernaturally enables us to forgive and love and deal patiently with those who have so horribly wronged us.

In Proverbs 16.32 we are taught, "Better a patient man, than a warrior, a man who controls his temper, than the one who takes a city." Proverbs 19.11 teaches that "a man's wisdom gives him patience; it is his glory to overlook an offense." And in Proverbs 14.29 we are told, "a patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man is a fool and displays folly." In verses sixteen and eighteen of Proverbs 14, we read, "A wise man fears the Lord and shuns evil, but a fool is hotheaded and reckless. A quick-tempered man does foolish things, but a crafty man is hated. The simple inherit folly, but the prudent are crowned with knowledge." The writer of Proverbs understands that wisdom and patience go hand in hand.

James 3.13 teaches that we are to look to the Lord for wisdom concerning what to do when we have been wronged. In James 3.17 we read that "the wisdom that is from above is peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy." The wisdom that comes from God shapes the response of the Christian when he is wronged. He looks to the Holy Spirit for His enabling grace. And by that grace the believer is able to respond lovingly to those who have wronged him, and is ready, by God's grace, to suffer even more for the sake of peace.

Members of the church at Corinth, unwilling to settle their differences, were taking each other to court, seeking a legal solution to their disputes. Paul tells them that "the fact that you have lawsuits among you means that you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged?" (1 Corinthians 6.7). In the next verse Paul has the audacity to write, "Why not rather be cheated?"

Did Paul say "cheated"? "I'm not going to let anybody cheat me!" Isn't that our response? "Only a wimp would allow himself to be cheated. I'm a man, and I will not be cheated. Nobody's taking

advantage of me!"

What was Paul's question? "Why not rather be wronged? . . . Why not rather be cheated?"

In 2 Timothy 2.24-26 Paul gives Timothy some practical advice concerning how he should respond to those who wrong him. The offense that Timothy is called upon to bear is most serious. Look at verse twenty-six. The people Paul envisions wronging Timothy are "senseless . . . [en]trapped by Satan . . . [and] held captive to the Devil's will." In verse twenty-five we are told that "they are opposing the Lord's servant." So what is the response of the Lord's servant to be? In verse twenty-four Paul says, "He must not quarrel, but be kind, he must seek to instruct them and not be resentful." Furthermore, "Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (v 25).

In response to this call to exercise a supernatural love that is patient, Jonathan Edwards observed:

One may perhaps reprove his neighbor. This may clearly be his duty. But if he does, it will be without impoliteness, and without that severity that can tend only to exasperate. . . . It will be without angry reflections or contemptuous language. . . . He will be one that more desires to deliver the offender out of the error into which he has fallen, than to be even with him for the injury done to himself.

Is our response to those who have wronged us motivated by a desire to deliver the offender out of the error into which he has fallen, or is it motivated by a desire to get even with the one who has injured us? I can judge the biblical correctness of my response when wronged by asking the following questions: Am I concerned about being treated fairly? Am I concerned about getting my just dues? Or does my response demonstrate a concern for the eternal

soul of the one who has offended me?

If my love is a demonstration of God's supernatural love, then it will be long-suffering. I will be lovingly patient. I will be eager to see those who have offended me repent and experience deliverance from their sins. Paul writes in Ephesians 4.1-2 "we are to be humble, gentle, patient, willing to bear with one another." Furthermore, "we are to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

Paul writes in Colossians 3.12-14:

Therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other, and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all of these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

In Matthew 18.23 Jesus talks about a servant who owed the king ten thousand talents (several million dollars today). The servant owed the king more money than he could ever repay. Repaying what he owed was an impossibility. The king called him to account, and the servant did the only thing he could do—he begged for mercy. In his begging for mercy, the servant even foolishly *promised* that he would repay the debt. The king graciously overlooked his servant's foolish promise and chose to forgive his debt. He wiped the slate clean.

The forgiven servant left the king's court. As he walked through the streets of the town he encountered one who owed him a few dollars. A debt of a few dollars is one that can be repaid. But this debt had not been repaid. The forgiven servant grabbed the man who owed him money! He began to choke him! He demanded repayment! The debtor begged for mercy. He promised that he would pay what he owed. (And he could repay what he owed,

given enough time.) However, the king's forgiven servant, who owed a debt he could never repay, would not forgive one who owed a debt he could repay. The idea of forgiving the debt and the debtor never enters his mind. Instead, he exercised his legal rights and had the debtor thrown into prison.

All of this was reported to the king. The king ordered his forgiven servant to appear before him. The King's opening remarks left little room to wonder what he thought of his forgiven servant's words, deeds and attitudes. "You wicked servant, I was merciful to you. I forgave you a debt you could never repay. Do you not understand that in response you should have been merciful to your fellow servant? Because you have failed to show mercy, you will not be shown mercy." The king then ordered him thrown into prison.

Jesus ended His parable with this observation, "This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you, unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18.35). Earlier, in Matthew 6.12, Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." What is Jesus teaching? Is Jesus teaching us salvation by works? Of course not! But the Scriptures consistently teach that good works are the evidence of salvation.

In Ephesians 2.8-9 we are taught that we are saved by grace through faith. In verse ten we are told that we were saved by grace through faith so we could do the good works that God prepared in advance for us to do.

In 1 Corinthians 13.4 we are taught that love, the supernatural love of God, will be manifested in the lives of all believers. Furthermore, we are taught that this love is characterized by patience. Paul is not *suggesting* that Christians consider the possibility of being more patient with one another. Instead, he is teaching that love *is* patient. The supernatural ability to love patiently is one of the good works God has prepared in advance for us to do.

With whom are you impatient? Those with whom you are impatient, what have they done to you? Is it worse than what you have done to God? Do they owe you more than you owe God? God has been patient with you — slow to anger. He disciplines you because He loves you. He never stops loving you. He never turns His back on you. He has always loved you and always will. He never treats you as you deserve.

And now, He desires to reveal Himself to others through you. The love that you are commanded by God to show to others is the supernatural love that God has shown to you.

In Matthew 18:21 Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times (or seventy times seven times).” The number is not what matters. It may be seventy-seven. It may be four hundred and ninety. In either case, we are not to keep track on a yellow pad the number of times we forgive someone, so that upon reaching the magic number we can *lower the boom*. The point is to exercise a love characterized by patience, by long-suffering – to love others as we have been loved.

Believer, do you know your sins? Do you understand what they deserve? Do you understand that God is holy, and that He does only what is right? Do you understand that He is a just Judge? If so, you can meditate with special delight upon this truth: He loves you because He loves you because He loves you to the praise and glory of His Holy Name. He pours out upon you, not His wrath, but His grace, mercy, blessings, and love. He poured out His wrath upon His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, who suffered and died in your place. With us, He is infinitely patient.

If you do not know Him as Savior and Lord, God has also been patient with you. He has continued to allow you to hear the

proclamation of His Gospel. He has not allowed you to become satisfied with a life lived out of sync with His divine promises. He has prodded you to read this book. Peter says, "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3.9). And He pleads with you as He speaks through His prophet, "Return to me with all of your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart. . . . Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious, and He is compassionate, He is slow to anger, He is abounding in love, and He relents from sending calamity'" (Joel 2.12-13).

- Chapter Four -

LOVE IS KIND

1 Corinthians 13.4

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That’s the question asked of Jesus in Luke chapter ten by an expert in Jewish law of Jesus. Jesus responds by asking him two questions: “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” Knowing his Old Testament, the expert quotes Deuteronomy 6.5 and Leviticus 19.18. “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus tells him, “Do this and you will live.”

The expert has a follow-up question for Jesus. “Who is my neighbor?” He is confident he loves God but uneasy about who Jesus includes under the heading of “neighbor.” The tradition in which he has been educated taught that you are to love your neighbor and hate your enemy (Matthew 5.43). So it’s understandable why he wants to know who this “neighbor” is he must love to inherit eternal life.

To answer the expert's question, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan.

A Jew traveling the narrow road from Jerusalem to Jericho is attacked by robbers, beaten, stripped, and left for dead. After a while a priest happens by and finds the poor fellow lying in the road, battered and bruised. The priest sees his wounds and hears his cries, but instead of helping him, he ignores his pleas, crosses over to the other side of the road, and continues his journey.

A short while later a Levite, a deacon, comes upon the scene. He sees his countryman’s bruises and hears his moans. But instead of offering assistance, he also crosses over to the other side of the road

and keeps going.

Finally, a Samaritan happens by. The Jews hated Samaritans. Seven hundred and fifty years earlier, following Israel's annihilation at the hands of the Assyrians, Gentiles had moved into this vacated territory, intermarrying with the few Jews still living in the area.

The Samaritans were their descendants. They worshiped their own god in their own ways. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews; they viewed them as half-breeds and heretics. The Samaritans, in turn, despised Jews. Samaritans and Jews were enemies.

Nevertheless, when the Samaritan hears the cries of the Jew and sees his wounds, he does what neither the priest nor the Levite was willing to do. The Samaritan pities him and ministers to his needs. He lovingly and kindly cares for his enemy. The Samaritan does not know how badly his enemy is hurt or if he will be able to reimburse him for expenses. Nevertheless, he tends his enemy's wounds, places him upon his donkey, finds him a room in the local inn, and makes arrangements to cover whatever expenses might arise until the Jew has fully recovered.

It was for religious reasons that neither the priest nor the Levite was willing to offer assistance to their fellow Jew. If they stopped to help this man and came in contact with the blood oozing from his wounds, they would be ceremonially unclean and barred temporarily from participating in the ceremonies and rituals of the Temple. They probably thought they were pleasing God by ignoring a dying man, and thus remaining untainted by this fellow's blood. They could justify their lack of compassion, their unwillingness to show loving-kindness to one desperately in need, as a demonstration of their zeal for the things of God.

But when Jesus asks, "Who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?", the expert in the law knew it was the one who showed mercy. The Samaritan proved to be a true neighbor. The Samaritan loved his enemy as he would want to be

loved.

The priest and Levite were not merciful. Out of their zeal for God they chose to leave their fellow Jew wallowing in his blood. They would have been considered by many to be good men, men deserving of God's reward, for they prayed the prayers and offered the offerings required by the law. And yet, their understanding of grace did not motivate them to show – even to a fellow Jew – the love with which God had loved them.

Someone has said that Christian doctrine can be summarized by the word *grace*, and Christian ethics by the word *gratitude*. If we have genuinely understood and experienced the *grace* of God, realizing that in and of ourselves we deserve His wrath, and yet, for His own good pleasure, God has chosen to shower His loving-kindness upon us, to claim us for Himself, to remove from us our filthy rags and to dress us in the pure white robes of His righteousness — then our *gratitude* should be obvious to others. They will see in us not empty religiosity or superficial piety; instead, they will see a supernatural ability to love with the love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13.

In 1 Corinthians 13.4 Paul teaches that love is patient. He then teaches that *love is kind*. Jonathan Edwards observed that “the supernatural gift of love enables us freely and eagerly to be kind toward one another in the doing of good things.”

What does it mean to be kind to one another? What is loving-kindness? To show loving-kindness to others is to do for them what God has done for us. It is extending to others the mercy that God has extended to His covenant people. He has not treated us as we deserve. Instead, He has chosen to deal kindly with us no matter the cost. Even though we were by nature His enemies, a sinful and rebellious people, whose transgressions are deserving of His wrath, He has chosen to suffer in our place the penalty for our sins,

satisfying the Father's justice.

By grace through faith in Him as Savior and Lord, He saves us, pouring out upon us His mercy and loving-kindness. Though we are morally bankrupt and dead in our sins, by God's mercy and kindness we are granted freely the gift of eternal life. With loving-kindness He responds to our utter helplessness. This is the loving-kindness shown by the Samaritan to his battered, bruised and helpless enemy. This is the loving-kindness we are to show to others.

We should be concerned about the physical and material needs of others. As concerned as we should be about them spiritually, we must not overlook their physical and material needs. The beaten, bloodied and battered Jew needed the priest and Levite to roll up their sleeves, tend to his wounds and provide for his long-term care. When they ignored the realities of his physical condition, they denied his significance as a person created in God's image.

Jesus taught that when the Son of Man comes in His glory and sits upon His throne to judge the nations, acts of loving-kindness will distinguish the sheep from the goats (Matthew 26.31-46). The sheep, Jesus said, would be welcomed into the kingdom prepared for them since creation. The goats, on the other hand, would be sent into that eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. What will distinguish a sheep from a goat is the sheep's active concern for the physical needs of others. They fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, housed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the imprisoned. On the other hand, the goats did not respond to any of the needs of those Jesus calls "the least of these brothers of mine" (Matt 25.40).

The sheep responded with loving-kindness to the physical and material needs of others. They were the ones welcomed into God's kingdom. But the goats were condemned because of what they failed to do. They offered no food to the hungry, no drink to the thirsty, no shelter to the stranger, no clothes to the naked, and

showed no concern for the sick and imprisoned.

Now we must be careful. We know, in light of what is taught throughout Scripture, that Jesus is not teaching that salvation is earned by doing good works. But He is illustrating the profound truth that the reality of salvation will be evidenced by the doing of good works, one of which is to show loving-kindness to others.

The expert in the law quoted Leviticus 19.18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Leviticus 19 is filled with practical illustrations of what it means to love our neighbor. For example, in Leviticus 19.9 we read:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time in order to pick it clean, or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God.

God instructed His people to leave the gleanings left in the field by the harvesters after their initial reaping. Likewise, after the grapes had been picked, the grapes remaining on the vines or those that had fallen to the ground, were to be left. God told His people not to reap the fields a second time or pick the vines clean. They were to leave the second pickings for the poor and aliens who lived among them. Furthermore, God told them that when they came to the corners of their fields they were to leave some standing grain untouched for the benefit of the poor and aliens.

For many of us, God has provided fertile fields and productive vines. He has not blessed us with such crops simply for our own benefit. He has blessed us materially that we might bless others.

Furthermore, in Leviticus 19, God instructs His people to deal honestly with others, to show compassion toward the disabled, to be just and fair toward all, to do nothing that would endanger

another's life, to speak kindly to others without compromising the truth, and to never seek revenge or bear a grudge. These are some of the ways God's people were to show His loving-kindness to others.

I imagine there were some among the poor and aliens who complained about having to harvest their own crops or about having to settle for left over grain and grapes. When we attempt to meet the fundamental physical and material needs of others, some of those we minister to will be upset with us for not doing more. But we must not allow the sinful responses (or manipulations) of some to hinder us from attempting to meet the legitimate needs of those God brings across our path.

Jesus teaches us to pray for our daily bread. We are to do for others what God promises to do for us. We are to meet their needs. But those we help are sinners just like us. And at times they will not be happy simply to have their needs met. Most of us wouldn't be happy either if God gave us only what He teaches us to ask for in prayer – our daily bread. If He did, most of us would be like the children of Israel who grumbled and complained when God gave them nothing but manna, day after day after day.

Therefore, it should not surprise us when no matter how far we go in meeting not only the needs, but also some of the wants and desires of others, some will never be grateful, thankful or satisfied. Such attitudes are a reflection of that sinfulness that troubles all of us. But we must not allow Satan to win this battle by failing to meet the genuine needs of those in desperate circumstances.

We have many people coming to our church looking for assistance of one kind or another. We try to get to know them, to understand their circumstances, and to evaluate the legitimacy of their needs. It's not an easy task. And sometimes, perhaps, most of the time, we are probably fooled into helping those who really don't need our assistance because they are fully capable of providing for themselves. But we must not make our standards so rigid that we fail

to respond to the needs of those who are genuinely impoverished. If it means we are frequently fooled, so be it. That's not our concern. Our concern is to make certain that we do not fail to show loving-kindness to the genuinely needy.

Several decades ago the evangelical church forsook its responsibilities for the needy for another reason. They did not want to be identified with what was called "the social gospel." Some advocates of this social gospel believed that the church's primary calling was to meet the physical and material needs of others. Many identified with this gospel compromised the teaching of Scripture and the importance of the good news concerning the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. Many evangelicals, not wanting to be identified with those they believed were watering down the truths of Christianity, threw out the baby with the bath water. In separating themselves from the social gospel, many evangelicals also separated themselves from their God-given responsibility for the poor and needy. This was not and is not pleasing to God.

One Sunday evening at church, an elder reported on his visit to Tanzania. He and several of his students had the opportunity to visit a home run by Catholic nuns. It provided shelter for the unwanted of the community: orphans, abused women, the elderly. The backrooms of the home were populated by lepers -- men and women without legs, without hands, without noses, with distorted limbs and faces. Our elder and his students were told not to touch any of the sick. But they watched as the sisters tended to the needs of the "untouchables." They fed them, bathed them, changed them, and held them in their arms as they talked with them about Jesus and His love.

Concerned about how overwhelmed his students may have been by all they had seen, heard and smelled, our elder asked them to talk about what they had just experienced. Many talked about the horror. But one student observed with great profundity, "I

found it to be an oasis. In the midst of all this poverty, sickness and disease, here was an oasis. It was for these dear people a home. A haven. It's like when I go home. Some may think the house in which I live isn't all that great. But it's my home. And no matter how much baggage I may bring with me, it's for me a haven. An oasis. An oasis of love. There I am loved and cared for. Unconditionally."

The people of the church of Jesus Christ should be ready, willing, and eager to provide for those in desperate circumstances an oasis, a place of rest, a haven of peace, a home in which the loving-kindness of God is evident to one and all.

We have a God-given mandate to respond compassionately to the physical and material needs of others. But we must do so, praying that our acts of loving-kindness will provide us with opportunities to share with them the good news concerning Jesus. While it is of great importance for us to meet their physical needs, it is of eternal significance for us to minister to them spiritually.

Jonathan Edwards wrote:

By endeavoring to do good to them externally we are under the greater advantage to do good to their souls; for, when our instructions, counsels, warnings, and good examples are accompanied with such outward kindness, the latter tends to lead such persons to appreciate our effort when we seek their spiritual good.

How do we, in loving-kindness, go about meeting the spiritual needs of others? First, we show Christ's love by the example of our lives. Then we speak to them the truth in love. Our lifestyle must validate our message. We must remember that our actions speak louder than our words.

I find it interesting that our evangelistic efforts are frequently

directed toward people with whom we have little contact. I think I know why. It is tremendously challenging to share the Gospel with those with whom we work eight hours a day, because our actions speak louder than our words. We often fail, in the hustle and bustle of the work place, to treat kindly those with whom we rub shoulders day after day. Tempers flare. Words are spoken. Sinful attitudes about the work we do, about those for whom we work, and about those with whom we work, are frequently exposed. Thus it is often easier to talk to a perfect stranger about the Lord than share the Gospel with someone who knows us well. To talk to a stranger, we can memorize a particular Gospel presentation and share it boldly because they know nothing about us. But when we share the Gospel with those who know us, all too often we feel like hypocrites, and those with whom we speak might well agree.

Jesus said, "Let your good deeds shine before men [that is, let your good deeds be seen by others. Why?] so that they might praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5.16). I am convinced that if believers in the marketplace lived as image bearers of Christ, they would have ample opportunities to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Few people can simply ignore lives characterized by loving-kindness. Eventually, somebody will ask, "What gives? What's with you? What makes you do the things that you do?" Clearly such questions provide a wonderful opportunity to share the Gospel. A life characterized by loving-kindness cannot be ignored.

For three summers during college I worked for USSteel in Morrisville, Pennsylvania. For one summer during seminary, I worked on the assembly line at the Chevrolet plant in St. Louis. I did not approach either job with the idea that I would have great opportunities to share the Gospel with my fellow workers. I simply attempted to do what my father had taught me to do – to give eight hours of work for eight hours of pay. In both situations, it did not take many days before someone wanted to know, "What gives with you?" I didn't grumble about work. I didn't complain about my

bosses. I didn't speak derisively about my fellow workers. I treated almost everyone with respect and kindness. My attitudes, actions and words were so different from those all around me that I eventually had repeated opportunities to share the good news about Jesus, my Creator, Savior, Lord and King.

Not only are we to show loving-kindness to those who may be unbelievers, we are also to deal lovingly and kindly with our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

It's not easy to minister to others. When people are grieving and you reach out to them, their pain becomes your pain. When people are rejoicing in God's goodness to them, you struggle not to be envious of their happiness.

When someone gets caught up in sin, it's easier to look the other way than become involved in the messy process of restoring them to their Lord.

We are to weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice. We are to encourage those who struggle or have been ensnared by the evil one. A simple hug. A heartfelt prayer. A gentle rebuke. The bottom line is that whatever we do, we do because of our concern for their temporal and eternal well-being, and our passionate desire to see that God is honored and glorified through all that is said and done.

It is greatly important that we learn to show loving-kindness to those who have wronged us. In Romans 12.17, 21 we are told to "not repay anyone evil for evil. [Instead we are to] be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. [We are not to be] overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good." 1 Thessalonians instructs us to "make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong. [Instead, we are] always [to] try to be kind to each other and to everyone else" (5.15). Peter teaches us, in 1 Peter 3.8-9, "Live in harmony with one another, be sympathetic, love as brothers. Be compassionate and

humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."

Remember the man beaten and robbed? Who helped him? It wasn't one of his fellow countrymen. He was helped by a Samaritan. The Jews hated the Samaritans. In return, the Samaritans didn't think too kindly of Jews. Yet it was a Samaritan who showed love and compassion for this Jew who had been beaten, robbed, and left for dead. This parable must have irritated the crowd to whom Jesus spoke. He used a Samaritan – a *Samaritan!* – as His example of a man doing the right thing. Essentially, Jesus said, "You should love one another by doing the kinds of things this Samaritan did." He was calling upon Jews to emulate a Samaritan! Jesus' parable teaches that we are to love not only those we like, but our enemies as well. To them we are to show loving-kindness, doing for them what is useful and benevolent, just as the Samaritan cared for the Jew.

Against whom do we feel justifiably angry? Whom do we disdain? For whom are we not willing to lift a finger? We know, don't we, that however they have wronged us it doesn't compare with the ways in which we have wronged God? Yet God has chosen to be lovingly kind to us.

Bob Cratchet's wife did not think too kindly of Mr. Scrooge, and for good reason. There wasn't anything about him to like. He was mean, nasty, inconsiderate and cheap. But Mr. Cratchet still insisted that the family drink a toast to Mr. Scrooge. "After all," he told his wife, "it's Christmas." I'm not sure of Dickens' theology, but that short remark reflects a profound truth. If God chose to show us His loving-kindness by sending His Son to be our Savior and Lord, then we can show loving-kindness even to the Scrooges of this world. Remember, not only did Mr. Cratchet offer up a toast in honor of Mr. Scrooge, he also invited Mr. Scrooge to join them for Christmas dinner.

Not only are we to show loving-kindness and do good to others, we are also to do so freely and spontaneously. Jesus said in Luke 6.35, “. . . lend to them without expecting to get anything back.” A man in our church once told me, “I never lend anything that I’m not willing to give, so I never look for it in return. If it comes back, praise the Lord, I’ll lend it again.” Such generosity is the reflection of a Christlike love. We are to respond freely, spontaneously and eagerly to opportunities to show loving-kindness to others.

Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 13 is not an ethic that everyone can put into practice. These things are terribly difficult, if not impossible, to implement in our lives unless we are children of God. Loving-kindness is the result of being supernaturally equipped by the Lord to love even as we have been loved.

The grace that saves is the grace that enables. Those who have been saved by grace have been supernaturally equipped to do good works. In Ephesians 2.8-9, Paul teaches us that we are saved by grace, through faith, and the faith that saves us is a gift from God. Salvation is not our reward for doing good works. We are saved by grace, the unmerited favor of God. We have nothing of which to boast. Verse ten tells us that we have been saved by grace through the gift of faith so that we might do those good works which He has prepared in advance for us. We are not saved because we do good works, but we are saved to do good works.

Christianity isn’t simply a fire insurance policy. We don’t pray the sinner’s prayer simply to avoid the fires of hell. We don’t pray the sinner’s prayer simply to gain entrance into heaven. Now don’t misunderstand me. I am deeply grateful to know that when I die I’m not going to hell but instead to heaven. However, Christianity is far more than a fire escape out of hell or a ticket into heaven. Far more. God saved us so that we might fulfill His purpose in the day-to-day living of life. As Christians we have been given the privilege of doing those things that please the Lord. We have been given the

opportunity to do those good works He has prepared in advance for us to do. Those who have purchased only an insurance policy are not concerned about doing good works. They are happy thinking they won't go to hell when they die, but they aren't motivated to know God's will for their lives and to do those things that are pleasing to Him. With their lips they profess faith, but their lives do not demonstrate the reality of what they claim to believe.

Just as Christianity is not a fire insurance policy, neither is it a club for theologians. I love theology. Theology is important. Theology attempts to systematically explain what God has revealed in Scripture. We ought to be eager and willing to wrestle long and hard to make certain that we properly understand the truths that God has revealed to us. But at the same time, we must understand that the gaining of such knowledge is not the bottom line.

God did not save us simply to keep us out of hell or so we might become theologically astute. He saved us to do those good works He prepared in advance for us to do – those good works that would resound to His glory and praise. This truth is reflected in Paul's prayer for the Christians at Colosse:

Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this *in order that* you may live a life worthy of the Lord, pleasing him *in every way*: bearing fruit *in every good work*, growing in the knowledge of God. (Col 1.9-10)

Our good works are pleasing to the Lord when they are prompted and motivated by an eagerness to show to others the love with which we have been loved.

Most unbelievers are able to love that which is lovely. By God's

supernatural grace, believers are enabled to love the unlovely. The most common Greek word for love was *eros*. In the New Testament the word most often used to describe the love we are to show to one another is *agape*. *Eros* is the ability to love that which is beautiful and desirable. *Agape* is the supernatural ability to love the unlovely. *Agape* is the supernatural ability to love others as Christ loves us. Christ loved us even when we were sinners and ungodly, even when we were ugly in His sight. Christ chose to love the unlovely, and by His supernatural enabling grace we are able to do the same.

God saves us so that we might be the instruments of His love toward others. This is how Jonathan Edwards describes this honor:

So far as God makes men the instruments of doing good to others, he makes them like the heavenly bodies — the sun, and moon, and stars, that bless the world by shedding down their light; he makes them like angels, who are ministering spirits to others for their good; yea, he makes them like himself, the great fountain of all good, who is forever pouring down his blessings on mankind.

My children's generation was taught to sing, "I want to be like Mike." Mike is Michael Jordan, the superstar of pro basketball in the late 80's and throughout the 90's. I understood the wish expressed by that jingle. It would be fun to have Jordan's athletic abilities.

But far more significantly, I have been given the supernatural ability to be like Christ. Think about this. Meditate upon God's loving-kindness toward you. Give some thought, as painful as it may be, to what you deserve from God. Then meditate upon what you have received. Think about what His loving-kindness means to you. Think about what it might mean to others for you to show to them God's loving-kindness. Then dwell upon the glory, praise, and honor that

such love demonstrated in our lives brings to the One who loves you.

“Be kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as *in Christ, God has forgiven you*” (Eph. 4.32).

- Chapter Five -

LOVE DOES NOT ENVY

1 Corinthians 13.4

“Because the patriarchs, the sons of Jacob, were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt” (Acts 7.9). As Ecclesiastes teaches, there is nothing new under the sun (1.9). Motivated by jealousy, Joseph's brothers first plotted to kill him and then sold him to a passing band of Midianite slave traders.

They were Jacob's ten older sons, born to Leah and two concubines. But Joseph was the first son born to Rachel, the wife whom Jacob loved (Genesis 29.30-31). It was her son that Jacob favored above all the others as demonstrated by his gift of a richly ornamented robe. Furthermore, Genesis 37 reveals that Joseph was also a tattletale who enjoyed bringing to his father bad reports concerning his brother's activities.

In addition, the brothers also knew about Joseph's dreams. They listened as he told them how in one of his dreams he had seen a field, and in that field were twelve sheaves of grain. “Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it” (Gen 37.7). Joseph also shared with them a second dream in which he saw the sun, the moon and the eleven stars all bowing to him. His brothers understood Joseph was suggesting that there was coming a day when his father, mother and eleven other brothers (Rachel had by this time given birth to a second son named Benjamin) would all bow before him.

It is not hard to understand how Joseph's coat, tale-bearing and dreams provoked his brothers to anger. They were jealous of him and their jealousy had turned to hate. But it is still shocking to realize that they decided to murder him. And they would have if Reuben, the oldest, had not convinced

them to do otherwise. He persuaded them to sell Joseph to a band of Midianites who took him to Egypt and sold him as a slave.

The brothers, to cover their crime, dipped Joseph's multicolored coat in the blood of a goat and took it to their father, allowing him to believe that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. Heartlessly, they let their father experience the grief of losing a child. When they hypocritically tried to comfort him, he would not be comforted. The intensity of Jacob's grief and sorrow over the loss of Joseph added to their jealousy and hatred of their younger brother. They hated him and were jealous of him because he had what they wanted — their father's favor.

Being jealous of what others have is a common experience. James asks: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" He then answers his own questions: "You want something, but you don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight" (James 4:1-2). When we covet what others possess, be it a special item of clothing, or, far more importantly, a father's love, Satan uses our sinful desire to make us miserable, to injure our relationships with others, and to render us ineffective for the cause of Jesus Christ.

The jealousy of Joseph's brothers was so intense at first they were willing to murder him and then eagerly agreed to sell him into slavery. James says this same emotion produces fights and quarrels among the people to whom he is writing, people who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Does that shock us? It shouldn't. All of us have experienced the emotions of jealousy and envy. This is why Paul finds it necessary to say in 1 Corinthians 13.4 that the supernatural love that characterizes the lives of believers is a love that does not envy. It is natural for us to be envious and jealous of others. It is only by the supernatural work of God's grace in our hearts that we become a people who are able to overcome this terrible emotion.

I get a flu shot each winter. To keep from getting the flu, I allow the nurse to inject a form of the virus into my arm that encourages my body to produce the immunities needed to fight off the bug. If we are to overcome the jealousy and envy that threatens to disrupt our lives, injure others, and undermine our effectiveness for Christ, we need to be inoculated with a jealousy that is jealous for God's glory and the eternal welfare of others.

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul writes, "I am jealous for you, with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him" (11.2). The Greek word translated jealousy is *zeloo*. It hints at the ideas of heat or zeal. Jealousy is a deep, intense emotion. And while we tend to think of jealousy in negative terms, the Scripture often uses it in a positive sense. The jealousy of Joseph's brothers was evil, but Paul's jealousy for the Corinthians was good. Joseph's brothers were jealous of him. Paul is jealous for the Corinthians. Joseph's brothers were jealous of him and therefore hated him. Because Paul loves the Corinthians he is jealous for them. He is jealous that they experience the best that God has to offer. He wants them to be all that God intends for them to be.

Likewise, parents are jealous for their children, husbands for their wives, and wives for their husbands. When we desire what is good and best for the ones we love, we are jealous for them "with a godly jealousy."

John calls upon the Laodicean church to "be earnest [*zeloo*] and repent!" (Rev 3.19). John wants them to jealously desire what God desires. In 1 Corinthians 12.31 Paul calls upon the believers at Corinth to "eagerly desire [*zeloo*] the greater gifts." Paul wants them to be jealous for what is good. In 1 Corinthians 14.1 he calls upon them to "eagerly desire spiritual gifts." In 14.39 we read, "Be eager to prophesy, be zealous for that which is good and right and well pleasing in the eyes of Almighty God." The common

message in all

these verses is that God's people should be zealous for God's best so that in and through them God might be glorified by a people jealous for His glory.

God is jealous for His own glory. He tells the Children of Israel in Exodus 20.5, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God." In Isaiah 42.8 He reminds them that He would not share His glory with any other pretender to His throne. God is jealous for that glory, honor, praise, worship and adoration which are rightfully His. As His people, He expects us to be jealous for Him, eager to do those things that bring Him honor, praise, worship and adoration.

While God's jealousy is good, ours is almost always sinful. Most often, instead of being jealous for others, we're jealous of them. For example, we are envious of what someone else has or who they are. Perhaps we're jealous of their personal attributes. I do not like Paul Newman. I don't like the look in my wife's eyes when he comes on the screen. Perhaps we are jealous of the intellectual accomplishments of others. I read the writings of C. S. Lewis, and I feel pangs of jealousy. I would love to be able to use words as he did. We can become jealous of the professional advancements of others. I know what it is to be jealous of good preachers, of those who write great books, of those who have a television audience.

We easily become jealous of what others possess materially. Somebody buys a new car or new house or new clothes, and we're envious. We're envious of people's social standing. We want to have the same friends they have. We desire to have the same status or influence they possess. Such envy and jealousy almost inevitably result in our disliking someone, and perhaps, even hating them. Literally, we "burn with envy."

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *zeloo* is used to describe

Rachel's attitude toward Leah (Gen 30.1). The Scripture tells us that when Rachel saw that her sister Leah had four sons, she became jealous. She wanted children but didn't have any, and here was her sister with four sons. *Zeloo* also describes Saul's attitude toward David as they returned from battle (1 Samuel 18.6-9). The people sang the praises of both David and Saul. But, as they sang, they spoke of the tens of thousands slain by David compared to the thousands Saul had slain. Saul's jealousy was such that he eventually decided to kill David. When Paul came to Thessalonica and proclaimed the Gospel, people were converted and a church was established. Dr. Luke tells us that the unbelieving Jews were jealous of Paul's impact and influence upon their community (Acts 17.5). They didn't simply object to the content of Paul's message, with which they would have had serious theological differences. They were troubled by the enthusiastic response of the people to Paul as a teacher and preacher.

Romans 13.13 is one of those terrible lists that we find throughout Paul's writings. In calling upon us to live decently, Paul lists the types of activities that we must avoid: "Orgies and drunkenness, sexual immoralities and debauchery." It's a terrible list and obviously such behaviors are despicable. Paul could have received a loud amen to these first four items. But then, at the end of the verse Paul includes two more items: "dissension and jealousy."

Paul challenged the Christians at Corinth with these words: "Since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?" (1 Cor 3.3). The implication of Paul's words is hard to miss.

We are to be characterized by the supernatural love of Christ. The supernatural love of God does not envy. Therefore when we do envy, we are acting like citizens of this world instead of citizens of heaven.

Paul again emphasizes this message in Galatians 5.19 and 21.

Allow

me to paraphrase. “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: jealousy and envy. I warn you as I did before that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Only the inspired apostle could dare write such thoughts.

How can this be true? Paul proclaims the Gospel of grace. We are not saved by doing good works but by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ at Calvary. How can he teach that jealousy and envy are two obvious works of the sinful nature and that those whose lives are characterized by jealousy and envy will not inherit the kingdom of God? How can that statement be true? It seems to imply that we are being held accountable for what we do. Aren't we saved by grace?

Yes, we are saved by grace! We are saved by grace to do good works (Eph 2.8-10). We are saved by grace so that we might live in obedience to Jesus Christ. By God's grace we are supplied with the supernatural ability to live as Christ would have us live. In Galatians chapter five Paul teaches that if day after day, envy dominates our hearts — Paul is not talking about a momentary flash of jealousy that by God's grace we are able to beat down and get under control — such an attitude suggests that we do not trust God. How can we be envious of others when we claim to believe that God has supplied all our needs? If we believe that all our needs have been met, then how can we be jealous or envious of others?

Most Christians have memorized the twenty-third Psalm. “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” Since the Lord is our Shepherd, we want for nothing. Those who want only Jesus will not be characterized by envy or jealousy. Of course they will experience momentary flashes of envy because they are sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. Obviously they will on occasion do battle with this green-eyed monster. However, they will always, by God's grace and through the supernatural power that is at work within them, turn away from that which tempts them and look again in faith to Jesus. If He is their Shepherd, they will want and need nothing more.

If we love God, then we will keep His commandments. When we break His commandments, as we all do, it indicates that our love for Him and others has momentarily grown cold. For example, the tenth commandment instructs us not to covet, that is, not to desire those things that do not belong to us. When we covet, we break the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me," because we demonstrate a desire for a god other than the God who has decreed for us the particular circumstances of our life. Likewise, when we covet, we break commandments six through nine. Our growing dislike of those who possess the things we want can become so intense that we are soon guilty in our hearts of murder. Our lust for another may lead to adultery. Our desire for things that belong to others may turn us into thieves. Our disdain for others may encourage us to think that we are justified to bear false witness and spread malicious rumors. Coveting leads to the breaking of all these commandments.

These commandments are part of the law given to us by God to show us our sin so that we will run to Jesus, ask for forgiveness, and embrace Him as our Savior and Lord. When we see our sin, we know how desperately we need the supernatural faith and power that only Jesus can graciously provide. Left to ourselves, we neither want to keep God's law nor are we able to do so. Likewise, on our own there is no possibility that we will be able to love according to the pattern set down by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. We are not naturally inclined to love with a love that does not envy, just as we are not naturally inclined to love God's law and to delight in doing what He commands. However, by God's grace, through faith in Christ, we can do all these things.

For example, by God's grace, we can avoid one of Satan's great traps. Satan wants to trap us into believing that if we had just a little bit more, we would stop being troubled by jealousy and envy. That is a lie. Material blessing does not free us of jealousy. How much

is enough? The answer to that question is almost always the same. Enough is just a little bit more than we have. Great wealth does not free us of envy. If it did, then most people reading this book would have no problem with jealousy or envy. Most of you enjoy a standard of living higher than 90% of the people in the rest of the world. We have become dulled by our material prosperity and no longer recognize the great wealth that is ours. Yet we are a people consumed by jealousy and envy. If great wealth could free us of these vices, almost no one in America would be troubled by these sins.

In England, living in a "detached" house is a sign of material prosperity. Almost everyone in Britain lives in a house that is joined to at least one other house. The individual who lives in a detached house is sitting on top of the world. Many of us live in detached houses. Yet many of us want a house that's just a little bigger, just a little nicer. Far too often we find it all too easy to become jealous of those who have the kind of home we can only dream of possessing.

Nebuchadnezzar is a good illustration of someone who wanted just a little bit more. He had a dream in which he saw a statue with a head of gold, a chest and arms of silver, a belly and thighs of brass, and legs and feet of iron and clay. Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar: "God has given to you a great and glorious kingdom, and you Nebuchadnezzar are that head of gold. But after you will come three other kingdoms, represented by the silver, the bronze, and the iron and clay." So what did Nebuchadnezzar do? He built a statue ninety feet high that was completely covered with gold. Being the head of gold was not enough. He wanted the entire statue covered with gold.

Haman was honored by the king of Persia above all the other nobles. Yet because Mordecai, Esther's uncle, would not bow down before him, Haman plotted to have Mordecai killed. He wanted to humiliate Mordecai by hanging him from a gallows 75 feet high. Not only did Haman want to destroy Mordecai, he also wanted to kill all of Mordecai's race. Haman was more highly honored than all the

other nobles of Persia, but he could not rest until he had put to death the one man (and his people) who refused to show him deference.

We never have enough. Envy is a terrible cancer. It's not just the "have-nots" who are troubled by envy. It's all of us. We are seldom satisfied with what God graciously supplies. Of course, there are those who prosper even by American standards. And those whom God has especially blessed materially must not tempt their brothers or sisters to sin. They must not flaunt what they have. They must be grateful, but exceedingly modest. They must understand that they have not earned what they have because they work so much harder than everyone else, nor does their material prosperity mean that they are better than anyone else. They must understand that what they have is because of God's mercy and grace. Therefore, as much as possible, they must not allow the blessings God has poured out on them to become for others a source of envy and jealousy.

I have a good friend who is one of the finest preachers I have known. He receives more invitations to preach than he can accept. But when you are with him, he never speaks of his opportunities. Most of the time he's asking you questions about your ministry or commenting on how thankful he is for the work you are doing for the cause of Christ. He never flaunts his gifts. And while his gifts are far greater than mine, I seldom find myself jealous of his ability to proclaim the good news.

Personally, I find it difficult to be with preachers when they begin to discuss their churches. Inevitably I begin to hear all kinds of horror stories. First, one shares his sad story, and then someone else, and then a third his tale of woe. Finally it's my turn. I'm supposed to join in and share with the group my own personal story of horror. The only problem is I don't have any horror stories to share. And if I begin to speak truthfully about how the Lord has blessed our church, I see in their eyes a greenish tint, and that's why I do not talk much to others about what the Lord is doing here. I do not want to provoke my brothers to envy.

In reflecting upon the phrase “love does not envy” Jonathan Edwards wrote:

The true believer will not allow envy to break forth and show itself in words or actions. . . . He will be grieved whenever he sees the evidence of those things in his own heart and he will crucify such emotions and with the power given to him by God he will not allow such envy to evidence itself in his living of life from day to day. The power available to him is the power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead, it is the power of that supernatural love of God that is at work within his own heart. It is that power that gives Paul the willingness, and the freedom, and the audacity to say, ‘I can do all things through Christ.’ I can do all things. The true believer will learn to be content with his circumstances, working hard to achieve what he believes God would have him to achieve. He will work diligently at the tasks set before him, but satisfied with God’s sovereign determinations . . . knowing that the providence of God is both wise and good.

Do we believe what Edwards has written? Do we believe that the providence of God is both wise and good? We must examine ourselves. Have we ever felt bitterness or unkindness toward another because God has caused them to prosper? Of course we have. Have we ever responded with unkind thoughts? Have we ever noticed that when others are honored, our minds become clouded with negative thoughts? Have we ever felt an urgency to tell someone the shortcomings of the one being honored, because we know full well that they did not earn all this adulation and attention? Well, we are right. They most certainly did not earn all this adulation and attention. But in the providence of God it is theirs. Why theirs and not ours? We do not know. However, we do know the God who

determines all of human providence, and we are confident that He knows what He's doing.

So often we're like the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 14.11-32). When the prodigal son returns home, the elder brother is disgusted over his father's reaction. The father throws a party to celebrate the younger brother's return. The elder brother refuses to attend. His father comes to him and asks, "Are you not going to attend the celebration, son?" "No!" "Why not?" "All these years I've slaved for you (interesting word). I've never disobeyed you (interesting thought) but you never gave me a party. Now this bum returns home — he has not shaved in weeks, his clothes have not been washed since who knows when, he smells like a pig sty, and he has squandered all of his inheritance on parties and wild living. For him YOU THROW A PARTY!" To which the father responds, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But it is time to celebrate. For this, my younger son, was lost, but now he is found; he was dead, but now he is alive."

In James 3.13-18 we read,

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done and the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder in every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

The spirit of envy, James says, is contrary to the spirit of heaven. The

spirit of heaven rejoices in the happiness of others. The spirit of envy is the spirit

of hell. In Proverbs 14.30 we're told that, "A heart at peace is life to the body, but envy rots the bones."

We who name the Name of Jesus Christ need to understand who we are and Whose we are. We need to abhor and shun this evil of envy whenever it raises its ugly head, sincerely seeking the spirit of Christian love that rejoices in the prosperity of others, and fills our hearts with genuine gratitude for all that we have. This spirit allows us to say with Paul in Philippians 4.11,

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstance. I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any, and in every situation whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want, I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Consider the words of Jesus recorded in the sixth chapter of Matthew, beginning with verse twenty-five.

Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you, by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he

not much more clothe you, O you of little faith. So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all of these things will be given to you as well.

A heart focused upon doing those things that glorify Christ and are of eternal benefit to others has no time or reason for envy.

- Chapter Six -

LOVE IS HUMBLE

1 Corinthians 13.4

“Two negatives make a positive.” In 1 Corinthians 13.3-4 Paul uses three negatives – love does not boast, it is not proud, it is not rude – to teach the positive virtue of humility. Or, at least, that is what Jonathan Edwards suggests in *Charity and Its Fruits*. A love that is humble does not boast, is not proud, and is not rude.

Again, we're not talking about someone's disposition. Some people have a humble, retiring manner. They speak softly and with deference. But when push comes to shove, they show how highly they esteem both their opinions and themselves. They appear humble, but in truth they are terribly proud. I have, on occasion, been stunned when meeting with a member of our congregation who I thought to be a quiet, sweet, unassuming person, to discover that he was a simmering volcano about to erupt because someone had said something he didn't like, or someone hadn't done something he thought should be done. The person had to speak with me so we could discuss the issues. What the member wanted was for me to hear and agree with what he was saying, and to do what he “humbly” asked of me.

On the other hand, there's Dr. John Sanderson. For years he taught and served as dean for several institutions of higher learning. Brilliant, insightful, with great knowledge and astounding wisdom, he quietly taught and prepared others to carry the message of Christ into all the world. Those who had the privilege of attending his classes learned much from what he taught, but even more from his Christ-like example.

Dad and I once drove for nearly two hours to hear Dr.

Sanderson expound God's Holy Word. After the service, as we shook Dr. Sanderson's hand, he was obviously surprised to discover that my Dad was willing to drive such a distance to hear a sermon.

My father had little formal education. He left school and went to work when he was ten. Dr. Sanderson was a highly educated man. But when he preached, it touched my Dad's heart, impacting his whole life. I know, however, that what impressed my father the most was that John Sanderson was a genuinely humble man. He was, by God's grace, a devoted follower of the One who humbled Himself for the sake of Dr. Sanderson and millions of others.

Philippians 2.5-6 makes one of the most radical claims in all of Scripture. It teaches us in straightforward language that "Christ Jesus (is) . . . in very *nature* God." The word *nature* translates the Greek word *morphe*. Jesus is "the sum of all those characterizing qualities" that make God, God. To say that Jesus is the sum of all that makes God, God, is to say that Jesus is God. That is Paul's claim. The reason Paul dares to make such a claim is because Jesus repeatedly made the same claim.

- "The father and I are one." (John 10.30)
- "I have the authority to forgive sins." (Mark 2.1-12)
- "It is by my words that you will all be judged at the end of the world." (Matthew 25.31-46)
- "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14.6)

The One making such claims is either a legendary figure – a figment of our imagination, such as King Arthur or Robin Hood whose qualities and accomplishments have been exaggerated beyond belief – or else He is a liar, a lunatic, or, as he claimed, the Lord. There are few who would dare to suggest that the story of Jesus is nothing more than a legend. Even in reference to the resurrection, few would dare to deny that His disciples believed Jesus rose from the dead. This is why many who would deny the deity of Christ sense the need to offer explanations for why the grave was empty and

the disciples were convinced that He was risen from the dead.

If the story of Jesus isn't simply an overblown legend, then perhaps we can explain some of His claims by making Him out to be a liar. Again, few would say that Jesus intentionally deceived the people to whom He spoke. How ironic it would be if the One recognized by most people to be a great teacher of morality should prove to have been a bald-faced liar.

Perhaps He was simply a lunatic. But again – except for Judas in Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice's *Jesus Christ Superstar* – few have dared to suggest that Jesus was mad.

Many have suggested that those who wrote about Him were either foolishly deceived or maliciously deceptive. But again, it is difficult to demonstrate that such charges are justified when speaking of those who fearlessly proclaimed the Good News, and willingly died for the sake of their Savior, who they claimed to be alive. For example, this was John's testimony:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared, we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us.
(1 John 1.1-3)

Those who argue that the writers of the NT were either deceived, or they were liars, remind us that we all know that men do not rise from the dead, and therefore, anyone suggesting that a man rose from the dead must be either deceived or a liar. We know this is true because we've never seen a man rise from the dead. Therefore, we can be confident that no one ever has.

If you begin by denying the possibility of the supernatural, then you must assume that the writers of the Gospels were desperate to believe what they wrote, so desperate they even convinced themselves that Jesus was risen from the dead. Or, perhaps, they were just liars telling lies to justify their efforts to convince others to become disciples of the man from Galilee. Of course, it is hard to understand why such men would be willing to suffer and die for what they knew to be a lie.

There would be few who would charge Paul with being a liar or lunatic. He is recognized by many to be one of the great religious geniuses of human history. From what he wrote, it is clear he believed that Jesus is God, and that our Lord's claims of deity are true. "Christ Jesus (is) . . . in very *morphe* God." Paul believed Jesus to be the very form of God. Everything that makes God, God, was true of Jesus. For, in truth, Jesus is God.

Being God, every advantage and privilege that belonged to God, belonged to Jesus. With this in mind we read in Philippians 2.6-7 that Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but he made himself nothing." Jesus did not "give up" being God. He was, is, and always will be God. Instead, He gave up some of the advantages and privileges of being God. He set aside the advantages and privileges that were His as God in exchange for the humiliation of becoming "nothing." To be more specific, the "nothing" that Jesus took in exchange for all the advantages and privileges of being God was "the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." Jesus gave up the advantages and privileges of being God to become, in comparison, "nothing." He chose to become a man. And not just any man. He chose to become a servant – the suffering servant.

The One served by angels came to wash dirty feet. The One who never knew hunger or thirst came to hunger for His Father's presence and beg for a drink of water. The One who lived in a land where there are no tears came to weep at the grave of a friend. The One who does not grow tired or weary came to experience

fatigue and exhaustion. The One in whom there is no shadow of turning came to have one of his dearest friends deny three times even knowing Him. The One who was the author of life came to die.

In exchange for the advantages and privileges of heaven,

He took up our infirmities, he carried our sorrows. We considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted, but he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53.4-6, emphasis added).

Jesus gave up the advantages and privileges of heaven to be identified with us and in our place to suffer the God-appointed penalty for our sins. He chose to love us, and in choosing to love us, He chose to humble Himself on our behalf.

In Romans 3.10-12 Paul says of those for whom Christ humbled Himself: "There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless, and there is no one who does good, not even one." Jesus humbled Himself for rebels. Jesus chose to humble Himself for people like you and me. Created by Him and for Him, we have rebelled against Him, chosen to go our own way and do our own things, without any thought or consideration for Who He is or for what He desires. Paul teaches in Romans 3.23 that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Jesus chose to humble Himself on our behalf even though what we deserved was to be consumed by His righteous wrath.

But God does not treat us as we deserve. Instead, He chooses to love us. He lovingly chooses to give us what we have neither merited nor deserved. He lovingly chooses to be gracious and merciful to us. For His own mere "good pleasure" He chooses to

extend to us His grace, mercy and love (Ephesians 1.5, 9). The love with which He chooses to love us costs Him dearly. Because of His love for us, He “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he *humbled* himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2.6-8, emphasis added).

Because of his love for you and me, He humbled Himself and became as we are. He “who had no sin, [became] sin for us” (2 Cor 5.21). He became a man and yet lived a sinless life. He was tempted in every way just as we are tempted, but He did not sin (Hebrews 4.15). Then – sinless, perfect, spotless – He freely chose to take upon Himself our sins and transgressions. In our place He suffered and died. He gave up the privileges and advantages of the Godhead to become a man so that He might pay the penalty for our sins. On Calvary’s cross, in our place, He suffered the Father’s justice. For our eternal welfare and His eternal glory, He humbled Himself in love and rescued us from sin’s curse and power.

This is the humility that is to characterize our love for others. Just as Christ humbled Himself for the sake of His Father’s glory and our eternal welfare, so we are to humble ourselves for the sake of God’s glory and the eternal welfare of others. He taught us true humility, not only by dying, but also in living life from day to day in this sin-sick world.

In John 13 Jesus and His disciples gather in an upper room to celebrate the Passover. They’re hot, dusty, and dirty. Jesus watches as everyone looks for a place to sit. It is obvious that none of them is concerned about relieving the physical discomfort of the others. So Jesus takes off his outer garment, wraps a towel around his waist, fills a basin with water, and begins to fulfill the task assigned to lowliest of household servants — He begins to wash the disciples’ feet. When He finishes, He says to them, “Do you understand what I have done

for you? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13.12-15).

It was a hard lesson for them to learn. Just a few weeks earlier, in Matthew 20, the mother of James and John had asked Jesus for a favor. "When we get to heaven, I want you to give John the seat on your right and James the one on your left." When the other disciples learned of this conversation, they were incensed. They weren't upset that she would make such a request. They were upset because she had beaten them to the punch. In the midst of all the hubbub, Jesus says to them:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them; not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. (vs. 25-28)

The opening verses of Philippians 2 teach us about humility. In verse four Paul instructs the believers at Philippi to "do nothing out of selfish ambition." He goes on to encourage them "in humility [to] consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." Later on, beginning in verse nineteen, Paul points to Timothy as an example of someone who in humility is concerned about the eternal welfare of others, as demonstrated by his willingness to make the arduous journey to Philippi to encourage their faith and to comfort Paul concerning the progress of the Gospel in that location. But, it must sadly be noted, that in verse twenty-one Paul observes that "everyone looks out for his own interest, not those of Jesus Christ."

To love with a love characterized by the humility of Christ is a

great challenge. Only through the supernatural work of the Spirit within us can this challenge be met. The Spirit takes away our stone-cold hearts and gives us hearts alive unto Him. And when our focus is on Him, we have nothing of which to boast, we have nothing about which we want to boast. All we want is to humbly serve Him by humbly serving others.

If who we are and what we have done is of any worth, all praise and glory belong to the Lord. In Ephesians 2.10 we're told that God has prepared in advance good works for us to do. So when we do the good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do, we have nothing about which to be boastful about.

In Ephesians 2.8-9 Paul told us that "it is by grace [we] have been saved, through faith — and this not from [our]selves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that [we] can[not] boast." In Philippians 2.12 Paul challenges us to "work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling." But in verse thirteen Paul reminds us that "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose." However we "work out" our salvation, whatever we accomplish that is of any value, it is because God has chosen to work in and through us to accomplish His good purposes. When we understand, believe and embrace these truths, we are empowered to love with a love that does not boast because it is not proud.

It is proper to take pride in one's work. A good friend of mine, John Burke, oversaw the construction of our Sunday School wing. I was quite pleased to have John shoulder this responsibility because he takes genuine pride in what he does. Taking pride in one's work is good. It means that we will do our best to make sure that the job is done right. We can also take pride in the accomplishment of others. When I was a boy, nothing meant more to me than to have my father say he was proud of what I had done. Likewise, I am proud of the work John did. I enjoy telling others about the man who served as our general contractor.

When Paul tells us that love is not proud, he is speaking of a

pride that is arrogant and egotistical. King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4.30 illustrates such pride. He boasted, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" Babylon was a glorious city. The "Hanging Gardens" of Babylon was one of the ancient world's seven wonders. Babylon was an impressive empire, covering some five to six hundred miles from east to west, and some three to four hundred miles from north to south. Nebuchadnezzar's military exploits were impressive. Humanly speaking, he had a great deal about which to boast.

Nebuchadnezzar was proud and gave himself credit for all he had accomplished. God graciously chose to humble him. For seven years, Nebuchadnezzar became a babbling fool. He lived like an animal. When the Lord restored him, Nebuchadnezzar gained new insights. In Daniel 4.34 he testified, "At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. *I praised the Most High; I honored and I glorified him who lives forever. His dominion [not mine] is an eternal dominion; his kingdom [not mine] endures from generation to generation.*" He continues in verse thirty-seven: "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the king of heaven, because everything *he* does is right and all *his* ways are just. *Those who walk in pride he is able to humble.*"

The Corinthians were also guilty of sinful pride. In 1 Corinthians 1.20 Paul asks them, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher?" Paul uses those terms because the Corinthians considered themselves to be wise, scholarly, and philosophically brilliant. In the second chapter of I Corinthians, Paul makes comments about himself that probably reflect the criticisms expressed by the Corinthians concerning him and his preaching style. "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom. . . . My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words" (vs. 1, 4). We can be assured that the Corinthians viewed themselves as possessing all these qualities.

In 1 Corinthians 3.18, Paul calls upon those who think they possess wisdom to become “fools” so that they might truly be wise. Paul’s language seems to suggest that some of the Corinthians thought Paul a fool and themselves wise.

In 1 Corinthians 4.18, Paul says to them, “Some of you have become arrogant.” They were arrogant about their teachings, believing they had improved upon Paul’s “rough” ideas. They viewed Paul’s theology as unsophisticated. They considered Paul’s Gospel presentation as needing help. This is why Paul warned them in 1 Corinthians 4.6 to “not go beyond what is written.” Paul’s words suggest that their thoughts, words, and actions were not governed by the objective standard of God’s Word. Their ideas and practices were governed by their subjective prejudices, shaped and molded by the philosophical and cultural ideas of their day. They arrogantly went beyond Scripture, proud of their “deep” knowledge. Because of their “superior” wisdom, they thought they were able to understand the “real” meaning of what Paul wrote. Perhaps like some in our own day, they were confident that they could look beyond the cultural distinctives that clouded the true meaning of Paul’s words and discover the kernels of truth hidden behind what he wrote.

Their arrogance, as it always does, impacted their lives. They were willing to split a congregation rather than to submit to one another. They could justify the involvement of some of their members in incestuous relationships and overlook the use of temple prostitutes by others. With their great “wisdom” they could justify their words and actions.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 8.1 the issue was whether Christians could eat meat that had been offered to idols. The issue wasn’t whether they *should*, but whether they *could*. They understood that eating such meat was a perfectly proper thing to do. After all, as everyone should know, an idol was “nothing.” So how could it matter if the meat they ate had been offered up to “nothing”? Paul agreed that their understanding was correct. He

explained in verse four that idols are nothing, and therefore, eating meat offered to them should not be a big deal. As they read those words, I can hear them muttering, "That is what we have always said, believed, and practiced. We knew there was no reason to give up our Sunday roasts just because they had been offered up to an idol."

But Paul goes on to say, "You are using your knowledge to run roughshod over those who do not understand what you understand. When those without your 'understanding' copy your example and eat such meat, their consciences are battered to pieces. You are puffed up with knowledge. You have become arrogant. Your arrogance is causing the faith of others to be shipwrecked. And you don't care. You don't love others as you should. You are proud, not humble. You aren't willing to do whatever it takes to protect the faith of others."

The Corinthians loved to boast. So do we. We boast about our theological understanding, our accomplishments, our possessions, our abilities, our lifestyles. We think ourselves wise. We glory in our riches. And in doing so, we easily lose sight of the biblical teaching that anything we have of genuine value, or have accomplished that is truly significant, is all because of God's grace and mercy. Who we are and what we have is the result of God's blessing. He has blessed us with wisdom and knowledge. He has met all our needs. He has richly provided for us in countless ways. He has bestowed upon us the greatest privileges of all: To be called His child, to be declared a citizen of His Kingdom, to be given the task of serving as His Ambassador. These are blessings we do not deserve and have not earned. All that we are, have and do is because God has chosen to bless us. We have many reasons to be humble, but we have nothing of which to boast.

When we boast, we rob God of the glory that should be His. In our pride we show ourselves to be fools who lack a clear understanding of our natural condition. Our boasting demonstrates a lack of appreciation for the impact of

God's grace upon our lives.

People boast to draw attention to themselves. I remember watching one of my children, when he was a toddler, trip while walking across the floor in a room filled with visitors. Everyone laughed and commented on how cute he was. He heard them. For the next half-hour he continued to walk, trip and look around to see who was smiling and nodding their heads approvingly. Likewise, we love to draw attention to ourselves. Just like my toddler, we do so to our own hurt. As you may have anticipated, there finally came that moment when he tripped, fell to the floor, and injured himself.

We weren't created to draw attention to ourselves. We were created to serve the Lord by serving one another and, through our good deeds, draw attention to the God who has saved us, remade us in His image, and supernaturally equipped us to live as His image bearers. We are here to do those things that will glorify God. When we do so, we experience God's richest blessings. When we deny our God-given purposes, we hurt ourselves, often injure others, and deprive God of the glory that is rightfully His.

If we will remember that we have nothing of which to boast, that every good thing has come down to us from above, we will have gone a long way in avoiding that arrogant pride that so easily distracts us from fulfilling God's purposes in our lives.

In Matthew 23.5, Jesus said that everything the Pharisees did was done "for men to see. They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels of their prayer shawls long. They love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogue. They love to be greeted in the marketplace, and to have men call them 'Rabbi'." We should be free of such arrogance.

Paul writes in Philippians 2.3, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." In Ephesians 3.8 Paul observed: "I am less than the least of all God's people." It takes the God-given perspective of

Ephesians 3.8 to produce the God-given character of Philippians 2.3. If anyone had a right to be proud of his accomplishments for the cause of Christ, it was Paul. But Paul knew that in whatever way he had managed to “work out his salvation,” it was because, and *only* because, God was at work within Him, supernaturally making him both willing and able to act according to God’s good purposes (Philippians 2.12-13).

We should be free of willful, stubborn pride. We must not insist upon having our way. If we cannot persuade others, whom we believe want what God wants, to do what we think should be done; then we must not oppose, belittle, or frustrate their efforts simply because our ideas have not been accepted or followed. Such attitudes must not be ours. Instead, we should be a people characterized by a sensitive and tender spirit. Rejecting selfish ambition and vain conceit, we should be willing for the sake of peace to comply in many things. When necessary, and if possible, we should be willing to yield to the judgment of others, who likewise desire to “act according to His good purposes.”

There are elders on the Session of our church who have strong opinions. They are men of significant accomplishments. Many are used to having others do as they instruct. When complex issues arise, there is often sharp disagreement about what should or should not be done. Motions are made and seconded. Debate follows. Arguments are made. The discussions are often intense and sometimes long. But in my many years of working shoulder to shoulder with these men, I have never known us to leave a meeting divided. Not everyone “gets their way.” Original motions are defeated. New motions are made and seconded. More debate follows. Finally, there is a joining of the minds, more importantly, a joining of the spirits. And when the meeting ends, the elders go home persuaded that the Session has attempted to the best of its ability to “act according to His good purposes.” And if that is true, then it does not matter whose ideas were voted down, and whose

ideas were embraced. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, this is why I have no “horror” stories to tell about our church. We are wonderfully blessed by God to be led by men who are willing to submit with genuine humility to what we believe (and hope) to be “the mind of Christ.”

In 1 Corinthians 6.7, Paul pushes his argument to its logical conclusion: “Before you disturb the peace of the church why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?” If we would say to Paul, “Get real!”, he would say to us, “I’ve never been more real. I am talking to you about the supernatural reality of God at work in His people. Before you disturb the peace of the church, why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? You should be willing to do all that you can, short of compromising the purity of the church, to maintain its peace.”

Not only should we be free of insisting on our own way, we should be free of the tendency to justify our behavior and attitudes. Parents know that their children have begun to mature when there is no attempt to justify the wrong they have done. There is, instead, a simple acknowledgment that they have sinned — “Dad, I messed up big time. Forgive me.” Such confessions exhibit a deepening maturity.

In James 5.16 we read, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” We need those individuals with whom we can honestly discuss the things that are going on in our lives. Before them, when necessary, we should humbly confess our sins and seek their encouragement. Like the Psalmist, we should be willing to receive gladly the rebuke of a friend. “Let a righteous man strike me, it is a kindness. Let him rebuke me, it is oil on my head, my head will not refuse it.” (Ps 141.5)

Finally, love that is genuinely humble “is not rude.” The people at Corinth were willing to speak scornfully about Paul and to be scornful of their fellow believers. The church had splintered into

several factions. One group claimed to be followers of Paul, another claimed Apollos as their leader, a third boasted of their association with Cephas, and a fourth boasted about being followers of Jesus Christ. I can easily imagine how this fourth group would have taken great pride in saying, "We have no creed but Christ, no book, but the Bible. The rest of you may be followers of particular men. We are followers of Jesus." Some things never change.

We need to remember how scornfully Jesus could have talked about us – and with absolute justification. But instead, He chose to love us. Instead of speaking of us with scorn and judgment, He chose to speak to us words of love.

The church of Jesus Christ is made up of sinners. If we look for a reason to speak scornfully about a brother or sister in the Lord, we will find one. However, to love is to refrain from speaking scornfully of others. As image bearers of Christ, we should love even as He has loved us with a love that is not boastful, proud, or rude.

When I was a boy, Dad wanted to teach me about humility. In confidence, he told me about one of the ruling elders of our church. Each week this elder placed a check in the offering plate that amounted to almost half of the church's income. Nobody knew that except my Father who made the bank deposits. In Session meetings, joint Elder/Deacon meetings, or when the corporation met to discuss monetary issues, few knew that without this individual's weekly contribution the church's budget would have been cut in half. This elder displayed no arrogance. He never insisted upon having his own way. He never argued, "It's my money, and it will be spent as I want it spent or it will not be given." Instead, there was a willingness to yield to the judgment of others. Such an attitude is clearly the radical consequence of a radical love for God which produces a radical love for others.

Love is humble. It does not boast, it is not proud, it is not rude.

- Chapter Seven -

LOVE IS NEITHER SELF-SEEKING NOR EASILY ANGERED

1 Corinthians 13.5

During my final years of high school my parents required two things of me. First, when I left the house, they asked that I tell them where I was going, who I was going to be with, what we were going to be doing, and when I would be home. It was a matter of common courtesy.

My parents' second request was for me to "remember who you are." Frequently, when I left the house, these were the last words my father spoke to me. He was telling me two things. One, "Remember that you're my son, and what you do reflects upon this family." And two, "Remember that you are God's son, and what you do reflects upon His family."

As believers, we need to remember who we are. We are a people who once lived in darkness but have now seen a great light. We are a people to whom God has given eyes to see the Light of His Truth. Furthermore, we are a people through whom God has chosen to carry His light to those who still dwell in darkness. We are a people chosen by Him to reflect His glory to a watching world.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul teaches that love is patient and kind; it does not envy or boast; it is neither proud nor rude. And now, in verse five, he tells us that "love is not self-seeking nor easily angered."

The selfishness against which Paul warns in 1 Corinthians 13.5 is an inordinate self-love. Those controlled by selfish desires want first and foremost to have their needs met, be they material, physical, sexual, spiritual or relational. They are fully convinced they are deserving of such things, and getting what they deserve is what

makes them happy.

According to the Scriptures, if we were to get what we deserve, we would be consumed by the flames of an eternal hell. As people who live in rebellion against the One by whom and for whom we were created (Colossians 1.16), we deserve nothing from the Creator except His judgment and wrath. Sometimes I moan and groan because I don't think I'm being treated fairly. But when my mind is in gear, I tremble to think what it would be like if God gave me what I deserve. The good news of the Gospel is that instead of getting what we deserve, by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, we are recipients of His mercy. What I deserve, Jesus suffered at Calvary. What I receive, because of His suffering, is God's grace and mercy.

As believers, we should be controlled by our desires. That's because, as followers of Jesus Christ, our desires should be the same as His. Christ's desire was to do the Father's will and, therefore, to save His people from their sins. The focus of Christ's life was the Father's glory and our salvation. Therefore, He lived a life characterized by love for the Father and others. Because of this love, He was willing to lay down His life to satisfy the demands of the Father's justice and procure for us the gift of eternal salvation. It is a profound truth to realize that God does treat us "fairly." He doesn't simply overlook our sins. Jesus suffered what we "fairly" deserve. Therefore, because Jesus has suffered the penalty for our transgressions, God can now "fairly" choose to love us and pour out His richest blessings upon us.

Fulfilling the Father's purpose should be our burning desire and chief delight. Doing what the Father wants should be our passion. He has saved us, delivering us from sin's curse and power. Therefore, doing the Father's will is no longer of secondary importance to us or something we dread having to do. Believers do not get out of bed in the morning thinking, "Oh, I hate to think about what God wants me to do today." I doubt that any believer ever says that, at least

not in so many words. But when we spend our day avoiding what God wants us to do, pursuing things that we know are clearly displeasing to the Father; then doing God's will is obviously not our passion. If we are believers, and the doing of God's will is not our passion, it is because we have momentarily lost sight of all that Christ has graciously and mercifully done for us.

I used to play baseball. My mother would say that I ate, slept and lived for baseball. I never got out of bed on game-day mumbling to myself, "Oh no, I have to play baseball today. I have to go out there and field my position. I'll probably have to come to bat three, four, or five times. Oh, how I wish this day would end." Never did those thoughts cross my mind. Instead, on the day of a game, I bounded out of bed with excitement, passion, and anticipation. Likewise, doing the Father's will should be the believer's passion. Living lives that demonstrate our love for Him and for those made in His image should be the controlling and consuming passion of our lives.

The inordinate self-love which characterizes our culture numbs us to what is good. Partaking of the sinful pleasures of this world is like eating a candy bar before supper. It momentarily curbs our appetite, but it does not satisfy our need for nourishment. Sinful pleasures rob us of our appetite for what is good and wholesome. People focused upon themselves lead miserable lives. God created us to serve Him by serving others. When we deny Whose we are and who we are and spend our days pleasing ourselves instead of seeking to serve God and others, life becomes a brutish existence. If we think the world revolves around us, then life becomes extremely agitating and frustrating when people or events do not go our way.

The last line of 1 Corinthians 13.5 teaches that "love is not easily angered." Self-centered people know a great deal about anger, for it is a common human emotion. We become angry when cut off in rush-hour traffic, when the guy in the "cash only" line takes up our time writing a check, when dealing with unreasonable bosses

or unreliable employees. We become angry with strangers, with friends, with those we love. We even become angry with ourselves. At such moments we know that our anger is wrong. From experience we know that such anger accomplishes nothing of positive value. Some, at this point, become even angrier because they are angry.

In 1 Samuel 25, David has been anointed by God to be the future king of Israel, but Saul still sits upon the throne. Saul hates David. Saul knows that when he dies, his son will not succeed him to the throne because of Saul's sins. Saul knows that God has appointed David to be the next king. Saul hates him.

Saul tries many times to kill David. David is forced to flee into the wilderness to escape Saul's attempts to murder him. David has to live like a common criminal. There in the wilderness, David gathers a group of followers. David loves the Lord, and therefore, the Lord's people. He and his men are of great service to the Israelites. For example, David and his men protect the crops and herds of a wealthy man named Nabal.

David, responsible for feeding and clothing some 400 men, asks Nabal for provisions, which Nabal should have been eager to provide. David and his men protected Nabal and his crops from thieving nomadic tribes threatening to carry off the bounty of Nabal's harvest.

But when David requests provisions, Nabal says, "No." In addition, he insults David, by describing him as runaway slave. In 1 Samuel 25.13, we are told of David's "Clint Eastwood style" response; he says to his men, "Put on your swords." (I must tell you – I like it. And, if you're honest, you like it.) So David's men strap on swords and prepare to take from Nabal by force the requested supplies.

Abigail is Nabal's wife. She is a virtuous woman, highly intelligent, with a heart sensitive toward the Lord. Upon learning of Nabal's refusal to supply David and his men with needed provisions

and his insulting of David's character, she instinctively knows what to do and does it. In verse twenty-three, she rides to David's camp, taking with her many of the supplies that David has requested. When she sees him, she quickly gets off her donkey and bows before him with her face to the ground. She falls at his feet saying,

My Lord, let the blame be on me alone. Please let your servant speak to you; hear what your servant has to say. May my Lord pay no attention to this wicked man, this man Nabal. He is just like his name – he is a fool, and folly goes with him. But as for me, your servant, I did not see the man my master sent when you asked for the provisions. Now since the Lord has kept you from blood shed, and from avenging *yourself* with your own hands, as surely as the Lord's lives and as you live, may your enemies and all who intend to harm my master be like Nabal. And let this gift, which your servant has brought to my master be given to the men who follow you. Please forgive your servant's offense, for the Lord will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my master, because he fights the Lord's battles. (1 Samuel 25.24-28)

Abigail reminds David, “[You] fight the *Lord's* battles. [Therefore] let no wrongdoing be found in you as long as you live. Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, [your life] is bound securely in the bundle of the living by the Lord your God. But the lives of your enemies He will hurl away *as from the pocket of a sling*” (vs. 28-29).

From the pocket of a sling. It is as if she were saying to David, “Remember the ‘sling’ with which you defeated Goliath? Remember what the Lord did for you when you were fighting His battles? He protected you and handed your enemies over to you. So remember what the Lord has done, and don't begin taking matters into your own hands.”

She continues her argument in verse thirty: "When the Lord has done for my master every good thing He promised concerning him and has appointed him leader over Israel, my master will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself." In verse thirty-two David answers, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from *avenging myself with my own hand.*"

When his reasonable appeal to Nabal for provisions is denied and he finds himself slandered by Nabal's comments, David is ready to do battle. "Strap on your swords!" Losing sight of who he is, David forgets he is God's man, called to do God's work, for God's glory, under God's protection. Instead, he prepares to avenge himself by his own hand.

Why was David so angry with Nabal? Why do we get angry? Our anger stems from the selfish desire to put "me" first. James writes, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something, but you don't get it. And so you kill and you covet and you cannot have what you want, so you quarrel and you fight" (4.1-2).

Why do we get angry? We become angry because we don't get what we want or believe we deserve. Or we become angry because we've been wronged, and we want to get even.

Sometimes we get angry over things that are not important. It is incredible to me to remember some of the ways I've responded to a spilled glass of iced tea at the dinner table. At times I've gone ballistic! Anger can be so illogical. At times we are angry with people for things that aren't their fault. "Some are of such an angry, fretful spirit," writes Jonathan Edwards, "that they are put out of humor by . . . things in others, in the family, or in society, or in business that are of no greater fault than they themselves are guilty of every day."

Sometimes we get angry because of our circumstances. But,

isn't God the author of circumstances? So the logical conclusion to our complaint that "life is not fair" is that "God is not fair." Edwards writes

Many are of such a proud and peevish disposition, that they will be angry with anything that is in any respect against them, or troublesome to them, or contrary to their wishes, whether anybody is to blame for it or not. Oftentimes, person's spirits are kept very much in a fret by reason of things going contrary to them, and their meeting with crosses and disappointments and entanglements in their business, when what they will not admit is that it is God they fret at, and it is God with whom they are angry.

In this life we will be mistreated; people will take advantage of us and will not deal with us fairly. Life is not fair. We know this is true. And yet when faced with unfair circumstances we respond with surprise: "What's going on here?"

What's going on is exactly and precisely what God tells us we will experience while living life in this world. Furthermore, when in anger we determine to avenge ourselves by our own hands, we need to remember that God has told us: "There will be justice. But justice is my prerogative. Revenge against evil doers is my business." In 1 Samuel 25.29 Abigail said to David, "The lives of your enemies He will hurl away as from the pocket of a sling." In Romans 12.19 we read, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'It is mine to avenge, I will repay says the Lord.'"

Why do we get angry? To protect our egos when we don't get what we deserve or when we've been wronged and want to get even. Those are natural responses, but we are not a natural people. We are a supernatural people, and the God who supernaturally equips and enables us, says to us, "Do not seek revenge or bear a

grudge against one of your people" (Leviticus 19.18). Jesus takes it a step further in Matthew 5.44, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." Paul writes in Romans 12.14, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." In Proverbs 14, we are told that "a quick-tempered man does foolish things." James teaches us that "everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (1.19).

Anger is sinful when it is excessive in degree. We "lose" our temper. When we lose our temper, we are doing exactly what we want to do. But what a wonderful phrase, "I lost my temper." When I lose something, I usually consider that an unplanned event. But, the losing of one's temper is planned. Our "planning" may only be of short duration, but we still "blow our tops" because that's what we have decided to do.

For years I had the habit of believing that it was my calling in life as both a coach and a spectator to make sure every decision by a referee during a game was right – even if it meant being asked to leave a game. Following one particular episode, a friend wrote me a gracious letter in which he challenged my actions and attitudes. "What are you doing? Do you have any idea what that looks like? Do you have any idea what that sounds like? Do you have any idea how that undermines everything you try to do for Christ?"

Several years later, during a basketball game, my son, David, was knocked to the floor by an opposing player. The referee called a foul on my son! I jumped to my feet to express my opinion of the call, but then thought, "What am I doing? Just how important is this? In truth, this isn't at all important. The importance of whether the ref got this call right is completely insignificant in comparison to the importance of serving as Christ's light bearer to a watching world lost in darkness." So I sat down and said nothing. Inwardly I was fuming. But outwardly I was under control. That's important. It's not exactly sanctified, but it's a first step toward true sanctification.

Anger is sinful when we cannot let go of it. In Psalm 4.4 we read, "In your anger do not sin." Paul quotes this verse in Ephesians 4.26: "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry." Edwards writes, "If anger be long continued, it soon degenerates into malice, for the leaven of evil spreads faster than the leaven of good." Listen to that statement. "If anger be long continued, it soon degenerates into malice because the leaven of evil spreads faster than the leaven of good." Edwards continues: "If a person allows himself long to hold anger toward another, he will quickly come to hate him."

The religious leaders were at first angered by what Jesus said and did. But their anger quickly turned to hatred. And in the end, they had Him put to death.

Such anger robs us of our joy. Such anger slays the possibilities of love. Such anger kills us. It kills those around us. I write of what I know experientially, for I have known undue anger. And I have seen it terribly injure my relationships with other people whom I dearly love.

Instead of choosing to become angry, we need to stop and think. We need to prayerfully consider how our self-centered, ego-protecting anger provokes God and offends others. We need to consider how unhappy it makes them. We need to see how difficult it makes it for others to live with us.

Listen to the Word of God. Proverbs 29.22, "An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins." We should strive to avoid that anger that eats away at our souls. We should do so by earnestly beseeching God to increase the spirit of divine love and humility within us.

Anger is sinful when it is motivated by anything other than the glory of God. "We should never be angry but at sin," writes Jonathan Edwards. We should be passionate people, but our passion should not be over whether a ref makes the right call in a basketball game. Our passion should be for the glory of God. Our passion should be for a hellbent world, for whom, in God's scheme

of things, we are its only hope. The hope for people lost in the darkness of sin is that they see Jesus in us. Living as image bearers of God is worthy of our passion.

Listen to Psalm 37:

Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they'll soon wither, like green plants they'll soon die away. Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he'll do this: *He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, and the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.* Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret – it leads only to evil. And evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land. A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found. But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace. . . . Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked. . . . I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken, or their children begging bread.

There are occasions when we experience a different kind of anger. For example, we become angry when sin wrecks the lives of those we love. In 2 Corinthians 11.29 Paul tells us that when others are “led into sin” he “inwardly burn[s].” We become angry because our world is determined to destroy itself. We become angry with our own weaknesses in fighting temptation. These experiences of anger, while not pleasant, are frequently used by the Lord to motivate us to try to make right what is horribly wrong.

Jonathan Edwards writes:

There is that anger that is consistent with good will. For example, a father may find in himself an earnestness, an opposition of spirit to the bad conduct of his child, and yet at the same time he will not have any ill will to the child, but on the contrary good will. And so far from desiring his child injury, he has the very highest desire for his child's true welfare, and is angry about that which he thinks will be of injury to his child. There is that anger that is consistent with good will.

We must not lose that anger that is "consistent with good will." For example, the anger that we experience when confronted with sin and its consequences is "consistent with good will." There is such a thing as righteous indignation. Anger is righteous when it is directed at the same things that make God angry.

Observe Moses' anger. He comes down from Mt. Sinai and returns to the camp of Israel, and finds the Israelites worshipping a golden calf made by his brother Aaron. Their "worship" includes acts of sexual immorality. In Exodus 32.19 we're told that, "when Moses approached the camp and he saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain." For this outburst of anger Moses is not rebuked. His anger is directed against the people's sinful acts of physical and spiritual adultery.

Later on, when Moses, in anger, strikes the rock because he was "fed-up" with having to "put-up" with the people's gripes and complaints, he is severely rebuked by God. At that point his anger is selfish and egotistical. He is feeling sorry for himself and is growing weary of all the responsibility he carries on his shoulders. But when he comes down off Mt. Sinai and in anger throws the stone tablets to the ground causing them to shatter, God does not rebuke him.

The Apostle Paul, having been chased across the Macedonian landscape, arrives in Athens. In Acts 17.16 after Paul's arrival in Athens, he looks the city over, and in the NIV we read, "he

was greatly distressed.” Our English translation does not convey the strength of Paul’s response. To put it in everyday slang, Paul was ticked. He was furious because he found the city filled with idols. The word describing Paul’s distress is the same word used in 1 Corinthians 13.5. In Acts 17 Paul is angry. He is angry because the city is filled with idols and consumed with the worship of false gods.

In 1986 the General Assembly of the PCA was held in Philadelphia. I attended those meetings with two elders from my church. Arriving late in the evening, I went to our hotel to check in. As I looked around the hotel lobby, I thought to myself, “Well, isn’t that nice, they’re having a graduation party.” The lobby was filled with people dressed in tuxedos and formal gowns. I assumed the couples were eating at the hotel and would soon be leaving for the dance. But the longer I looked at these people, the more uncomfortable I became. At first unable to figure it out, I knew something wasn’t right. Finally, it hit me. All of these people, those dressed in tuxedos as well as in evening gowns, were men. They were all men! I felt no hatred for them. But I felt absolutely sick over the reality of what our culture had become. I was angry that such degradation was publicly acceptable. I was angry with myself because I didn’t know what to do, what to say, and wasn’t sure I wanted to know. All I wanted was to get to my room.

In John 2.13-17, Jesus is angry. He enters the temple carrying a whip in His hand. If you enter our church with a whip in your hand, most of us are going to assume that you aren’t pleased with some aspect of the church’s worship or practice. Jesus is not pleased by what He knows is taking place in the Temple. He proceeds to drive out those using the temple as a marketplace. He scatters the coins of the moneychangers, overturning their tables. He thunders, “Get out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a marketplace!” Observing His actions, His disciples remember Psalm 69.9, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” Jesus is zealous for His Father’s glory. He is consumed by His zeal, and He is angry with those who have so little regard for His Father and His House.

Jesus' righteous indignation should not surprise us, but it tends to. We have become accustomed to a watered down, wishy-washy Christianity that is so spineless it stands for nothing and falls for anything. We're told to just "get along." One of our favorite texts is Jesus' words, "Judge not, lest ye be judged" (Matthew 7.1). We love to quote that verse. Most of the time we quote it out of context. We fail to note that Jesus is speaking against a hypocritical judgment. We pay no attention to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7 that we must recognize that some are dogs and others are pigs (v. 6). We give little thought to the fact that Scripture instructs us to "discern the spirits" (1 John 4:1). We pay little attention to the Scriptural teaching that we can judge a man by the fruit produced in his life.

Therefore, when we come to John chapter two and the parallel passages in the other three Gospels, we are stunned and flabbergasted by Jesus' actions in the Temple. I know too many evangelicals who would have taken Jesus by the arm and said, "Jesus, let's sit down over here and see if we can gain a little composure and perspective. Let's think this thing through." Which is exactly what we should do because we don't have the perfect judgment that Jesus had. The spontaneity of Jesus' *righteous* anger cannot be copied by us. We must stop and think carefully about the situation confronting us and attempt to prayerfully determine what our proper response should be. However, the spontaneity of Jesus' righteous anger should not surprise us. After all, the Scripture clearly demonstrates for us the Father's anger.

The Scripture goes so far as to describe God as being "full of wrath." God's anger is never sinful or capricious. God never "loses" His temper. Our theology teaches that God is "without passion." The term is rather old-fashioned and subject to serious misunderstanding. It does not mean that God does not feel strongly about things. It means that God always feels the same way about things. He is not hot one minute and cool the next. God's response is always the same. He is filled with emotion, but He is *always* filled with emotion. He is not up one day and down the next.

God's anger is never the result of a temper tantrum. God's anger is provoked by man's sinfulness. His anger is a righteous response to sin. In Psalm 76.10, the psalmist proclaims that God's anger is good and should evoke from us words of praise. I'm not sure if I've ever praised God for His anger, but that is precisely what the Psalmist calls upon us to do – to praise God for His righteous indignation.

The cross speaks to us of God's anger against sin, His hatred of sin, and His demand that justice be served. He is a just Judge Who must punish sin. That's what makes the reality of His love so stunning. You cannot appreciate the love of God without being awed by His hatred of sin. As your awe of God's hatred of sin increases, your understanding of His love will deepen.

If I were to go to jail, my wife would visit me. My children would visit me. My mother would visit me. But what if I were to go to jail for having sexually molested your daughter? During the 70's, while living in Illinois, the eight-year-old daughter of a friend was sexually molested by a neighbor. When I heard about it, I was furious. I thought, "It's time to load the shotgun and find a strong rope." God gives us special grace in our moments of need. My friend's response was to go visit his neighbor in jail, sharing with him the Gospel of Jesus Christ, attempting to befriend him. That's almost beyond my comprehension, but it is nothing in comparison to the fact that God chooses to love a sinner such as me.

As the time approached for Jesus to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem, and he sent messengers on ahead. They went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him, but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?' But Jesus turned and he rebuked them, and they went ahead to another village. (Luke 9.51ff)

The Scripture refers to James and John as “sons of thunder.” I like these two guys. They want to call down fire from heaven and destroy the villages that had snubbed Jesus. Sounds reasonable to me. Surely these ruffians who acted as if they were too good to welcome the Son of God into their midst deserved a little hellfire from heaven. And yet, Jesus rebukes James and John.

Knowing the difference between sinful anger and righteous indignation is not easy. What motivates our response to others when they attack us? Concern for the testimony of Christ or concern for our wounded egos? Someone slaps us on the right cheek, what are we to do? We are to turn the other cheek; that is what Jesus taught. But what if our loved ones are present? What if the threat is something more than just a slap on the cheek? What if it is an attack upon our life? How do we respond in that situation? Suddenly, it is not simply a matter of responding to a personal insult. Now it is a matter of protecting those for whom God has made us responsible. Now it is a matter of protecting yourself because you are responsible for others.

At times it is difficult to know the right time or reason to be angry. Paul doesn't teach that Christ-like love *never* becomes angry. He teaches us that Christ-like love is not *easily* angered. So how should we respond to situations in which it is not immediately obvious what we should do? We would do well to meditate at the beginning of each day upon James 1.19. “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.” Once we've spoken or acted, we can't take it back. We can confess, repent, and ask forgiveness, but we can't take it back. We can't change what we've done or take back the words spoken in haste. Remember when we spilt gravy on our mother's white tablecloth? We were so sorry. Perhaps we even helped Mom wash the tablecloth. But the hint of a stain was forever present.

We must be sure that our spiritual instincts are fully engaged before we open our mouths or do something rash. Jonathan

Edwards offers these two observations:

It is because men are proud, and exalt themselves in their own hearts, that they are revengeful, that they are apt to be excited, and to make a big deal out of that which is insignificant. . . . It is because men are selfish and they seek their own, that they are malicious and revengeful against all that oppose or interfere with their own interests. If men sought not chiefly their own private and selfish interests, but the glory of God and the common good, then their spirits would be a great deal more stirred up in God's cause than in their own; they would not be prone to hasty, and rash, inconsiderate, immoderate, and long-continued wrath, with any who might have injured or provoked them; but they would in a great measure forget themselves for God's sake, and from their zeal for the honor of Christ. The end that they would aim at would be, not making themselves great, or getting their own way or achieving their own will, but the glory of God and the good of their fellow-beings.

Christ-like love is not concerned about whether I get what I deserve. Christ-like love is not concerned about whether my ego is stroked or my efforts are properly rewarded or all men think highly of me. Christ-like love is motivated by a concern for God's glory and the welfare of others. There is no one who does not wrestle with an inordinate self-love. No one naturally focuses upon doing the Father's will and the good of others. But by God's grace we can learn to be more and more the kind of people God intends for us to be.

I rejoice to tell you that I know many people who do exactly that. They are deeply in love with Jesus Christ, and their love is evidenced by how they live their lives. They are glorious because at the beginning of every day they ask God to fill them with a holy passion and equip them for the battle that lies ahead. Many of

them, at the start of each day, offer up a simple prayer to the Lord: "Today, O God, by your enabling grace, I will live to glorify you. This day, I will live with the eternal good of others in mind. Today, I will live in such a way that others may see my good deeds and give you the glory."

Christ-like love shines with the holy light of God's glory. Such a love is not self-seeking. Christ-like love does not seek its own good, but instead seeks

God's glory and the good of others. Christ-like love focuses on pleasing and glorifying the Father by learning to serve others.

In Ephesians 6.6, Paul says that believers are people who "do the will of God from their hearts." What we do from our hearts we do with passion. In 1 Corinthians 10.31, we are taught that, "whatever we do [we are to] do it all for the glory of God." Not just our worship, but our work, recreation, family times – whatever we do is to be done with all our hearts, so as to glorify God. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks, "What is the chief end of man?" The answer: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." Biblical love focuses upon glorifying God. How do we glorify God? By loving Him. How do we love Him? By doing what He commands. What are His commands? Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10.24, "Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others." In Romans 15.2 we read, "Each of us should please his neighbor for his good to build him up." And in Philippians 2.4 Paul writes, "Each of you should not look to your own interests, but also to the interest of others."

Do we hear what God says? The self-centered person focuses on his own problems, assuming that his problems are far greater and more significant than anyone else's problems. He believes his problems to be unique. Of course, such an attitude flatly denies the teaching of 1 Corinthians 10.13, where we are taught that "there is no temptation that confronts any of us except that which is the common experience of all men." That same verse concludes with this wonderful promise: "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted,

he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

In contrast to how the world thinks, Christ-like love is focused upon others. Paul writes in Galatians 6.10, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." Believers are concerned for others. They are concerned for the church, for the community, and for the society. Like Queen Esther, for the sake of others, we are willing to put our lives on the line. Esther was encouraged to take that courageous step by the words of her Uncle Mordecai, "Who knows, but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4.14).

You were born at this moment in history because God has a special purpose for you to fulfill at this point in time. Joseph told the brothers who had sold him into slavery, "Listen, you intended it for evil, God intended it for good. God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50.20, paraphrase).

Moses, empowered by God, went and stood boldly before the Pharaoh, commanding him to let the children of Israel leave Egypt. Moses, empowered by God, parted the waters of the Red Sea and brought the Israelites into the wilderness. At that moment they were only a few days removed from entering the Promised Land. But they would not enter for another forty years. There in the wilderness we find them grumbling and complaining. God had met their every need, but they were dissatisfied. They turned their backs on God and instead worshiped a golden calf.

We are a part of a culture blessed by God. God has met our every need. And yet, we find it so easy to gripe and complain. We become angry with those around us. We turn our backs upon God. We embrace the idols of our age.

In the book of Exodus God talked about annihilating Israel. Having been told of God's intentions, Moses pleaded with God on behalf of Israel. In Exodus 32.32 Moses prayed, "Lord, forgive their sins, and in their place blot me out of the book you have written."

Fifteen-hundred years later the apostle Paul expressed the same emotion. In Romans 9.3 he wrote, "I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel."

These men were ready to die for the sake of others. The challenge of their example is obvious. *Are we ready to live for the sake of others?* The apostle John in his first epistle writes, "This is how we know what love is, Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. We ought therefore, to *lay down our lives for our brothers*" (3.16).

We must remember Whose we are so that we might understand who we are, and therefore, eagerly embrace the glorious responsibilities and opportunities that are ours. We are to live glorious lives so that we might show Christ to a watching world. We are to live for the eternal good of others so that, having seen our good deeds, they will have a reason to praise our Father in heaven. Those good deeds done for their benefit will be like a beacon of light shining in the midst of a city darkened by a raging storm.

So many of us live our lives loaded down with guilt over the fact that we don't witness for our Lord like we should. We don't share the Gospel with people or speak a word of testimony whenever the opportunity arises.

The place to begin in overcoming such failings is with how you live. Part of the reason we don't speak a word for the Lord is because we know that our lives do not validate the words we would speak. Jesus said in Matthew 5 that men will glorify our Father in heaven when they see the good lives we live. If we want to impact this world for the cause of Christ, then we must live as Jesus would have us to live. When we demonstrate to others the Christ-like love that is not selfish or easily angered, we will impact them for the cause of the Gospel. People will want to know what enables us to live the way we live. At that moment we will have opportunity to speak a word for Jesus. Furthermore, our lives will validate what we say.

We have the opportunity, privilege, power and ability to live lives that glorify our Father in heaven. We have the opportunity and

Love Is Neither Self-Seeking Nor Easily Angered

the privilege to be those whom God will use to turn this world right-side up. And one of the ways in which we can prepare to respond to such an opportunity and to exercise such a privilege is by meditating upon this precept: "Love is neither self-seeking nor easily angered."

- Chapter Eight -

LOVE KEEPS NO RECORD OF WRONGS

1 Corinthians 13.5

I may not be able to remember where I put my car keys, but I can give you a list of the names of those who have wronged me over the past years. It's hard to forget. I'm not even sure it's possible. But God is the God of the impossible.

Paul is imprisoned in Rome. In his second letter to his son in the faith Timothy, Paul remembers how "at my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me."

That's hard for me to imagine. The Apostle Paul on trial in Rome and no one comes to his defense.

How does Paul feel about those who left him high and dry? Paul instructs Timothy, "May it not be held against them" (2 Timothy 4.16).

Stephen was slandered, arrested and put on trial. Faithfully he had proclaimed the Gospel, performed a few miracles, and used the OT Scripture to show that Jesus is the Christ. His enemies were unable to stop him from preaching, or to explain away the miracles, or to refute his biblical arguments demonstrating that Jesus is the Christ. So they arrested him on false charges, put him on trial, and based upon the testimony of false witnesses, stood ready to condemn him.

Acts chapter seven is Stephen's answer to his accusers. He recites Israel's history from the days of Abraham until the reign of Solomon. He remembers God's mercy and the people's sins. In verse fifty-one, he drives home his point, "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears. You are just like your fathers. You always resist the Holy Spirit."

Stephen's trial never concludes. His less than flattering survey of their history and stinging words were bad enough. But then he says to them, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7.55). Covering their ears and yelling threats, they grab him, drag him out of the city and begin to stone him. As the rocks begin to fly, Stephen in Acts 7.60 prays, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Stephen's words are much the same as the words Jesus prayed from the cross, "Father, forgiven them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Perhaps, I could forgive those who several months, or perhaps years, before, had turned their backs on Paul. I find it harder to think of forgiving those who picked up large rock and flung them for the purposes of crushing Stephen's skull. And it is almost impossible for me to imagine forgiving those who mocked, abused, tortured and killed my Savior.

But I'm glad to know they were forgiven. That's the kind of forgiveness I need. My sins are hideous, despicable, deliberate acts of rebellion against the One by whom and for whom I was created. My sins are worse than the sins of an unbeliever, because I know Jesus loves me. When I sin, I sin against the One I claim as Lord and acknowledge to be my Savior. I don't sin as a drunken Roman soldier who doesn't know any better. I sin as a citizen of heaven. My sin is an act of direct and deliberate rebellion against my King, whom I claim to love.

I've grown up despising the name of Benedict Arnold, the American general who turned over the fortifications at West Point in New York to the British for a sum of money and a promised position back in merry ole England. I despise him. But I think I know him. I think I know him far too well.

Could I forgive Benedict Arnold? I don't know. But this is what I do know – God graciously chooses to forgive me and wipe clean my slate of all offenses. Here is why they call it "good news":

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. (1 John 1.8-10)

It is when I recognize the horror of my sin that I am overwhelmed by the wonder of God's love. I am stunned to realize that He forgives me, removing my sins from me as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103.12), burying those sins in the deepest sea, tossing them behind His back (Isaiah 38.17), keeping no record of the wrongs I have committed.

While working at a Bible conference in high school, I was repeatedly confronted by a sermon illustration that always caused me to break out in a cold sweat. The speaker would ask, "How would you like God to come in here and play a movie of your life for everyone to see?" Now, like almost everyone else, there were some truly positive moments I would love to have shared with others. I've made a few plays in the infield that I'd love to be able to sit down and watch over and over again! But the idea of friends and family viewing a play-by-play epic of my sinfulness was a terrifying thought. I'm still not interested in having that take place.

And yet, there is One who has viewed that film. God knows every moment of my life, every thought I've ever had, everything I've ever done; He knows everything there is to know about me — and yet He chooses to love me, to forgive me, and to keep no record of how I have wronged Him.

I love Psalm 32. "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven. Blessed is he whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him."

Those words were written by David, an adulterer and a murderer. He had sinned horribly against the Lord – the Lord he truly

loved and genuinely desired to serve. But David delayed a long time before seeking God's forgiveness. In Psalm 32.3 David confesses, "When I kept silent my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long."

Foolishly, David chose to live with the misery that accompanies sin. He was too proud to talk about what he had done. And since he was the king, no one dared challenge his behavior. So, if no one was talking to him about these things, and if David chose not to bring up the subject, then perhaps it would all just be forgotten.

But the ache in his bones wouldn't go away. How foolish can we be? If no one talks about it, then it will just all go away. But, of course it doesn't. In our heart of hearts we know that God knows. He knows everything about us there is to know. And knowing everything there is to know, He will forgive and cleanse us from all unrighteousness, if we will confess and repent.

Listen to the words of Psalm 103.1-4: "Praise the Lord, O my soul; and all my inmost being, praise His holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits — He forgives all my sins, he heals all my diseases, he redeems my life from the pit, He crowns me with love and compassion."

In verse eight we delight to read: "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." For me, the tenth verse is one of the most precious in all of Scripture: "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities."

Instead He pours out His mercy and grace upon us. "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him" (Psalm 103:11-13).

This was the testimony of King Hezekiah: "In your love, O God, you have put all of my sins behind your back" (Isaiah 38.17). By grace through faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord, God loves and

forgives us. And this is how we are to love and forgive one another. As Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians 13:5, “[Love] keeps no record of wrongs.”

Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12). Two verses later Jesus tells us even more: “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive men their sins your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt 6:14-15).

Is Jesus teaching that we merit forgiveness by forgiving others? No. Jesus is teaching that those who have been loved and forgiven by God love and forgive others. If we find we are not willing to love and forgive, then we need to question whether we have been loved and forgiven by God. For those who are loved and forgiven by God, love and forgive others. The supernatural ability to love and forgive others is because we have been loved and forgiven.

Loving and forgiving others as we have first been loved and forgiven means, in part, that we keep no record of wrongs. One way to avoid such record keeping is to acknowledge the strong possibility that our records are wrong.

Often, when we learn the whole story, things just aren't what they seemed. Far too often I have condemned the words or actions of another and then discovered that my evaluation was wrong. Far too often my words and actions have been judged harshly by someone whose understanding of my situation is inaccurate and whose conclusions are warped. As believers, wisdom dictates that we put the best possible interpretation upon what others do and say until we have overwhelming proof to the contrary.

Remember, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Think about how slow you are to condemn your own words or actions. Think about how gracious you are in evaluating what you've said or done.

“Well, I know it wasn't exactly right, but I can explain it to you.”

Most of you are slow to condemn the words and actions of those who love you. You're able to forgive and forget their offenses. In part, it's because they've forgiven you, many times, and are unwilling to rehearse again and again the ways in which you have offended and hurt them. How patient my parents were with me. How patient my wife is with me. How patient my children are with me. Why? Because I have never aggravated them? No. It's because they love me, and therefore, are not in a hurry to harshly judge me or to keep track of my offenses.

We judge quickly those we don't love as we should, taking careful notes and long remembering what they have said or done.

Jonathan Edwards wrote, "An eagerness to judge and condemn shows a conceited and arrogant disposition. It reflects someone who thinks himself better than others as though he were fit to be the Lord and the judge of those around him."

I remember a situation in which I thought an individual was going to assist me with a major project. But when the time came for that to happen, he never showed. He didn't come through. He left me hanging. Having to do it by myself, I was angry! I formed all kinds of judgments concerning why he had not shown up to help me as he had promised. The next time I saw him I asked, "Hey, where were you?" He told me that he had been sick in bed with a fever. "Well, why didn't you call me?" "I was in bed with a fever. I was so miserable I didn't even think about it. I'm sorry." I felt foolish and rightfully so.

God requires that we consider carefully the evidence before jumping to conclusions that can prove hurtful to someone else. In Proverbs 18.13 we're told "he who answers before listening, that is his folly and his shame." Have you ever been so absolutely certain you knew what was going on that you would not give the other individual a chance to say anything?

My sons and I were playing basketball at home, a ball got

loose, and I moved to recover it. One of my boys also went for the ball. We collided. I gained control of the ball and knew that he had fouled me. I took the ball out of bounds to start a new play, and then I heard the fouler groan to himself, “I got run over.” I immediately concluded that he was accusing me of having fouled him. Now, unless you’ve played basketball, you don’t appreciate how significant this is. First of all, he fouled me. Second, he was accusing me of having fouled him. I verbally ripped him. I went up one side of him and down the other. I berated him. Then I finally gave him a chance to speak. When I did, I learned that his words were not an accusation but a statement of fact. He knew that he had fouled me – which he had! – but I outweighed him by about sixty pounds and it felt to him as if he had been run over — which he had! That’s all he was saying. But I had not given him the chance to explain to me the meaning of his words. “He who answers before listening, he who doesn’t take the time to get all the facts straight, it is to his folly, to his shame” (Proverbs 18:13, paraphrase). I knew I had spoken foolishly. I was ashamed of what I had said. And I had injured my son – physically and spiritually. But he forgave me. And as best as I can remember, he’s never thrown in my face this moment of parental foolishness.

In Joshua 22 the tribes of Reuben and Gad along with half the tribe of Manasseh, having fulfilled their responsibilities to assist their brothers in battle against the Canaanites, return home to the eastern side of the Jordan River. On their way home, somewhere on the east banks of the Jordan, they build an impressive altar. When the Israelites living west of the Jordan realize what their brothers have done, they are angry. They *assume* that these tribes intend to use this altar as a place of worship. They know God intends for the tabernacle to be *the* center of worship for *all* the tribes. That tabernacle was located in Shiloh, west of the Jordan. The western tribes are convinced that the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh have broken faith with the Lord by building an

altar in a place and for a purpose contrary to God's Word. In Joshua 22.11 we're told that "when the Israelites heard that they had built the altar on the border of Canaan at Geliloth near the Jordan on the Israelite side, the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them."

How often do we jump to conclusions without knowing the whole story? We are so certain, so sure we know the truth. But then we learn the rest of the story, and things are not what they seemed.

As the western tribes prepare for war, they send Phinehas, the high priest, along with an elder representative from each of the tribes, to speak with representatives of the two and a half tribes. In Joshua 22, the representatives are given an opportunity to explain their actions.

"The Mighty One, God, the Lord! The Mighty One, God the Lord! He knows! And let Israel know! If this has been in rebellion or disobedience to the Lord, do not spare us this day. If we have built our own altar to turn away from the Lord and to offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, or to sacrifice fellowship offerings on it, may the Lord call us to account." (vs. 21-23)

In verse twenty-six they tell their western brothers, it was not our intention to use this altar for burnt offering or sacrifices. We built this offering to serve as "a witness between us and you and the generations that follow, that we will worship the Lord at his sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings."

In verse twenty-nine they explain that it was not their intention "to rebel against the Lord and turn away from him today by building an altar for burnt offerings, and grain offerings and sacrifices." They fully understand that the only altar to be used for these purposes "stands before his tabernacle."

In the west the rumor had spread that the two and a half tribes of Israel living east of the Jordan had built an altar. Immediately it was assumed that they had turned away from the Lord. They had

chosen to do their own thing and go their own way without any concern for Who God is or for what God has commanded. It seemed obvious that they had broken faith with God. And for such offenses, they deserved to die.

I'm saddened but grateful to read in Scripture about people who are just like you and me. People who when faced with a genuinely difficult situation, far too often respond as sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. I relate easily to the western tribes. Just like you and me, they jumped to conclusions. Their eastern cousins have built a second altar as a place of worship. But that wasn't true.

The altar their eastern cousins had built was meant to serve as a memorial and not a place of worship. Its purpose was to remind those living in the east that the only place at which the Lord was to be worshiped was before the one true altar in Shiloh. They had built their altar as a memorial. It was built to remind them that God was to be worshiped only in His tabernacle.

The people living in the west were certain they knew why their eastern cousins had built this altar. But they were wrong. We are often so certain we know what lies behind people's actions, and then we learn the whole story and discover that things are not what they seem.

Consider 1 Samuel, chapter one. Hannah came to the altar at Shiloh on a yearly basis, accompanying her husband. She had no children. She was barren. As she stood before the Lord, she prayed with great intensity. As she prayed, she wept. As she wept and prayed, she swayed from side to side. Her lips were forming the words, but no sound could be heard. Eli, the high priest of God, watched as her lips moved, her body swayed, and tears coursed down her cheeks. He was convinced he knew why. His conclusion? "She's drunk!"

Eli was so convinced of his conclusion that he rebuked her. In 1

Samuel 1.15-16 Hannah replied, "Not so, my Lord. I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

King David has befriended a cripple named Mephibosheth, the son of David's closest friend, Jonathan. Jonathan has been dead for many years. David befriends Mephibosheth because of his love for his father. He provides for all his needs.

In 2 Samuel 16, David's son Absalom rebels against him. Because of Absalom's rebellion, David is forced to flee the city of Jerusalem. As he is fleeing, he is met by a man named Ziba, Mephibosheth's chief servant. Ziba brings donkeys and supplies to aid David in his flight out of Jerusalem. David thanks Ziba for the supplies and asks about Mephibosheth. Ziba tells him, "Mephibosheth waits in Jerusalem for Israel to acknowledge that he, a grandson of Saul, is the one who should be king." Upon the testimony of this one witness, David condemns Mephibosheth in his heart.

After Absalom has been defeated in battle and David has returned to his capital, one of the first people to greet him is Mephibosheth. David asks Mephibosheth, "What are you doing here? Why did you stay in Jerusalem when I had to flee it? Why did you not accompany me in my flight from Jerusalem?" To which Mephibosheth responded, "David, I didn't accompany you because I love you. I'm a cripple. If I had accompanied you it would have slowed you down, and if you had left here any slower, Absalom and his armies might have overtaken you. That's why I didn't accompany you. David, I know what Ziba told you, but he was lying."

Looking at all the facts, it appears that Mephibosheth was telling the truth.

My friends, we are to love one another as we have been

loved. And we have been loved with a love that keeps no record of wrongs. We are to embrace the best possible interpretation of what others do or say until we have overwhelming proof to the contrary.

And yet, at the same time, the Scriptures require that we make sound judgments.

In 2 Timothy 4.16 Paul told Timothy, "There were many who deserted me and gave me no support during my first defense. May it not be held against them." But, six verses earlier, in verse ten, Paul wrote: "Demas has deserted me, and he has gone to Thessalonica. . . Only Luke is here with me." In verse fourteen he wrote, "Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm, the Lord will repay him for what he has done." And in verse fifteen Paul told Timothy, "You too, should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message." Clearly, Paul remembered what Demas had done and was calling upon Timothy to be wary of Alexander.

What is going on here? How do we logically put together Paul's words in 2 Timothy 4? On the one hand he says, "I will not hold any of these things against those who deserted me when I was first brought to trial." On the other hand he writes, "Let me tell you about Demas and Alexander. Let me tell you the evil things these men have done." How do we fit together these two examples of Paul's attitude toward those who had harmed him?

Scripture requires us to maintain our balance. When we compare Paul's statements in 2 Timothy 4 with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7, we realize that we must strive to maintain a proper balance.

Paul tells us that there were those who deserted him when he was first arrested – but he will not hold it against them. But he also names names. Demas and Alexander were two of those who deserted him.

Jesus instructs us not to judge, but then requires that we not give what is sacred to "dogs" and "pigs." On the one hand, we are not to keep a personal record of wrongs. But, on the other hand, we are not to be naive about those who oppose the Lord and the

proclamation of His Gospel. We are not to judge. But we are to recognize that some deserve the label “dog” or “pig.”

In Scripture God calls upon us to exercise discernment. The ability to exercise discernment is a spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 12). Discernment is the ability to form a judgement or to make a decision. In Philippians 1:10, God instructs us to make judgments. We are to discern what is *best*. The Greek word used here is *aisthesis*. This is the only time this word is used in the New Testament. It is the root word for our word “aesthetics.” Aesthetics is the study of that which is beautiful. Paul instructs us to discern what is best, what is beautiful. Why? “So that we may be pure, blameless, filled with the fruits of righteousness” (Philippians 1:11).

Scripture also teaches us to judge others. In Jude 12, Jude speaks of shepherds who feed only themselves. Jude says when they eat with believers at the “love feasts,” they scar the Body. They’re ugly. And they make the Body ugly. Jude describes them as clouds without rain, trees uprooted by the wind, fruitless and dead – “twice dead.” Would it be important for us to know that our “shepherds” are men whom Jude describes as blemishes? Clearly. How can we know if this were true or not? Would it not require us to “judge” those who serve as “shepherds” of God’s flock? How do we form such judgments?

Jesus said, “By their fruit, ye shall know them.” Fruit is the outward manifestation of the inward work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. For example, love, joy and peace should characterize the life of one who has embraced Jesus as Savior and Lord. The lives of believers should be fruitful. Clearly, that should be true of those who shepherd God’s Flock. When there is little, or no fruit, to be seen, we have a right to ask questions and lovingly challenge one another, and especially our shepherds.

Furthermore we are taught in Scripture to judge the spirits. In 1 John 4:1 we are challenged to “test the spirits, and see if they are of God.” John warns us that there are false spirits. As Christians, we are to discern whether the spirit of the one who instructs us is of God or

Satan. Such judgment must be based upon the clear teaching of God's revelation. Like the Bereans, we are to examine the Scriptures to see if what we are being taught is in accord with God's Word.

Basing a judgment on the clear teaching of God's revelation is critical. Our judgments must never be arbitrary. Our judgment must never contradict Scripture. When Scripture warns us about making false judgments, it is warning us about making judgments that are not based upon the Truth. When we judge, we must be judging in the light of God's revealed Truths.

In Matthew 7.1, Jesus says, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged," but we cannot stop reading with verse one. If we read only the first verse of Matthew seven, we will misinterpret the Word of God. In verse two Jesus says, "For in the same way that you judged others, you will be judged, and with the measure that you used, it will be measured to you." If we judge an individual by a false standard, such as our likes and dislikes, our prejudices, our preconceived ideas, we will have no right to stand before God and have Him deal with us justly, for we have not dealt with others justly. When such judgments are necessary, we must make them in the light of God's just standards. Godly judgments are made by exercising minds that have been renewed by the teaching of God's Word. We form judgments with prayerful dependence upon the Holy Spirit in the light of the truths revealed in Scripture.

Secondly, godly judgments are made by carefully considering the evidence. In Proverbs 18.13, we are taught that "he who answers before listening, that is his folly, and that is his shame." Thirdly, we should have two or three witnesses before reaching a conclusion (Deuteronomy 19.15). Fourthly, and most important, we must never take any delight in finding someone at fault. When we "know" that we have been wronged, it should break our hearts, bring us to tears, and never be a source of delight or satisfaction to discover that we were right when we felt ourselves to be wronged.

Furthermore, we must remember that we are a part of His

church. God has given to certain individuals within the church the responsibility to judge the hard cases. Just as God has given to the state the responsibility to use the sword to “punish those who do evil and to protect those who do good,” God has given to his church the final responsibility to make judgments in those difficult and complex cases that involve believers. Just as it would be wrong for us to take the law into our own hands, usurping the responsibilities that God has given to the state, so it is wrong for us to render the kinds of judgments that are the church’s God-given responsibility to make.

In Matthew 18, we find a structure for settling difficult issues that may arise within the church. Allow me to paraphrase for you verses fifteen through seventeen. “If you have good reason to think that your brother has sinned against you, don’t talk to anybody else about it. Don’t talk to anyone but that individual. The only individual with whom you ought to be speaking is the one who you think has sinned against you.” Far too often, we talk to everyone but the one who has offended us, justifying such talk by insisting that all we are doing is seeking “godly advice.”

“You know, I don’t want to talk about this, I hate to bring this up, I hate to mention this, and I’ll hope you’ll understand the context in which I say these things.” Satan is very devious and can fool us into thinking our intentions are good. “We may not have any hard evidence, but we’re not simply spreading rumors and innuendos about others when we express our ‘concern’ for what we think they’ve done.” In fact, of course, by the spreading of such rumors and innuendos we are slandering our brother or sister in the Lord.

Remember, God required in Deuteronomy 19.15 that there be two or three witnesses to prove a charge brought against another individual. If our judgment is our own, and we do not know of any other believers who agree with us, we better rethink our judgment. The principle of God’s Word is that no charge is to be brought against anyone unless two or three witnesses can testify to the facts of the case. Evidence is what you can taste, touch or see. It’s not, “I

think” or “I feel.” Evidence is something concrete, and God's law requires two or three witnesses who agree concerning the evidence.

David listened to the accusation of one man, Ziba, concerning Mephibosheth. David chose to believe what Ziba was telling him. Humanly speaking, David's “belief” was understandable. David was fleeing for his life, his kingdom was crumbling before his eyes, his own son was in rebellion against him. It seemed as if the whole world had turned against him. Things were collapsing all around him. Now here stands Ziba, and Mephibosheth is not with him. David wants to know, “Where is Mephibosheth?” And Ziba tells him, “Mephibosheth is waiting in Jerusalem for the crowds to come and proclaim him, as grandson of Saul, the rightful King of Israel.” David believed him.

In God's holy law David had been taught that an accusation must be confirmed by two or three witnesses. Still, David believed what he was told because of the circumstances he faced. Because of the pressures he was under, he believed what Ziba told him.

If you think that your brother has sinned against you, you go to him and talk it over. Hopefully that will settle the issue. Go to him in great humility, because you might be wrong. But, if you remain convinced that your brother is in sin, and he has not responded positively to your visit, then go back to him, taking with you one or two others. Again, you talk it over and hopefully that settles the issue. Either you're persuaded that you were wrong, or your brother responds positively to your loving concern, confesses his sin and repents of his wrong doing.

If that doesn't settle the issue, then Jesus instructs us to bring it to the church. We are to bring it to that body which governs the church. We are to present our concerns, to present the testimony of two or three witnesses, and hear our brother's defense of his actions.

This is serious business. The accuser can be disciplined by the court if their accusations are found to be without warrant. If the governing body of your church – in my case, the Session – finds the accused guilty of the charges brought against him, they will call upon him (or her) to confess and repent. If he does, that's

wonderful. He may still need to be disciplined for the sake of his own soul, the testimony of the church and the cause of Christ. But if his confession is genuine, he will respond positively to the church's admonition.

If he doesn't confess and repent of his sin, the church may choose to admonish him, but they will probably either suspend his rights as a communicate member or excommunicate him if he stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the authority of the church court.

Church discipline can be terribly misunderstood and abused.

We discipline our children because we love them. We don't discipline our children because we hope they'll jump up, run out the door, leave and never come back. In love we discipline our children because we want them to learn to discern wrong from right, evil from good--praying for the day when they will freely choose right over wrong, good over evil.

Likewise, the exercise of church discipline is never for the purpose of driving someone away. The purpose of discipline is always to bring the individual to his senses — to his supernatural senses, if you will. The objective is always to win him back to the ways of the Lord.

Your brother sins against you, you go to him, you talk to him. If that doesn't work, you go back with two or three others. If that doesn't work, then you have to bring it to the church. Obviously, to do things God's way takes time. Church discipline is a lengthy process. It can take weeks, if not months, to be properly accomplished. I suggest that God has given us this pattern to teach us to proceed slowly and carefully. Quick judgments are almost always wrong and have a greater chance of being contrary to God's desires. Jonathan Edwards offers us the following words of instruction:

When we don't have overwhelming proof for judging ill

of someone, then we will be very cautious in doing so, we will go no further in that judgment than the evidence demands, and we will think the best that the nature of the case will admit. And we will put the best possible construction on the words and the actions of others. And when we are obliged, because of the evidence to believe that someone is guilty of sinful behavior, we will take no pleasure in saying so, but will be reticent not to speak of it to anyone. And when we do speak of it to someone, we will do so only when a sense of duty to God requires it.

We must appreciate just how much God hates for us to keep a careful and permanent record of how we have been wronged. Some have a list as long as their arm. It's a detailed list. They can tell you everything you want to know, and many things you don't care to know, about how someone has wronged

them – be it yesterday, last week, last month, last year, or twenty years ago. They remember every detail.

God hates that kind of behavior. God hates for us to keep a careful and permanent record of how we have been wronged. God speaks to us these words of admonition in the fiftieth Psalm:

You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit. You speak continually against your brother and you slander your own mother's son. These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face. Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue you. (vs. 19-22)

God asks those He addresses directly in Psalm 50: "Do you want me to deal with you as you deal with others?" And then He warns: "If I do, I will come and tear you to pieces."

Paul writes in Titus 3.1-3, "Remind the people . . . to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men." Paul instructs us to show true humility to all, and not just to those we think deserve it. Peter writes, "Rid yourselves of *all* malice, and *all* deceit, and *all* hypocrisy, and *all* envy, and *all* slander of every kind" (1 Peter 2.1). God wants us to love as we have been loved. He wants us to display a Christ-like love. He wants us to love with a love that keeps no record of wrongs.

When you are required to render judgment, do so without hypocrisy. Do so in the light of God's truth. Remember to put the best possible interpretation upon what others do or say until you have overwhelming proof to the contrary.

We must forgive as we have been forgiven. We must love as we have been loved. We must love with a love that keeps no record of wrongs.

- Chapter Nine -

LOVE DOES NOT DELIGHT IN EVIL BUT REJOICES WITH THE TRUTH

1 Corinthians 13.6

When the twin towers fell, the news commentators described what had happened in lower Manhattan as evil. I'm not sure they knew what they were saying. I wonder if they considered the implications of their suggestion that in this world there is such a thing as evil. But their analysis was correct. On 9/11, for one terrible, wicked moment, we were reminded that evil is both a meaningful adjective and a proper noun.

If asked to name the most wicked and evil deed of human history, many reading this book might suggest that it was Judas' betrayal of Jesus, the Friend of sinners betrayed by a friend for thirty pieces of silver. What Judas did was evil.

Evil. Wickedness. They've been a part of our world since the fall. They will continue to be a part of our world until our Lord returns.

When we consider the horror of evil, it should sober us to hear Paul reminding us in 1 Corinthians 13.6, "Love does not delight in evil." Why does Paul think it necessary to encourage *believers* not to delight in evil? We're not terrorists. Our name isn't Judas.

Perhaps Paul exhorts us to remember that "love does not delight in evil" for the same reason James is compelled to tell us that "the tongue . . . is a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of . . . life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3.6). In Romans 6.12-13, Paul exhorts us "to not let sin reign in [our] mortal body so that [we] obey its evil desires. [To] not offer the parts of [our] body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer [ourselves] to God."

Evil or wickedness is the antithesis of righteousness. The Greek word for righteousness is *dikaios*. The word used in the verses above is formed by adding

the negative prefix “a”. Wickedness, or evil, *adikaios*, is the negation of righteousness.

By grace through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord we are declared righteous. We are not saved by doing what is righteous, but by the righteousness of Jesus, exhibited in His life and death, and validated by His resurrection from the dead.

Being righteous, we are commanded and empowered by God to live righteously. That is, we are to do what is right. Which means, of course, that we are to live as God commands and empowers us to live. The grace that saves us is the grace that enables us to follow a pattern of behavior that conforms to His revealed Word.

We are not saved by living righteously. But if we have been saved by grace through faith in the Righteous One, we will eagerly desire to be like Him. We will passionately desire to live righteously.

It's not automatic. We must choose to “offer [ourselves] to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the part of [our bodies] to him as instruments of righteousness” (Romans 6.13). And this we can do because “sin shall not be [our] master” (6.14). We aren't saved by obeying the law, but by grace we are eager to do what is right as defined by God's holy law.

God loves us. He has redeemed us. He declares us to be citizens of His kingdom and members of His family. He assures us that He will be with us always, and that nothing can ever separate us from His love. He tells us that He will be at work within us so that we can both will and do what is pleasing to Him. He promises us that we can overcome the temptations of the evil one (I Corinthians 10.13).

We fail often. We are capable of wickedness, of choosing to do what is evil, of doing those things that are contrary to God's revealed will. We may not be terrorists. Our name may not be Judas.

But we still sin. We still do what is evil. We are still, at times, guilty of wicked deeds.

John tells us that if we claim to be without sin, we are liars. John also tells us if we will confess our sin to the Lord, He will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (I John 1.8-10). And then, as His children, forgiven anew, we will strive in the strength that He provides to “walk as Jesus did” (I John 2.6).

This is what Paul is encouraging us to do in 1 Corinthians 13. He is describing for us the more excellent way, the way of love. We are to love the Lord with our whole being. We are to love others as we love ourselves. We are to love as we have been loved. In verse six of 1 Corinthians 13 Paul teaches that such love does “not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.”

If we love God, and therefore our neighbor, we will not delight in evil. Paul writes in Galatians 5.16-17, “[If you] live by the Spirit, you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit, what is contrary to the sinful nature.” In verses nineteen through twenty-one he tells us to avoid the obvious works of evil, such as “sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.” Paul warns “that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

That’s sobering. “Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” To embrace with unrepentant zeal any of these vices demonstrates a lack of love for God and others. If we love God, why would we deliberately choose to live in a way that displeases Him? And if we love others, why would we deliberately choose to live a life that discourages them from taking seriously the Word of our Lord?

Gratefully, we read in verse sixteen: “Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” We do not have to live lives controlled by sin. We have the supernatural ability to live

free of sin's power, by living "by the Spirit." That's great news because the sins Paul lists in verses nineteen through twenty-one dishonor God, play havoc with our lives, harm others, and threaten us with eternal damnation. By God's grace, we do not have to live under sin's control and suffer its consequences.

We are children of God. The Spirit of God is within us. By God's grace we have been saved. By God's grace we have been gifted with the supernatural power and ability to live as image bearers of Jesus Christ. We can love God and others with a love that does not delight in evil. We can, by God's grace, live "by the Spirit."

To live "by the Spirit" means, in part, to live knowing that the Spirit of God is at work within us so that we both will and act according to God's good purposes (Philippians 2:13). God the Father sends God the Spirit into our lives, and He empowers us to live lives that blossom with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

By God's grace we can live lives that He can use for His glory to impact the world around us. Our lives can reveal to others that we are citizens of heaven and ambassadors of the King. God grants us the most profound credentials to validate our citizenship and calling – the supernatural ability to love others as God has loved us. This love for God and others turns the world right-side up.

Several years ago at a meeting of my Presbytery, a man I will call Jonah, a Pakistani by birth, reported on his work as a missionary to the Muslims of his homeland. I found it hard to believe the things he told us. In Pakistan it is illegal to preach the Gospel, and anyone who converts to Christianity is threatened with death. As he spoke, he pulled from his pocket a piece of paper and read for us some news that he had just received about four members of his congregation. Two months before, they had been killed by Muslims because they dared to publicly profess faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

As Jonah spoke to us about his people and the things they were suffering for the cause of Christ, his *love* for both his fellow Christians as well as his fellow Pakistanis, the *joy* he was experiencing in knowing that those who had died had fought the good fight and had kept the faith, and the *peace* that was his in the midst of a storm, were obvious for us all to see. I'd go so far as to say "his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6.15). Throughout church history, it is this kind of evident faith that God uses to call others to Himself.

The grace that saved us is the grace that enables us. If we have been saved by grace, then we have been enabled by grace. God enables us by grace to do what He wants us to do. God enables us to live as He would have us live. The grace that gloriously saves us, that rescues us from the dominion of darkness and brings us into the kingdom of light, that removes us from the camp of death and brings us into the tents of life, is the same grace that empowers us to both will and do God's good pleasure.

The Holy Spirit, who saved us, empowers us to live as a new creation. When Paul instructs us about the grace that brings salvation to all men, he tells us that "it teaches us to say *no* to ungodliness, and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and holy lives in this present age" (2 Timothy 2.12). Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify us so that we might become citizens of Heaven and serve as His ambassadors in this world. If this is who we are, then we will be eager to do those good works which honor our Father and are used by Him to call others to a saving knowledge of Jesus as Savior and Lord.

To live a life that is focused upon honoring our Father and impacting others with the truth of the Gospel is to live the holy life of which Paul speaks in 2 Timothy 2.12. Saving faith and holy living go hand in hand. By God's grace, we are freed from sin's

condemnation and power. By God's grace, we are freed to live as God would have us to live. This means that we are freed to live lives characterized by "a love that does not delight in that which is evil, but rejoices in that which is true."

The apostle James wrote in James 2:17, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." Think about it. I claim to have exercised faith in Jesus as Savior and my Lord. To exercise faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord means, in part, that I believe what God is telling me in Scripture. I believe Him when He tells me that Jesus died to pay the penalty for my sins. I believe Him when He tells me that Jesus rose again from the dead so that I can live a holy life. This is the Good News that I eagerly embrace.

But not only do I embrace eagerly the message concerning Christ's death and resurrection, I also embrace eagerly the Good News that I am chosen to show my love for Christ by loving others. To exercise faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord means that I am eager to live in obedience to His holy purposes.

If we claim to believe that the teachings of Scripture are true, and claim that we are grateful for the privilege of being able to live our lives in the light of His revealed Truth, but do not strive to live as He would have us to live, the Scripture says we may well be fooling ourselves.

Jonathan Edwards writes that "it is impossible for anyone to receive Christ as a Savior from sin . . . if he is not willing sincerely, in his heart and life, to turn away from all the ways of sin. For he that has not willed that sin and he part, cannot have willed to receive Christ as his Savior — who as Savior saves him from sin's guilt and power."

Jonathan Edwards also writes that "if a man be promised by another that if he part with one dollar he will give him a thousand, and if he claims to be fully convinced of that promise . . . what will he do? He will readily part with one dollar in the assurance of obtaining a thousand dollars." Jonathan Edwards' illustration is

powerful, but outdated due to inflation. The risking of a dollar in Edwards day was a considerable gamble. Most of us would probably be willing to risk a dollar for the possibility of receiving in exchange a thousand dollars. But Jesus asks for us to give Him our lives.

The promise of the Gospel is glorious, but its demands can seem overwhelming. For example, Jesus said in Luke 14.26, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and his sister, yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple." Few can read those words and not sense a disturbance deep within them.

Jesus was a Jewish rabbi speaking to a Jewish audience. In the cultural context of the first century A.D. the use of hyperbole was an accepted form of communication.

We also use hyperbole. You hear a baseball commentator say, "He hit that ball a mile." Obviously the ball didn't travel 5,280 feet. We know that. We know not to take such a statement literally. We know what it means. It means the batter hit the ball hard, and it went far up into the third deck. We know that the speaker is using hyperbole to make his point.

Jesus is using hyperbole to say to His audience, "You must not love anyone more than you love me. You must not desire to please anyone more than you desire to please me. Doing what I command must be your highest joy and greatest delight. In comparison to your love for Me, your love for others will seem like hate."

The demands of Jesus Christ are radical-- far more radical than simply asking if we're willing to risk a dollar for the possibility of receiving in exchange a thousand dollars.

But not only are His demands radical, His promises are radical as well, and they are far more significant than receiving a thousand fold return on our investment. For example, Jesus says in Matthew 6.33, "Seek first the kingdom and his righteousness," and if you do, "all of these things will be added unto you." The demand is radical:

above all seek first to live as a citizen of heaven by living a life that reflects our King's righteousness. The promise is equally radical: if you do, then all your needs for food, clothing and shelter will be met.

When I get to heaven, I'm going to tell Peter, "I'm glad you were there to say all those things I was thinking." For example, in Mark 10 Peter says to Jesus, "We have left everything to follow you." Have you ever felt that way? In Mark 10.29 Jesus says to Peter, "I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel, will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields — and with them persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life."

We know that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trusted in the Lord. Nebuchadnezzar told them, "If you refuse to bow down to this golden idol that I have set up for all to worship, I'm going to throw you into that furnace that I've made seven times hotter than normal." They responded, "King, please hear what we have to say. Our God is able to deliver us from that furnace. But even if He chooses not to deliver us from that furnace, we are not bowing down to your golden idol" (Daniel 3.16-18). We know that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego trusted the Lord by what they said and refused to do, no matter what the cost.

We also know that Daniel trusted God. The king issued a decree that no one was to petition anyone but himself for the next thirty days, and if anyone petitioned someone other than the king during the next thirty days, he would be thrown to the lions. So what does Daniel do? Daniel went home, opened his window, and prayed to the Lord (Daniel 6). We know Daniel trusted God by what He did.

We know Peter and John trusted God. The Sanhedrin, the high court of Judaism, commanded them not to preach in the name of Jesus. This is how they responded: "Gentlemen we respect the office that you hold, but we must obey God rather than man" (Acts 5:29,

paraphrase). And then as soon as they left the courtroom, they continued to preach in the name of Jesus.

You may never face the kind of circumstances that confronted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, or Daniel, Peter and John. But if you love Jesus, your love will be evident. For you will live a life that demonstrates what it means to rejoice in the truth of God's Word as you strive in the strength He supplies to keep His commandments.

Love rejoices in the truth. Love loves the truth revealed to us by Him who first loved us. God and His Word are the objects of love's affection.

What you love is made clear by what you do. If you love money, you do what you must to get it. If you love honor, you do what you must to gain it. If you love pleasure, you do all you can to experience it.

If you love God, you eagerly strive to please Him by doing what He commands. If you want to impact others with this Gospel that you claim has so radically changed your life, then you must understand that your actions will speak louder than your words. Jesus said, "They will see your good deeds and will praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5.16).

Evangelism should be the natural consequence of living lives that makes clear to others our eagerness to live as God would have us to live. If this is how we live, people will ask, "What gives? What's with you? Why do you do the things you do? Why don't you do the things we do?" As Jonathan Edwards wrote over 250 years ago: "A wise man will not trust the profession of another, except he sees the trial and the proof of it in his behavior."

If we have genuinely repented, confessed and turned away from sin, no longer delighting in evil, we will live holy lives. In 2 Corinthians 7.11 we are told that those who repent experience a

godly sorrow. Godly sorrow is an earnest longing to be right with God, an eagerness to be free of sin's guilt, a hatred of sin, a healthy fear of sin, a deep desire to be free of sin's power, and a willingness to have God do whatever it takes to recreate us as image bearers of Him.

A man who genuinely repents is a man who has been genuinely humbled. He is humbled before God. "God, I know that You know what is best for me. I will no longer rest in my own arrogance and pride. I will embrace the Word You have spoken. I will delight in Your truth because it is true truth. I will rest in Your love. I will take You at Your word. In your strength, I will live as You would have me to live because I believe that You love me and want only what is best for me."

He will also be humbled before others. He will consider others more highly than he does himself. Instead of being self-centered and concerned about protecting his right, he will be considerate of others and concerned about doing all he can to serve them. He will live content with knowing who he is and Whose he is. He will be marked by a calm and quiet spirit.

Such humility is essential if we are to live holy lives. To live holy lives we must fear God. I feared my father. I knew he loved me. But I was in awe of him. I was humble before him. I knew that he was in charge. And I knew that he loved me too much to let me get away with doing what was sinful and wrong. I knew that he would punish me if I transgressed his rules. I never doubted his love, but I was in awe of him, and most of the time I was eager to please him.

We are to tremble before our heavenly Father. We are to fear Him. We aren't scared of Him. We know He loves us. But we are in awe of Him. We are humble before Him. We know He's in charge. And we know He loves us too much to ignore our sin. We know He will discipline us. We know that His discipline is seldom pleasant. So we fear Him, just as a son fears the father who loves him. And, by God's grace, we are eager to please Him.

In Proverbs 8.13 we are told that "the fear of the Lord is to hate

evil." In Genesis 42:18 Joseph testified that he feared God. But, as demonstrated by his life, it was the fear of a son for a loving father. In Gen 39:9, Joseph said the reason he wouldn't allow himself to be seduced by Potiphar's wife was because he wasn't willing to do such a wicked thing and sin against God. Joseph feared God. And therefore he did not want to do anything that would offend him. Obviously, Joseph did not want to face God's judgment. But neither did Joseph want to offend the God he loved, for Joseph's fear of God was the fear of a son for a loving father, not the fear of a servant for a tyrannical master.

In today's culture we have lost our fear of God. Even within evangelical circles, it is not popular to talk about fearing God. We're supposed to talk only about "loving Jesus." Well, who do you think this One is that we are to love? He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. This is His world. He created it. He makes the rules, and His rules are good — the best of all possible rules. The one thing that He will not tolerate is being made a fool of. But some of us live as if He were a fool, as if He didn't know what we were up to, as if He didn't know what we were saying or failing to say; as if He didn't know what we were reading, watching, listening to. We're not worried about God punishing us because we have no fear of God. Since we have no fear, we sin fearlessly.

Why did I obey my father? I obeyed my father because I loved him. I obeyed my father because I feared him. He wasn't to be trifled with. I knew that, and I properly feared him. My fear of him did not negate my love for him. Often I did what he wanted me to do because of my love for him. But when I was tempted to ignore his instructions, there was also that healthy sense of fear that helped keep me in line. A friend shared with me this description of the practical consequences of fearing God: "The fear of God is that state in the heart of a believer in which the smile of God is his greatest delight and the frown of God his greatest dread."

As a boy it was my responsibility to cut the grass. I often waited until the last couple of hours before Dad got home from work to do

what I knew I was expected to do. I cut the grass because I feared his displeasure. But there were those occasions when I cut the grass knowing that when Dad got home he would be pleased.

Yes, at times I do what I know I'm supposed to do because I fear God. I don't want to experience His displeasure. But there are also times, thank God, when I do what I know He would have me to do for the sake of His good pleasure.

Holy living results from the fact that we're thankful. No man can be truly thankful to God for His grace, mercy and love, and yet live a consistently wicked life. The Scriptures reveal to us God and His truth. We delight in Him and His truth because through His Word He teaches us how to live. Scripture doesn't teach us simply how to survive. It teaches us how to live the best of all possible lives.

Several years ago, during my devotional reading, I was deeply affected by the words of Isaiah 48.17: "I am the Lord [ask yourself if you believe this to be true] who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go." Then, in the next two verses, He says:

If you would pay attention to my commands, then you shall have peace like a river and righteousness for you will be like the continuing waves of the sea. And your descendants [your children, and your children's children, and your children's children's children even unto a thousand generations] will become like the sand, like its numberless grains, and their names will never be cut off, and they will never be destroyed from before me.

Why? Because of the promise of verse seventeen: "I am the Lord your God, and I teach you what is best for you."

Do we believe that all God wants for us is the very best? You must answer this question for yourself. It's a question that you need to answer before facing the world's allurements. It is a question that

cannot be answered easily in the heat of the moment. If you wait until the heat of the moment, you'll probably come up with the wrong answer. Joseph's decision not to go to bed with Potiphar's wife was made long before the moment of temptation arose.

Do you believe that God wants for you only what is best? Do you believe that the righteousness God revealed in His word is the blueprint for living the best possible life you can live? If the answer is yes, that's saving faith. Faith is not simply believing that Jesus Christ died on the cross to save you from your sins. That is but the beginning of faith. What demonstrates the reality of whether you have truly exercised faith is whether in the living of life from day to day you exercise a faith that demonstrates that you believe God only wants for you what is best.

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, and a bad tree bears bad fruit, and a good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. (Matthew 7.16)

Jesus says in John chapter 14, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me." Jesus also teaches that anyone who loves Him, will obey His teachings, and that those who do not love Him will not obey His teachings. Paul writes in Ephesians 5.5-6, "No immoral, impure, or greedy person— such a person is an idolater— has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient." In Romans chapter eight Paul writes: "If you live according to your sinful nature, you will die, but if by [the power of the Holy Spirit] you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live."

I know that there are those of you who will read this and say, "If I judged myself by the standards that you are setting before us . . ." Let me stop you right there. I'm not setting before you any standards. I am setting before you the Word of God.

Some of you are saying, "If we judge ourselves by these particular standards, and we examine the way we live, then we must condemn ourselves for we fail so frequently and so often wander away from God. At times it scarcely seems that we can possibly be one of His children." There is not a believer who does not understand such thoughts.

Examine yourself in this light. Do you find your sins and your failures loathsome, grievous and humbling? Do you dread the idea of sinning? Joseph said, "How can I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's told Nebuchadnezzar: "We will not [bow down to your statue] because our God can deliver us from that furnace, but even if He chooses not to deliver us from that furnace, we will not willfully break His law." When Daniel was told he could not pray, he went right home, opened his window, and prayed.

Again, let me ask you: Do you find your sinful failures loathsome, grievous, and humbling? Do you dread the idea of sinning? Do you love the way of holiness? Do you hunger and thirst after righteousness? Do you strive to live a holy life? Do you love being with people who genuinely love the Lord? Do you love those all around you who are lost in the darkness of sin?

If you do, then God is at work within you. If you don't, you need to examine yourself further to see if you are a citizen of the Kingdom, a member of the family, a child of the King.

I'm not a morning person. I don't have my devotions in the morning because it would be close to a waste of time. But one thing I do almost every morning while in the shower is focus upon the idea that this is the day that the Lord has made; therefore, I will rejoice and be glad in it, and by God's grace I will strive in the strength that

He supplies to both will and do His good purposes.

As the day progresses, do I sin, displeasing the Lord and injuring others? Of course. But by God's grace I confess my sin and repent of my rebellion. God forgives me, wipes clean the slate, and allows me to start over. That's one of the greatest things about being His child. He is always willing to forgive and allow us to start over.

Holy living is not something that just happens. It is something that you must determine to do. It is something you are supernaturally empowered to do. Do you desire to know how God would have you to live? If you can honestly answer, "Yes," your life will evidence the fact that God is graciously at work within you, for the grace that saves also enables. That is the only kind of grace there is. Though you may fail, and we all fail daily, with Jesus there is always a new beginning. If you love God, then you will love Him even as you have been loved, which means, at least in part, that you will take no delight in that which is evil but will rejoice with the truth.

- Chapter Ten -

LOVE ALWAYS PROTECTS

1 Corinthians 13.7

“Grandpa, are you wearing your seat belt?” There's nothing quite like the innocent challenge of a grandchild. Especially when her only concern is for your safety. And that's because she loves you.

We do our best to keep our grandchildren safe. At first, when they rode in the car with us, we placed them in car seats that faced backward. After a few months they were allowed to see where we were going. Then, when old enough and big enough, they sat on the “big people's” seat. All the years of training pay high dividends. They all instinctively strap themselves in the moment they sit down in our car.

As they approach their middle teens, we'll watch their parents teach automotive safety. And when we know they're leaving their homes with keys in hand – we'll fall on our knees and pray.

When we were the parents, we were concerned to protect and provide physically for our children. We worked hard, by God's grace, to put food on their tables, clothes on their backs, a roof over their heads, and a fence around their lives. We also attempted to protect them spiritually from the evil one and his devices by teaching them the eternal truths of God's revealed Word, telling them again and again the good news of the Gospel, instructing and training them to live as followers of Jesus Christ. We tried hard, in the strength God provided, to show them what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Because we loved them, we strove to protect and to provide for them.

We tried to love them as God loves us. As our Father, God “always protects” (1 Cor 13.7) His children, physically and spiritually. Physically, He protects them from want by providing what they need. Spiritually, He protects them from sin's curse and power by

delivering them from the dominion of darkness (Col 1.13) and providing them with the supernatural ability to love as they have been loved.

In 1 Corinthians 13.7 Paul teaches that “love always protects.” The word *protect* is a translation of the Greek word *stego*. It was a word used to describe a roof that protects those beneath it from the rain. Homer used this word to describe a ship that was water tight, thus protecting its cargo and passengers from the wind and waves. This is the word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 13.7. “Love always protects.”

Paul practiced what he preached. He was willing to go without pay to protect from evil God's reputation, the truth of the Gospel and the believers at Corinth. Paul knew he had a right to draw a salary as a preacher of the Gospel. Just as a farmer has a right to eat a portion of what he has harvested (1 Cor 9.10), so a preacher has a right to earn a living from preaching and teaching God's Word. But in 1 Corinthians 9.12 Paul reminds the Corinthians that he did not exercise this right. The towns and villages of the Empire were visited frequently by professional “lecturers.” They hoped their reputation and eloquence would attract a large crowd that would be impressed by their speech and would generously show their appreciation when the plate was passed. (These people are still around. You can hear them on the radio. You can watch them on television. Their tactics haven't changed all that much in 2000 years.)

Paul knew that some believed this was his game. They accused him of preaching the Gospel so he could take up an offering and make off with the money. This is why Paul would not accept a salary from the Corinthians. He told them, “[I'm willing] to put up with anything rather than hinder the Gospel of Christ” (1 Cor 9.12). To protect the glory of God, the message of the Gospel, and those to whom he preached, Paul was willing to go without pay. He loved the Corinthians so much he wasn't willing to do anything that might discredit in their minds the truth of the Gospel. He loved God

so much, he wasn't willing to do anything that would give people justification to slander the Name of the Lord. He was willing to go without pay if that's what it took to protect the integrity of the Gospel, the glory of God, and the temporal and eternal welfare of the Corinthians.

Paul's love for His Lord and the Corinthians was a love that always protects.

Culturally, we are taught to live independently. The American mantra has become: "It's my life, and I'll live it the way I want to live it. Nobody can tell me what to do! Nobody writes the rules for me!" It is a philosophy and lifestyle that Satan finds quite commendable. But it is not the pattern set forth in Scripture. Christians are a part of the church of Jesus Christ. There is no such thing as an independent believer. Believers are dependent upon the Lord and interdependent upon one another. They are part of one body, members of His Body. Believers neither live unto themselves nor die unto themselves. What they do impacts their brothers and sisters in the Lord. How they live directly affects the unbelievers with whom they rub shoulders. Even more significantly, what they do impacts the cause of the Gospel and the reputation of their heavenly Father.

We often fail to appreciate how our words and deeds impact the response of others to the message of the Gospel. And this is true even of those things we think are private matters. We should be asking these questions: "What I am about to do, if others find out about it? Will it hurt them? If others find out about it, will it raise questions in their minds about the validity of the Gospel? If others find out about it, will it bring disgrace upon the Name of my heavenly Father?"

If we don't care enough to ask such questions, then we need to re-examine the reality of our professed relationship with Jesus Christ. Scripture teaches that love always protects. Always. It protects against evil. It protects that which is true. It protects the glory, honor, and praise of our heavenly Father. It protects the

integrity of the Gospel. It protects those to whom the Gospel is proclaimed.

Therefore, we must ask ourselves: Is it important to us to know our lives provide no justification for others to conclude, "If this is how followers of Jesus talk and act, then this Gospel of theirs can't be worth much"? Are we willing and eager to do whatever we can to protect the glory of God, the truth of His Gospel and those whose lives are directly impacted by our words and deeds?

Once more, think about Moses atop Mt Sinai in Exodus 32.

The children of Israel, encamped at the foot of the mountain, became restless. They wanted a god they could see. They asked Aaron, Moses' brother, to make a god for them. Aaron took their jewelry, melted it down, and formed a golden calf. Before the calf the Children of Israel gathered to worship. They praised the calf for their deliverance out of Egypt and before it they participated in illicit and immoral rituals.

As Moses started down the mountain, God told him what Israel had done.

The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down because *your* people whom *you* brought up out of Egypt have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and they have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it, sacrificed to it, and have said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."
(Exodus 32.7, emphasis added)

God told Moses what He intended to do. "I have seen these people, and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them, that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

Moses' first concern was to protect God's integrity. "Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. 'O Lord,' he said, 'why should your anger burn against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?'" (vs. 11). In verses seven and eight God called them Moses' people and gave him credit for delivering them out of Egypt. It seems God was testing Moses, and Moses passed the test with flying colors. He knew they weren't his people and that he wasn't the one who delivered them from the land of slavery. They were God's people, delivered from the bondage of Egypt by the Hand of God.

In verse twelve Moses voices His concern:

Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?' Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on *your* people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom *you swore by your own self, 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. I will give your descendants all this land I promised them and it will be their inheritance forever.'*

Here's the gist of Moses' prayer: "O God, why should You do what will drag Your Name through the mud? I'm not denying the sin of these people. I'm not denying the horror of what they have done. But if You rain down destruction upon them, then Your name will become a mockery. The Egyptians, who have seen Your power, will think of You as cruel and capricious. They will talk about how You brought the children of Israel out into the desert for the purpose of destroying them. O Lord, do not let such a thing take place. Do not let Your Name be dishonored. Don't give Your enemies an excuse to question Your wisdom and love."

Because of Moses' love for God, he was eager to protect His

Lord's good Name.

Moses also loved the Israelites. ““Please forgive their sin — but if not, then blot me out of the book that you have written” (Exodus 32:32).

What would you do if you were Moses? God tells you the people you led out of Egypt are worshiping before a golden calf whom they credit with their deliverance from the land of bondage. Their worship is both immoral and illicit. What do you do? I'm afraid that my initial response is simple: “Burn 'em!”

But Moses loves them with a love that always protects. He was concerned to protect not only God's glory but also the people's welfare. Moses tells the Lord, “To protect Your glory, hold me responsible for their sins and blot me out of the book of life. O Lord, forgive them. Wipe away their transgressions, but don't wipe them out. Lord, allow them to start over. Give them another opportunity to serve You.”

When Moses returned to the camp, there were many who suffered judgment and punishment for what they had done. However, God did not wipe them out. He chose, for His own good pleasure, to preserve them.

Look ahead forty years. The children of Israel were about to enter the promised land. Spies were sent to check out the city of Jericho. They came to the house of a woman named Rahab. I'm always stunned by what Rahab says to them. “We know all about you. We know all about the God you serve. We know all about His power, might, glory, and strength. Therefore we tremble at your approach” (see Joshua 2:8-13). Moses' concern at Sinai for God's good Name was richly rewarded. Forty years later, a gentile prostitute, knowing the recent history of the Israelites, testifies, “The Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (Joshua 2.11).

Moses was supernaturally enabled to love as he had been loved. He had been protected by God throughout his life. God had protected him when the Pharaoh ordered that all the male children

of Israel be put to death. God had protected him through his parents' courage and the decision of Pharaoh's daughter to raise him as her own child. Though educated in the courts of Egypt, he was protected by God from unbelief. The woman who served as his nurse was his mother. Day and night she instructed him in the ways of the Lord. Therefore, when he became a young man, he "chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than all of the treasures of Egypt" (Hebrews 11:25).

As a middle-aged man, God protected him again from the Pharaoh's murderous intentions. God brought him under the influence of Reuel, who became for him a godly father-in-law. God provided for him Zipporah as his wife, whose sanctified common sense would one day save his life (Exodus 4:24-26). After his return to Egypt, Moses and his brother Aaron demanded that Pharaoh let God's people go. Again, God protected him. Moses, knowing God's loving protection, responded with protective love for both God and God's people.

What God did for Moses He has done for all His children, including you and me. Over and over again we have known the Lord's loving protection. He has placed food on our tables, clothes on our backs, and a roof over our heads. He has protected us from ignorance and darkness, from sin's curse and power, from the fires of Hell, and from being overwhelmed by the realities of living in a sinful world. In His Word God tells us that life in this world will not be easy, but He promises to be with us always, even until the end of the age, and assures us that nothing will ever separate us from His love. God has loved us with a love that always protects and now calls upon us to love as we have been loved.

Therefore, we must ask ourselves: What is our objective and focus? Are we focused upon protecting others from sin, or do we have little concern for others and what they might think about the

things we say and do? Are we focused upon protecting God's revealed truth, or do we have little concern for how our words and deeds impact the cause of the Gospel? Are we focused upon protecting God's glorious Name, or do we have little concern for how our lives either reveal or hide His glory? Believers will focus upon living a life that glorifies Christ and demonstrates the supernatural wonder of His revelation. They will focus upon living a life that reflects the wonder of who Christ is and the truth of His Gospel. They will focus upon doing whatever they can to draw others unto Him.

Jesus came to protect the glory of His Father by dying on Calvary's Cross, thus satisfying His Father's justice and holiness. Jesus came to protect those who would embrace Him as Savior and Lord from the penalty of sin by dying on Calvary's Cross to pay the debt they owed. Jesus came to protect His Father's glory, to protect His people from sin's curse and power, and to fulfill God's promise to send into the world one born of woman, whose heel the serpent would strike, but Who in turn would crush the evil one's head (Gen 3:15).

Now He calls upon us to love as we have been loved. We are to live a life characterized by a love that protects the Father's glory, the Good News of the Gospel, and those before whom we live as image bearers of Christ. We are to live cognizant that everything we say and do reflects upon the Father and His Gospel and makes it either easier or more difficult for others to hear the words of life.

We must remember we do not live unto ourselves or die unto ourselves. We live dependent upon God and interdependent upon others. As a part of the church of Jesus Christ, we are called upon to love as we have been loved, for the sake of God, His Gospel and others. We can live and love as God commands, not because of who we are, but because of Who He is. We must remember God is at work within us both to will and to do His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12). God gives to us, as members of His Body, the supernatural ability to love with a love that always protects.

Many would claim to love God. Many would claim to be concerned about protecting His glory. But there is a reality that either validates their claims or makes them appear highly questionable. That reality is this: those who love God will love one another.

John said at the end of I John chapter 4, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and yet hates his brother, he is a liar. Anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command, that whoever loves God must also love his brother.” God commands us to love others with a love that always protects.

In Acts 20 Paul is on his way to Jerusalem where he will be arrested and put on trial for his life. He stops on his journey to meet with the elders of the church at Ephesus. Believing he will never see them again, he shares with them some final instructions. He speaks to them about false teachers, whom he describes as wolves. He encourages them to protect the people of the churches in Ephesus from these ravenous predators. “Keep watch. . . . Shepherd the flock. . . . Be on your guard” (vs.28-31).

Paul instructs the elders to protect the people from those who will attempt to draw them away from the truth. The culture of Paul’s day bombarded the people with false ideas and teachings. Nothing has changed in two thousand years. But the wolves of which the apostle Paul speaks are not found outside the church — they are false teachers who claim to be members of the church. Paul tells the Elders of Ephesus, “You must *protect* your people, not just from those who blatantly proclaim what are obviously lies. You must also protect your people from those who teach within the Body false ideas that distort the Gospel. In the end, these are the ones who injure most the Body of Christ.”

Heresies are hard to detect because heretics use Scripture. Most heretics take a particular passage of Scripture, distort its meaning and application, and teach a doctrine that is out of accord with Scriptural truth, but is hard to recognize as heresy

because it is “based” upon a verse of Scripture. Even some so-called Evangelicals distort God’s truth, basing what they say upon a misunderstanding of Scripture. It is our responsibility, in love, to show how they have mishandled the Scripture and have thus weakened the church, undermining its effectiveness. Such heresies and errors bring disrepute on the Name of God.

We are to protect one another from lies. We are also to protect each other from discouragement by, again, speaking the truth in love.

Several years ago a friend called me on the phone. I hadn’t seen him for several years. He lives in St. Louis. He’s about five or six years younger than I am. We carried on a casual conversation for about five minutes. I hadn’t talked to him for over a year. In the back of my mind I was wondering why he had *really* called. Finally, he said, “There’s something I have to tell you.” “What is it?” “I’ve been diagnosed with lymphoma.” I was silent as the reality of his words sunk in. We then spent the next ten minutes encouraging one another. I felt as if I had lymphoma. This is my friend. This is one of my dearest friends in all the world. His pain is my pain. If you were to analyze the conversation — I thought about it afterwards — you would find that it was filled with good theology. Good theology is a logical expression of God’s revealed truth concerning Himself, ourselves, and His purposes for us in this world.

We talked about the fact that while we don’t know what God is doing, we know He loves us and that His purposes for us are always good. We talked about knowing God was going to accomplish more than we could ask or imagine through this lymphoma. It’s not what we would have chosen. It didn’t seem right that my dear friend should have to wrestle with cancer. But the Scriptures clearly teach that our ways are not His ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts.

Good theology. That was the focus of our conversation. Love protects by remembering those truths which are our greatest

defense and encouragement when hurting, discouraged, depressed, beaten, sick, facing death, or just plain tired. A loving statement of what we know is true protects the ones we love.

Of course, there are moments when no words are adequate, moments when all we can do is weep with those who weep. God's truth is still true, but we lack the ability to put those truths into words.

I remember hearing the phone ring and my wife Linda entering my study to tell me that Joe, one of our deacons, had just died. He had been out riding his bike and had suffered a massive heart attack. With two other staff members, I went to see his wife, Carolyn. There weren't words to express the grief and shock we all felt in response to Joe's sudden death. So I didn't speak any words. We just hugged, held hands and wept. That's what is most often needed at such moments. An embrace, a holding of hands, a sharing of tears. Words of good theology would be spoken later. But at this moment it was a time for weeping, not speaking.

It is also our responsibility to protect one another from rumors. Rumors are most often half truths which, in fact, are complete lies. We must not repeat such rumors. We must not listen to those who would share them with us. We must protect one another, not tear one another down.

We must be ready to come to one another's defense against slander and false accusation. People are quick to decide for themselves what somebody meant by what they said or did and then to spread their interpretation as if it were the Gospel. We are to protect one another against slander. We are to protect one another against false accusations.

On occasion, loving others will require that we protect them from their own sinfulness and weakness. Holding people accountable for their behavior is the loving thing to do. It is unloving not to encourage people to take responsibility for their words and actions.

In John 8:11 Jesus spoke to the woman caught in the act of adultery. (We can debate later whether these opening verses of John 8 belong in Scripture.) Jesus' words to her are compassionate and forgiving as well as truthful: "Leave your life of sin." Think about the implications of that statement. Was Jesus asking her to do something that she was not capable of doing? I don't think so. Jesus' command implied that if she would recognize the sinfulness of her former way of living, He would supply her with the supernatural ability to do what He was instructing her to do. By God's grace, she could take responsibility for her life. What He commanded her to do, she could do.

We become physically weak and incapacitated if we fail to eat and drink properly. We also grow weak if we do not exercise. When we purchased a treadmill, I began using it on a fairly regular basis. The physical workout made a world of difference. I would never have believed how much difference the exercise would make in how I felt.

Spiritually, the Holy Spirit provides us with food and drink. By faith we spiritually feed upon Christ's body and drink His blood, knowing that He died to pay the penalty for our sins and procure for us forgiveness, cleansing and renewal. The Holy Spirit also illuminates for us the teachings of Scripture, instructing us in our faith and teaching us how we ought to live. We are given access into the throne room of the Lord where we talk with Him as friend with Friend. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit supernaturally enables us to live as image-bearers of God.

God sovereignly performs all these acts of grace on our behalf. He saves us, instructs us and empowers us. And then He holds us responsible for what we choose to do or choose not to do. We must decide to eat, drink, swallow and digest the "food" that God sets before us. We must also determine to live as God would have us live. We must be willing to experience the pain that comes when we first begin exercising our spiritual muscle, knowing that the more we exercise the stronger we will become. The stronger we

become the better equipped we are to encourage one another in the faith. In love we must hold one another accountable. That's the loving thing to do. Such love is a love that always protects.

I have a group of elders who hold me accountable. They love me. They know the importance of the work to which God has called me. They love the Lord. They are not willing to overlook anything that I do or say that might bring disrepute upon the Gospel and slander the Name of the Lord. They love me enough to protect me from evil.

That is how God has loved us. Here is God's promise: "I'll be here for you." Jesus promised His disciples, "Lo, I am with you always even until the end of the age" (Matthew 28.20). He says to us in Philippians 2.13, "I make you this promise: through the Holy Spirit I will be at work within you so that you might will and do my good purposes." But we must chose to do what God has for us to do. Paul teaches us in Philippians 2.12 that we must understand the implications of our salvation, of what it means for us live as image bearers of our Lord and Savior. We must be eager to understand, as professed followers of Him, how we should live in light of the truths that He has revealed to us in His Word and through the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, we must do so with fear and with trembling, soberly realizing the absolute importance of exercising an obedient faith.

Working out the implications of our salvation is a sobering responsibility. It is not something to be done in a slip-shod manner. Only with prayerful and sober reflection can it be done. A radical commitment is required to protect both God's glory and those He has created in His image. If that is our zeal and fervor, God says, "I've got great news for you. I'm right there with you. I'm at work within you, enabling you to will and to do my good pleasure. But now, you must work out the implications of your salvation, and you must do so soberly, with fear and trembling."

Prior to writing this chapter, I was reading a book entitled, *The Culture of Disbelief*, written by a professor at Yale University. The

author is greatly disturbed by the fact that our culture seems to think religion totally unimportant. He observes that our culture thinks belief in God is an interesting hobby. A hobby is something you choose to do whenever it is convenient. If your hobby is building model airplanes, it's something you do whenever you have the time. A hobby should not dominate and control every aspect of your life – except maybe baseball!

Where did our culture ever get the idea that faith in God is simply a hobby? Perhaps the idea of faith as a hobby came from church people who say they believe in God and yet their faith does not profoundly affect the way they live their lives. Their attitudes, actions, words, and relationships seem to be no better or worse than those who make no profession of faith in God.

This must not be true of those who name the Name of Christ. May no one ever be justified in pointing their finger at us, concluding, “Those people talk a great deal about God, but, obviously, for them, God is but a hobby.” For the believer, God should be a consuming passion. The believer should be filled with a love that protects both God's glory and those who have been created in His image.

Paul and Barnabas took John Mark, Barnabas' cousin, with them on their first missionary journey. When they arrived at the city of Pamphylia, John Mark deserted them (Acts 13.13). A couple of years later, as they were preparing for their second missionary journey, Barnabas thought it wise to have John Mark go with them (Acts 15.36-41). Clearly Barnabas believed John Mark had learned his lesson and was now ready to faithfully work with them in planting new churches throughout Asia. However, Paul objected. “John Mark deserted us in the middle of our first journey. I am not taking him with us on this one.” In the end, their disagreement over John Mark led to a parting of the ways. Paul would choose Silas as his new companion, and Barnabas would take John Mark as his associate. The two new teams went their separate ways.

It is tempting to be critical of this episode: "Their inability to reach a common understanding certainly seems to demonstrate a lack of Christian maturity." I would like to suggest that their disagreement was a *sign* of Christian maturity. If you read carefully Paul's letters, you will hear him express deep love and appreciation for Barnabas. At the end of his life, as he languished in a Roman prison, Paul sent for John Mark to come and minister to his needs. Paul wanted to see, embrace, and talk with John Mark!

Protective love is not a love that tries to cover up the truth. Protective love is a love that speaks the truth *in love*. It speaks that truth gently, with compassion, with a willingness to forgive, but it speaks the truth. Protective love does not avoid the truth to avoid hurting someone's feelings. There may have been momentary tensions between Paul and Barnabas, but they remained good friends, faithfully praying for each other, supportive of the other's efforts to further the cause of Christ. John Mark's feelings may have been momentarily hurt, but significant good came out of the decision made in Acts 15. In the end John Mark became an important part of Paul's efforts to evangelize the Roman world. The words Paul and Barnabas spoke may appear harsh, but they were truthful words spoken in love, and when they found themselves unable to agree, they thought it best to go their separate ways. That was a loving decision. It demonstrated love for each other, love for John Mark, love for the Gospel, and love for God's glory.

The church must, at times, love enough to speak the truth no matter how painful its initial expression might be. To do so is not easy. It requires radical commitment and great maturity. This is one reason why the practice of church discipline has become a rare experience in our day. The scriptures make it clear that God disciplines only those whom He loves. Likewise, the church is to discipline those whom it loves.

In 1 and 2 Corinthians we have the clearest biblical example of church discipline. In 1 Corinthians 5.1 we learn that someone in the church is guilty of sexual sin. Paul gives the Corinthians these

instructions: “Hand this man over to Satan” (v. 5). Many would suggest that doesn’t sound at all loving. But, in fact, it is an act of pure, unadulterated love. “Hand this man over to Satan, so his sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. For the eternal good of this individual, do what must be done to bring him face to face with the reality of his sin, that he might see it for what it is, turn his back on it, and on the day of final judgment hear from God words of welcome and not condemnation. If you love this man, then do what must be done to awaken him to the reality and consequences of his sin. If he is to be spared from those consequences, he must understand his sin and turn from it.”

Today, we define sin as *doing bad things*. Sin is *doing things you shouldn't do*. That's not the biblical definition of sin. In Scripture, sin is offending the Holy God, by Whom and for Whom we were created. Sin is not just doing bad things — putting your hand in the cookie jar and getting caught — sin is the attitude of heart which says, “I don’t care what Mom said about eating cookies between meals,” or saying, “I don’t care who God is or what God would have me to do — I’ll do what I want to do.” This is the heart of sin.

In Romans 7 the apostle Paul tells us, “I had to come face to face with the reality of who I was.” Having come face to face with that reality, Paul cries at the end of this chapter, “Oh wretched man that I am, who can rescue me from this body of death?” Does that sound a little melodramatic? It does if you don’t understand the horror of sin. When Paul recognized sin’s horror, it brought him to the place where all he could do was cry out to God for mercy and grace.

The man in 1 Corinthians five is to be disciplined because he is loved. Paul is hopeful that discipline will awaken him from his sinful slumber and motivate him to cry out to God for forgiveness and salvation. Paul is also concerned for the church. He writes in verse six: “A little yeast works its way through the whole batch of dough.” A sin that is publicly known and yet the church does nothing about it, affects everyone negatively. Such sin begins to undermine the

significance of the Gospel and provides others with an excuse for not living as God commands.

Paul is eager for church discipline to be exercised because of his love for the sinner and his concern for the church. Ultimately, Paul is motivated by his love for Christ and the glory of His Gospel. Sin, publicly known, cannot be allowed to bring disrepute upon the Lord or the great salvation which He has purchased for His people through the shed blood of His Son.

I know of two people in our congregation who came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ because we lovingly disciplined someone whose sin was publicly known. It helped them understand we weren't playing church. They came to realize that for us the call to follow Christ is genuine and radical. Seeing our love for the individual, for the people, and for the Lord, God used that love to break their hearts and bring them to Himself.

When Paul writes a second letter, several months later, he notes in 2 Corinthians 2.7 that the individual who had been disciplined by the church was experiencing genuine sorrow over his sin. He had asked for forgiveness and had demonstrated the fruit of repentance — he had turned away from his former sinful practices and was now eager to follow hard after the Lord. In verses seven and eight Paul instructed the church at Corinth to forgive the individual, reaffirm their love for him, and restore him to the membership of the church. Paul tells the Corinthians that they must not allow him to be “overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (v. 7). The purpose of church discipline had been accomplished. The one who had wandered away from the truth was now ready to be restored to the Body.

Love is the greatest of all God's gifts. The gift of love shows that we have passed from death to life and have genuinely embraced Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The love with which we have been supernaturally gifted is a love that always protects others from their own sinfulness and weakness by speaking to them, with compassion and tenderness, the uncompromising truth of God.

Love's motivation is never self-serving. Love is always motivated by the glory of Christ and the welfare of others. True love is demonstrated, not by ignoring the truth, but by learning to speak the truth in love. Note further, love does not demand its rights. Peter says that love is willing to be wronged. "Live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil, or insult with insult, but with blessing. Because of this you were called so that you might inherit a blessing" (1 Peter 3.8). In chapter four, verse eight, he writes, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." Love always protects the reputation of the Gospel from the slander of heresy and immorality. Love protects the reputation of the Gospel for the sake of God, His name, His glory, and His truth. Love always protects the reputation of the Gospel for the sake of those for whom it will prove to be the Words of Life. And love always protects others, be they fellow believers or people who have as of yet refused to bend the knee.

On June 6, 1944, the greatest armada in human history attacked the shores of Northern France. Nearly two hundred thousand soldiers hit the beaches, thousands upon thousands of whom would not live to see the sun go down. They were there, I'm sure, for lots of different reasons, but they were there for this expressed purpose — to protect you and me. They were there to protect our freedom.

In many ways June 6, 1944, was the end of the war. As soon as the Allies were able to put their forces ashore, even their enemies knew that their defeat was inevitable. There would be some horrendous battles to fight, and many would yet die, but the odds were now overwhelmingly in favor of the Allies, and victory was but a matter of time. On June 6, 1944, the war was won, but the fighting would continue another eleven months. It would not be until May of 1945 that VE day, "victory in Europe day," would be celebrated.

Around the year 30 A.D. Jesus Christ, because of His love for the Father and those for whom He would die, participated in His own D-day. He battled with the forces of sin at Calvary and Satan was defeated. VE day has been a long time in coming. We long for that day of triumph and celebration. But the battle has already been won. Believers have been delivered from Satan's stronghold. The Holy Spirit is at work within them, strengthening, equipping and enabling them to live as God would have them live. We eagerly wait for VE day to arrive and long to hear our Commander in Chief say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servants." But for now, we will, by His grace, live lives characterized by a love that always protects God's good Name, His glorious Gospel, and the welfare of others.

- Chapter Eleven -

LOVE ALWAYS TRUSTS

1 Corinthians 13.7

By faith Abraham believed God. *By faith* Abraham acted upon God's promises.

- *By faith* Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.
- *By faith* he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.
- *By faith* Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. (Hebrews 11.8-12)

God promised Abraham a land and *by faith* he packed up and moved. It took him awhile to get there, but after a few years, having left behind the comforts of home, he found himself camping as an alien in a foreign country. The only portion of this new land he ever “owned” was the cave where he buried his wife. But he believed God. He believed that God would give this land to his descendants as an inheritance.

God promised Abraham and Sarah a son. Twenty-five years after that promise was made, Isaac was born. Several years after

Isaac's birth, God called upon Abraham to offer up his son as a sacrifice. Abraham believed Isaac was the promised son, and that through Isaac God would bless Abraham with countless descendants. *By faith* Abraham headed for Mt. Moriah, to offer up his promised son as a sacrifice to the Lord. As they neared the mountain, Abraham instructed his servants to stay behind, telling them that he *and his* son would both return.

By faith Abraham when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death. (Hebrews 11.17-19)

Abraham believed God. Trusted God. Even to the point of believing and trusting in the Lord's power to raise his son from the dead.

There were also many occasions when Abraham's faith wavered. I find that comforting. We often want to turn these OT saints into super heroes with whom we cannot identify. I like better James Ward's approach. In his song about these OT saints Jim refers to them as being "just like us."

Just like us, Abraham's trust at times wavered, but the overall pattern of his life was one of an obedient faith. The bottom line was he loved God and believed God would keep His promises. The faith and trust of Abraham is like the faith and trust a young child has in her father or mother.

While watching a baseball game on television, I witnessed a wonderful moment. A young child, sitting in the front row, had leaned across the railing and his hat had fallen onto the field. His father picked him up, turned him upside down, held him by his legs, and lowered him onto the field until he was able to get hold of his

hat. His father then lifted him up and over the railing, turned him right side up, and sat him back down in his seat, the child's hat firmly in place. It was wonderful to see the child's absolute trust in his Daddy. Not a moment of hesitation or doubt. "My Daddy knows what he's doing. He'll take good care of me. I trust him." No questions asked.

It is this sort of faith and trust that makes parental abuse so horrible a crime that even those already incarcerated seemingly recognize the depravity of such behavior. Our Father never takes advantage of us. He never abuses the trust we place in Him. God is the kind of parent in whom a child can place his or her faith and trust, without ever having to worry about being betrayed.

As a child I dreaded hearing from my mother these words, "We're going to the dentist this afternoon." But I went, walked in the door without having to be dragged, sat in the waiting room, waited for the nurse to call my name, walked slowly to the chair, sat down, laid back my head, and . . . died. Why did I go to the dentist? Why did I get up into that chair? Certainly not because it was going to be a wonderful and pleasant experience. I went because my mother said to me, "This is what you need to do." My love for my Mother included a huge dose of loving trust. If Mom told me that I needed to go to the dentist, I knew it was what I needed to do.

When he was small, one of my children fell and sliced open his forehead. I took him to the emergency room of the wonderful hospital in our small town. The doctor came in saying, "We have to sew him up." The nurse brought in the "papoose," a board to which the child is strapped so he cannot move. The idea of being tied down and not able to move is far more terrifying to me than stitches. I told the doctor, "He doesn't need that." The doctor said, "Oh, yes he does. When I start this procedure he's going to jump all around and I can't have that." I told the doctor, "He doesn't need that. If I tell him to lie still, he will lie still." The doctor looked at me as if I were crazy. I repeated, "If I tell him to lie still, he will lie still." The

doctor finally agreed to try it my way.

I spoke tenderly, but firmly, to my son. "Son, this is not going to be pleasant. It's going to hurt. But it has to be done. You must lie still. You cannot move." They proceeded to sew him up, and he lay still. He didn't move. Not because it was a wonderful moment in his short life, but because he lovingly trusted his daddy.

In 1 Corinthians 13.7 Paul teaches us that love always trusts. The word for trust is *pisteuo*. It's comes from the Greek noun *pistis*, which is often translated "faith." "Love always shows faith." Faith trusts in the truthfulness of what it believes and acts upon what it knows is true. We love God and therefore we trust Him. When we lovingly trust Him we willingly strive in the strength He provides to do what He tells us to do.

The reason we love Him is because He first loved us. Because of His love for us, which we have experienced in so many ways, we've learned to trust Him. We've learned to take Him at His word. It's not always easy to do.

There's the story of the fellow dangling from the edge of the cliff, hanging on for dear life. He's about to fall into the abyss below when he cries out, "Somebody help me." A voice answers, "I *am* that I *am*. Let go, there's a ledge about six inches below your feet. Just let go!" The guy looks beneath him, but it's too dark to see. He thinks for a moment and then yells, "Is anybody else up there?" He's not willing to let go. I understand that. The only reason he would willingly let go and drop to the ledge just beneath his feet, would be because he recognized the voice of the One speaking to Him, and he knew Him to be both good and trustworthy. To let go might still require great faith and trust, but it wouldn't be a blind leap into the dark. Letting go would be a decision based upon prior experience.

The Lord God Almighty makes himself known to us in various ways. Long before I made my first verbal, public profession of faith, God had shown Himself to me. Long before I clearly understood that He was my Savior, Lord and King, I knew Him. My parents modeled

Him for me and taught me about Him. My Sunday School teachers and pastors revealed Him to me in the unfolding revelation and stories of Scripture. Long before I knew Him, He knew me, and was encouraging me to understand that He was trustworthy and reliable.

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." That's a clear and simple statement. If you love me, the reality of that love will be demonstrated by you keeping my commandments. As the hymn writer reminds us: "Trust and obey, for there's no other way."

The Psalmist instructs us to teach our children to love and trust the Lord. In Psalm 78.4 we read, "We will not hide them from our children; we will tell the next generation" (Psalm 78.4). We will not hide what? What is it we will tell our children and our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren? We will tell them "the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, His power, and the wonders He has done." We should be telling our children about our experiences of God's gracious providence and loving hand in our lives. We should tell them about the things we have seen Him do and accomplish. We should share with them how God has demonstrated to us His power, authority and love.

My Dad rejoiced to share with me the providence of God in his life. He greatly enjoyed telling me how God had protected him as a young boy, having left home at an early age to work for a farmer in north Florida. His eyes would mist when he spoke of the opportunity that came his way to move to Lee County, South Carolina. He met my mother there. He shared with my sister and me on many occasions the means by which he entered the army, moved north after WWII, ended up living in New Jersey, found work with USSteel, and was directed by a neighbor to the church in which my sister and I were raised. From my earliest remembrances, I was aware of "the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, His power, and the wonders He has done."

Mom and Dad also shared with us the horrendous pain and

loss they felt when my brother was killed at the age of six. He was walking home from school, stepped out from between parked cars, and was struck by a truck. I was only three and my sister, Candy, had not yet been born. But we knew of their pain. And we knew how the church had ministered to their needs, how God had brought them through this terribly dark hour. They did not pretend to understand why Lennon Junior was killed. But they demonstrated to us what it meant to trust even when they didn't fully understand. And their lives testified to God's gracious ability to sustain and restore them.

What about your life? Do you understand what the Psalmist is talking about? Do you recognize the ways in which God has shown you His love, providing for your every need? As Americans we have such a warped understanding of what we "need" that we don't appreciate what we have. Few of us are worried about whether there will be a roof over our heads, clothes on our backs, or food on our tables. We lose sight of the number of people in this world for whom those needs are the focus of their daily struggle. Often, they must go without. But that is not true for us. God has freely chosen to bless us materially. When we are blind to the evidence of His love and the trustworthiness of His promises, we fail to love Him as we should and to trust Him to provide for all our needs.

In Isaiah 43.2-3, God promises, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." God has delivered many from literal floods and fires. But here in Isaiah 43 the prophet is speaking symbolically. He is speaking directly to the people of Judah, preparing them for what lay ahead. But his words are applicable to our day-to-day experiences: a sick child, the death of a loved one, financial pressures, personal tensions.

As I write this chapter, my son and his wife are on their way to Vanderbilt Hospital in Nashville. Their four-month old son, John Render

Caines III, will undergo surgery. He was born with Downs Syndrome. He has two holes in his heart, between the upper and lower chambers. He has one heart valve where there should be two. Tomorrow the surgeon will cut open his tiny body, slice open his heart, and attempt to repair these birth defects. At times, I've felt like I was drowning. At times I've felt like my world was going up in flames. But I know God's promise, "I'll take you through. I'll bring you out on the other side."

There are those who feel like they are drowning or that their world is on fire. They don't look to God to rescue them. They don't love Him and aren't concerned about what He says. They're not even convinced He exists. Most certainly they don't believe that He knows best. They are drowning. Their world is on fire. But they have no faith or trust in the One who can deliver them from the deep water and rescue them from the flames.

There are some who are drowning, whose world is on fire, because they like it that way. They don't want to be delivered or rescued. They want to hold on to their excuses. They don't want to believe that God can enable and empower them to live as He would have them to live because if they did, then they would have no more justification for why they live like they do. They don't want the Lord to bless them.

I find interesting Jesus' question to a crippled man in John 5, "Do you want to be healed?" The answer to this question would seem obvious. Well, obviously it's not obvious or Jesus wouldn't have asked it. "Do you want to be healed or have you become so comfortable in your life as a crippled beggar with others supporting you that you really don't want to face the responsibility of suddenly having to provide for yourself? If I heal you, you will be well and strong. When you are well and strong, you will be responsible for your own welfare. So, do you want me to heal you? Are you willing to walk? Are you willing to stand up on your own two feet, to pick up your bed, and be made well?"

Those who do trust Him, know a joy and peace that is beyond understanding, in both good times as well as bad. I still can see my father being wheeled back into his room, waking up from surgery, realizing that not enough time had passed for the surgeons to have done what they had planned to do, and knowing what that meant. The doctors had opened him up and found that cancer had spread throughout his body. There wasn't any reason to operate. After only fifteen minutes they had stopped the entire procedure. It only took Dad's mind a minute or two to clear and to realize what had happened. Mom and I stood there crying. Looking at us he said, "You know, you can cry for yourselves because you're going to miss me, and I appreciate that. I love you. I understand your tears. But don't cry for me, I'm going home." I watched him through the last six months of his life. I never saw him waver in his faith or trust. He lived his final days with calm assurance in the loving purposes of the God He served.

Patricia, a dedicated worker in the pro-life ministry of Chattanooga, is a mother of five. During the pregnancy of her fifth child she developed serious liver problems. Her condition deteriorated to the point where she had to undergo a liver transplant. During the months of waiting for an available liver, I talked with Patricia on many occasions, and there was always a quiet peace and assurance, a quiet trust in the Lord's love for her. "The Lord loves me. I don't understand all of this, but I know He does. My life is in His hands. What more could I ask than that?"

My father and Patricia demonstrate the importance of good theology. Good theology leads to good thinking which results in good living. Bad theology leads to bad thinking which results in bad living. Both my father and Patricia understood that God loved them with a love that would never let them go. Therefore, they could trust Him to do what was best. (As I edit this chapter, ten years later, I want you to know that Patricia is still alive, still active, still serving her Lord.)

God has given to all His children the supernatural ability to love

Him with a love that trusts in His good purposes. By grace we are saved. By grace we are enabled to love as we have been loved. Such love is the evidence of salvation. It is a love that trusts the Lord. The reality of that trust is shown by the individual putting one foot in front of the other, getting on with life, striving to live as God commands, no matter how hot the flames or deep the waters.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus described two men involved in building a house. It seems fair to assume, for the sake of illustration, that they were both given the same instructions. These instructions had a lot to say about the foundation: how it had to be carefully constructed, how important it was that it be deep and strong. To follow these instructions required them to give a great deal of time and effort to laying a solid foundation.

The one fellow got tired just reading the instructions. It seemed like an awful lot of effort. It would obviously require a great deal of time. He just didn't feel like doing all the hard work required to put a strong foundation in place. Furthermore, he didn't believe what he'd been told. He didn't believe the instructions that he had been given. He didn't believe the Architect knew what he was talking about. So he built himself a beautiful house following his own plans. It looked great. It was quite impressive. But then the wind blew, the rain fell and the storm howled, and his house came crashing down.

The other fellow was a simple man. He believed the Architect knew best. He believed the plans, instructions, and directives he had been given were good and could be trusted. So he followed them. He dug the foundation and followed the Architect's plans. It took a lot of hard work and required a lot of time to accomplish, but he stuck with it. At last his house was built. When the rains fell, the winds howled and the floods came, his house built upon the Rock stood firm.

Jesus Christ is the Rock upon which we are to build. His word is the directive, the instruction, the blue print. As a pastor I've talked to many people whose lives were in shambles. In almost every case they were lacking a firm foundation. I've never spoken to anyone

who followed carefully the instructions of the Architect, built their house upon the Rock, were striving daily to live as the Lord would have them to live, but were not experiencing the blessings of God. I've never heard one of them say, "What a waste of time it has been to live as the Lord commands." They had experienced storms and fires, but the Lord always brought them out on the other side and their houses stood firm.

Ahaz was king of the southern two tribes of Judah. He was not a follower of Yahweh. He worshiped the false gods of the northern kingdom of Israel. After breaking away from Judah, the northern ten tribes of Israel set up their own places of worship, established their own priesthood, and worshiped many different gods. Ahaz, though king of Judah, "walked in the ways of the kings of Israel" (2 Kings 16.2).

He also worshiped the gods of other nation. He went so far as to sacrifice his son in the fire "following the detestable ways of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites" (16.3). Impressed by the altar at which the Arameans worship, Ahaz instructed his artisans to copy it and placed it in Jerusalem. Ahaz chose to worship at this pagan altar instead of at the altar in the Temple of the Lord, which he had removed. He also commanded the people to do the same (16.10-16).

When he became king, Jerusalem was surrounded by the armies of Israel and Aram. They were trying to force the young king to become part of a triple alliance to oppose the growing military might of Assyria. One hundred and twenty thousand Judean soldiers had been killed, and two hundred thousand Judean citizens had been taken captive. When the invading armies arrived at Jerusalem, they besieged the city.

At this moment in history, Isaiah was the prophet of Judah. God spoke through Isaiah to Ahaz. God told Ahaz that "it will not take place, it will not happen" (v. 7). God promised Ahaz that the armies of Israel and Aram would not achieve their purposes. God

placed before Ahaz the following challenge: “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.” God instructed Ahaz, “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights” (v.11).

Ahaz should have believed Isaiah and trusted in the Lord. As a descendant of David he should have embraced the theology reflected in Isaiah 8.7: “I have laid in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone that serves as a sure foundation; and the one who trusts in that rock will never be dismayed.” Ahaz should have understood that Mt. Zion, in Jerusalem, was built upon the solid Rock.

However, Ahaz responded to God's instructions that he ask for a sign to confirm for him the Word of the Lord, by telling Isaiah: “I will not ask, I will not put the Lord to the test (Isaiah 7.12).” That sounds good. It sounds theologically correct. “I will not test the Lord. I'm not going to ask for such a sign.” But it wasn't a good response. God commanded Ahaz to ask for a sign. It couldn't be wrong to do what the Lord told him to do. E. J. Young in his commentary on Isaiah writes,

Ahaz's refusal to ask the Lord for a sign indicates a complete lack of trust in the power of God and in the faithfulness of God. *Faith shows itself in obedience; unbelief in disobedience.* Ahaz is a practical man to whom the worship of Yahweh has little meaning. In a time of crisis he is too busy for Yahweh; he would rather follow the dictates of his own practical reason than to walk in dependence upon God.

The “practical” reason that kept Ahaz from doing what God commanded was revealed when he asked the Empire of Assyria for help. Ahaz was convinced that only Assyria could save him and his people. He didn't have time for the ramblings of a mad prophet. He wasn't going to trust in a God he could not see. Instead, he asked the king of Assyria for military assistance.

The king of Assyria granted Ahaz's request. He attacked the

northern borders of Aram and Israel and forced their armies to withdraw from the walls of Jerusalem. It appeared that Ahaz' practicality was paying off. But in 2 Chronicles 28.20 we learn that Tiglath-Pileser, the king of Assyria, came to Judah and gave Judah "trouble instead of help." After he attacked Aram and Israel, he attacked Judah with all the fury his army could muster. And Ahaz's house, built on the sand, began to crumble, and Judah found herself living under an Assyrian thumb.

After Ahaz's death, his son became king. He was Ahaz's son physically but not spiritually. 2 Kings 18.5 tells us that Hezekiah trusted in Yahweh, the God of Israel.

In the third year of his reign, Hezekiah rebelled against the Assyrians. In the fourteenth year of Hezekiah's reign, the new king of Assyria, Sennacherib, attacked the land of Judah because of Hezekiah's rebellion. The situation was awful. Hezekiah's military was impotent. He had no strong allies. His people were bombarded by Assyrian propaganda.

The Assyrian commander stood outside the walls of Jerusalem and he called out in Hebrew, "Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria, this is what the king says, 'Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you from my hand. Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the Lord when he says, "The Lord will surely deliver us. The city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria." Don't listen to Hezekiah. This is what the king of Assyria says, "Make peace with me and come out to me and then every one of you will eat from his own vine and fig tree and drink water from his own cistern.'" (2 Kings 18.28)

To eat from one's own vines and fig trees, to drink water from one's own cistern, was a good thing. It was about as good as life could get. Sennacherib, king of Assyria, promised the people of

Jerusalem a home of their own with land that would provide them with food to eat, water to drink and produce to sell at market. “I [will] take you to a land like your own, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey. Choose life not death” (v. 32).

“Choose life not death.” Those are the very words spoken by God to the children of Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 30.19).

Now they are spoken by the king of Assyria. His promises closely parallel the covenant promises of God. Speaking through his commander, the king tells the people of Jerusalem listening from its walls: “Follow me. If you follow me, you shall live and experience all the good things a man could want. If you don’t follow me, then you shall die. Do not listen to Hezekiah for he is misleading you when he says the Lord will deliver you. The Lord cannot deliver you out of my hands. Look. You are surrounded. Your God cannot deliver you. He cannot rescue you.”

Sennacherib asks them:

Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the Lord deliver Jerusalem from my hand? (2 King 18.33).

Sennacherib says Hezekiah is lying and the Lord is impotent. None of the gods of the other lands he has invaded have been able to resist his armies. Surely “their god” will be no exception.

But, if they will surrender to him, he will take care of them, meet all their needs, and do for them what their god is unable to do.

After listening to all this, it is with great faith that Hezekiah

speaks to Isaiah:

This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when the children come to the point of birth and there is no strength to deliver them. It may be that the Lord your God will hear all the words of the field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words the Lord your God has heard. Therefore pray for the remnant that still survives (2 Kings 19.3).

Isaiah responds:

This is what the Lord says: “Do not be afraid of what you have heard— those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. Listen! I am going to put such a spirit in him that when he hears a certain report, he will return to his own country, and there I will cut him down with the sword” (2 Kings 19.6-7).

Sennacherib responded to Hezekiah's refusal to capitulate with a letter. In part, it read:

Say to Hezekiah, king of Judah: do not let the god you depend on deceive you when he says, “Jerusalem will not be handed over to the king of Assyria.” Surely you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the countries, destroying them completely. And will you be delivered? (2 Kings 19.10-11).

Hezekiah hears the letter read, then takes it to the Temple and spreads it out before God. Hezekiah then prays: “O Lord, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth'” (v.15).

Did you hear that? What Hezekiah says is radical. “You alone are God.” Not simply God of Judah, but God over all the kingdoms

of the earth – including Assyria.

“You have made the heaven and earth. Give ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God.” (vs.15-16)

“It is true, O Lord, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they are not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by men’s hands” (vs.17-18).

Hezekiah now tells God his greatest concern. “O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God” (v. 19). O Lord, act in such a way as to make it obvious to the other kingdoms of the earth that the Lord, alone, is the one true God.

God responded: “I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant” (v. 34). God had made a covenant promise to David (2 Samuel 7). Hezekiah appeals to God to remember those promises. And, of course, He always does.

That night the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. And when the people got up the next morning— there were all the dead bodies. So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and he withdrew, and he returned to Nineveh and he stayed there (2 Kings.35).

And then “one day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisrock, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer cut him down with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat.” (v. 37)

Hezekiah’s faith was in the Lord. He trusted in the Rock upon which Mt. Zion was built. The winds blew, the rain fell, the floods raged — but Jerusalem stood firm because the king trusted in the Lord.

In Matthew chapter eight, a Roman centurion came to Jesus because his servant was paralyzed and suffering. Jesus agrees to go with him.

The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and this one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and He said to his followers, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (vs. 8-10).

Jesus replied to the centurion: "'Go! And it will be done just as you believed it would.' And his servant was healed at that very hour" (v. 13). As he sends the centurion home, Jesus says to those gathered around Him:

I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and they'll take their place at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom [*which is a reference at that point to the citizens of Palestine*] will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (vs. 11-12).

They did not believe in Him. They did not trust Him. The Roman centurion trusted Jesus. The covenant people didn't. They trusted in their wit and in their positions of prestige. Some actually trusted in the strength of the Roman Empire to maintain the status quo. But they did not trust Jesus. They saw the things He did. But they did not believe the things He said. They refused to build their lives upon the

Rock. In 70 AD the winds would blow, the rains would fall, the floods would rage — and Jerusalem would be completely destroyed!

The love described in I Corinthians 13 is supernatural in nature. God has given to His people a supernatural ability to love with a love that always trusts. The object of that trust is God. Love always trusts God. Love trusts God for salvation. Love trusts in the One who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man can come to the Father except through me." Salvation is described in Scripture as an act of re-creation. By faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord we become a new creation. If we are trusting in Jesus for salvation, then we are trusting Him to transform our lives. That transformation does not await our entrance into heaven. That supernatural act of transformation--of re-creation--begins here and now.

Hezekiah faced a tough situation. The Roman centurion obviously cared dearly for his desperately sick servant. And in the midst of these difficult circumstances both Hezekiah and the Roman centurion chose to trust the Lord. So must we. Trust in His goodness. Trust in His wisdom. Trust in His love.

While trusting for salvation and for the transformation of our lives, we must take responsibility for how we live. When Scripture teaches us to trust God, it is not suggesting to us that we become passive, that we "let go and let God." Part of trusting God is understanding that we must daily choose to live our lives as He instructs us to live.

Consider Hezekiah. Hezekiah took steps to cleanse Judah of idolatry. 2 Chronicles 32.1 describes Hezekiah as being 'faithful' to the Lord. Having been faithful to the Lord, he suddenly learns that the Assyrians have invaded Judah and are marching on Jerusalem.

When Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come and that he intended to make war on Jerusalem, he consulted with his officials and military staff about

blocking off the water from the springs outside the city and they helped him. A large force of men assembled, and they blocked all the springs and the stream that flowed through the land. “Why should the king of Assyria come and find plenty of water?” he said. Then he worked hard repairing all the broken sections of the wall and building towers on it. He built another wall outside that one and he reinforced the supporting terraces of the City of David. He also made large numbers of weapons and shields. He appointed military officers over the people and assembled them before him in the square at the city gate and encouraged them with these words: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him. With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battle.” (2 Chronicles 32.2-8).

Hezekiah took steps to prepare Jerusalem for the Assyrians' attack. He had the promises of God. He knew that God would fight for him. But he still prepared for battle. You can almost hear him barking out orders: “Let's prepare the wall where it's broken down; let's put up some towers from which our archers can shoot their arrows; let's strengthen the fortifications; let's block up the spring so that when they get here they won't have any water to drink. Let's do everything we can think of to get ready for battle. And let's do it with this understanding — the battle is the Lord's.”

His father Ahaz had looked to Assyria for military aid. While, humanly speaking, that may have seemed wise, it was an act of disobedience demonstrating Ahaz's lack of trust in the Lord. Hezekiah does what he does believing the Lord will bless His efforts.

Two hundred years later, when the Children of Israel returned

from captivity to rebuild the Temple, we find another example of what it means to trust God and take responsibility for one's circumstances. A few years after the remnant had returned from captivity, they became discouraged and work on the Temple stopped. In response, God raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to encourage the people to complete the task for which they had returned to the land.

The difference in the messages of these two prophets is intriguing. Zechariah told the people that it was their responsibility to rebuild the Temple. But he also told them that “it won't be by *your strength or might* that you will accomplish the task God has given you. *It will be the Spirit of God* who will supernaturally enable you to fulfill the task God has given you” (Zech 4.6, paraphrase).

Haggai stressed the other side of this coin: “It is *your responsibility* to rebuild the temple. Therefore, go up into the hills, cut down the trees, drag the timbers down here and get busy” (Haggai 1.8, paraphrase). Both are prophets of God, and there is no contradiction in the messages they bring.

To trust God for salvation is to trust God for the transformation of my life. Even as I trust God for the transformation of my life, I realize that He has given me responsibility for my life, and that everything I attempt to do must be done through the power and strength that He provides. He commands me to obey Him and obey Him I must. But He also supernaturally enables me to do what is good and pleasing in His sight.

On June 3, 1944, in the hours before the D-Day invasion of France, General Eisenhower sent a message to the troops. His message reflected his understanding that they were dependent upon the blessing of Almighty God if victory was to be achieved. Assuming that his message to the troops was a genuine reflection of his faith, what did Eisenhower do for the six months prior to the invasion? Did he sit back and say to himself, “Well, it's all in the Lord's hands.” Hopefully, he did say that to himself on many occasions, but

he didn't sit back and do nothing. He planned, made preparations and stocked-piled the necessary supplies and equipment. He had his soldiers physically, mentally and tactically prepared to fight the enemy. He had plans drawn up to cover many possible scenarios. Then he reworked those plans, again and again, right up until the moment the ships sailed for Normandy. He did everything humanly possible to guarantee victory. And yet, if his message to the troops honestly reflects his heart, he did what he did with a recognition of his dependence upon the Lord.

Times of challenge and difficulty provide us with opportunities to measure the reality of our faith and trust. Scripture encourages you "to trust in the Lord with all of your heart and to lean not to your own understanding, in all your ways to acknowledge Him and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5-6). At the same time, God holds you responsible for how you choose to live your life.

Here is the bottom line. God promises that we will have the ability to take responsibility for our lives. He promises that we will have the God-given ability to do the right thing, to make the right decisions. He never promises that those things will automatically happen. We have to make a decision. We have to put one foot in front of the other. We have to decide, in the light of God's Word, what is right and what is wrong. We have to determine to do what is right.

As we do all this, God promises: "I'll be right there with you. You can trust Me for eternal life. You can trust Me for this life. I'll give you the power to live this life. I'll give you the power to do the right thing."

There are certain gifts I received as a young child that I remember fondly. One of those gifts was Jetty Boy, a brown and white, medium-size mongrel. He was a present from my parents on my seventh birthday. Jetty Boy was my dog from the time I was in second grade until I left for college. He was and still is, for me, the

ideal dog.

When I was seven or eight I received a piano. Though not as exciting as getting a dog, I have always been grateful for the opportunity to learn to play.

I also remember receiving a set of the World Book Encyclopedia. I was thrilled. Day after day, year after year, I read the encyclopedia and thought it had to be the source of all knowledge.

My junior year in college, my father bought me my first car, a 1963 Ford Falcon Futura, for \$300. I was pumped.

When Linda and I got married, a family friend gave us \$500 to go towards the expenses of our honeymoon. That money helped pay all our bills. (Honeymoons were a much more modest affair in 1968.)

These are the gifts that stand out in my memory. But all of them are nothing in comparison to the greatest gift I ever received. It was, and is, the gift of love. It far exceeds everything else — even Jetty Boy. My parents' love, the love of a sister, the love of an extended family, the love of my children, the love of friends, and the love of my dear, precious wife. But most significant is the astonishing fact that I am loved by God. The Maker of heaven and earth, the Sovereign Ruler of all the universe knows everything about me there is to know, and yet chooses to call me by name and love me as His own.

Furthermore, He has also supernaturally given me the ability to love others. He has even given me the supernatural ability to love those who love me and those who don't. I don't always choose to exercise this love, but He has given me the supernatural ability to love even as I have been loved. God gives to all who are the beneficiaries of His grace, the supernatural ability to love with a love that always trusts in Him.

- Chapter Twelve -

LOVE ALWAYS HOPES

1 Corinthians 13.7

The seventh and deciding game of the 1992 National League play-offs. Bottom of the ninth, two on, two out. The Atlanta Braves trail by a run. Francisco Cabrera is the pinch hitter. He smacks a line drive into left field. It falls in front of the left fielder and the first run scores, tying the game.

But here comes the runner from second. Sid Bream. Not the fastest man on his feet. He's running as hard as he can, but it seems like slow motion.

As Sid rounds third the left fielder scoops up the ball and throws it homeward. It's a good throw, right on line. Sid begins his slide. On one bounce the ball is in the catcher's mitt. I'm on the edge of my seat, hoping.

Hoping. "I hope it doesn't rain." "I hope I get a raise." "I hope that Sid can beat that throw to the plate." We use the word "hope" to speak of things that are neither sure nor certain. We're not sure whether it will rain, but we hope not. We're not sure we'll get a raise, but we hope so. We're not sure Sid will make it home safely, but . . . he did!

Linda and I watched a PBS special about "Lassie." A number of clips of a familiar scenario repeated again and again in various episodes. Lassie is faced with a dangerous situation. Timmy is worried. His mother tells him to hope for the best and everything will be fine. As little Timothy squints up his eyes, tightens his facial muscles, and clinches his fists, you could almost hear him saying, "I hope, I hope, I hope." Of course, in the end everything is fine.

"Lassie" is a delightful escape from "the real world." All that a little boy has to do is squint up his eyes, tighten his facial muscles,

clinch his fists, and hope with everything in him that everything will turn out all right – and it does.

We all know that's not the way it is. But I *hope* we also know that there is *hope*. Real *hope*. True *hope*. For now. For ever.

Paul encourages us in 1 Corinthians 13.7 to understand that “love always hopes.” Always. Paul isn't saying that when we pray we squint up our eyes, tighten our facial muscles and clench our fists. Paul is reminding us that God loves us. Always has, always will. Nothing can ever separate us from His love. Our hope is in Him. Our lives and the lives of those we love, are in His hands. He is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth who is accomplishing, in and through the circumstances of our lives, His perfect purposes. And what are His objectives? To glorify Himself. To conform us to His image. To make His church glorious. And to turn this world right-side up.

Jeremiah declared that “God is the hope of Israel.” In 1 Timothy 1.1 Paul wrote that “Christ Jesus is our hope.” Our hope is focused upon Him Whose Word is true, Whose covenant promises are sure, Whose acts have been, are, and will always be in keeping with His declared intentions.

The hope of 1 Corinthians 13.7 is sure and certain because it is based upon the Word of the One Who loves us with a love that will never let us go.

Abraham, “against all hope . . . believed, and so he became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead [since he was about a hundred years old] and that Sarah's womb was also dead” (Romans 4.18). Against all worldly hope Abraham hoped in God's promise that he and Sarah would have a son, that from their son would come countless offspring, and that Abraham would become the father of many nations. In Romans 4.20 we read, “He did not waver through

unbelief regarding the promise of God, but he was strengthened in his faith and he gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.”

When a woman's womb is dead there is no hope that she will have a child – unless that hope is based upon a promise made by the Creator. Abraham's sense of hope would wax and wane. God made this promise to Abraham when he was seventy-five years old. Twenty-five years went by. Abraham had celebrated his hundredth birthday, and Sarah, her ninetieth. They still didn't have any children. And now Sarah's womb was dead.

The history of the OT is the real world. As is most often true for us, the promises made by God to OT saints were seldom immediately fulfilled. When Abraham was seventy-five years old, God promises that to him and Sarah would be born a son. Twenty-five years passed. Twenty-five years. Abraham turned a hundred, and Sarah was now ninety. No son had yet been born. Sarah's womb was now dead. But Abraham had God's promise. Abraham believed God. His hope was in the One Who cannot lie.

Biblical hope is the sure and certain anticipation of what we know God will do in our lives — today, tomorrow, and always. In his *Institutes*, Calvin writes that

hope is nothing else than the expectation of those things which faith believes have been promised by God. *Faith believes God to be true, and hope awaits the time when His truth shall be manifested.* Hope nourishes and sustains faith. Hope strengthens faith, so that it will not waver or doubt. Hope refreshes faith, so that it will not grow weary. Hope sustains faith, so that it perseveres.

“Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15.4). OT history is given, in part, to nourish, sustain, refresh and strengthen our hope. What God

has done, God is doing and God will do. His Word is true and certain. He cannot lie.

The OT saints were real people living in a real world. The Scripture is painfully honest about their strengths and weaknesses, about their victories and defeats, about their acts of obedience and sinful deeds. They also provide a historical account of how God fulfilled His purposes in the lives of His covenant people. We get to see their stories from beginning to end. As we watch God at work in their lives and circumstances, our faith is nourished and sustained, and our hope is refreshed and strengthened.

As a young boy, Joseph was sold into slavery, taken to Egypt and bought by a man named Potiphar. Potiphar soon knew that Joseph was a trustworthy and valuable servant. Potiphar's wife liked Joseph's looks. She tried to seduce him. But when he refused to go to bed with her, she accused him of rape, and he was thrown into prison. He remained in prison for many years. But they weren't wasted years. Joseph found repeated opportunities to be of help and assistance both to his jailers and his fellow inmates.

When the Pharaoh dreamed a dream that no one could interpret, one of his servants, who had been temporarily imprisoned for a minor offense, remembered how Joseph had accurately interpreted his dream. This information was relayed to the Pharaoh, and Joseph was brought from prison to stand before the ruler of all Egypt.

Joseph interpreted the Pharaoh's frightening dream. He also won his favor. The Pharaoh raised Joseph to the position of "prime minister" of Egypt. Joseph acted quickly. Using his newly acquired authority and influence, Joseph worked hard for the next seven years. As the fields of Egypt produced an abundant harvest year after year, Joseph stored grain in huge silos throughout the land. And then, when the seven years of famine foretold in the Pharaoh's dream came, countless Egyptians and others were saved from the horror of starvation including Joseph's brothers.

They came to Egypt to buy grain because there was no grain to buy in their homeland. We are allowed to watch as Joseph makes himself known to them. Many years have gone by. But the brothers have never forgotten what they did to their little brother. As they stand there, realizing that the one they sold into slavery has become the second most powerful man in Egypt, they tremble. Then we hear Joseph say to them: "You intended it for evil, but God intended it for good" (Genesis 50.20).

The story of Joseph is meant to instill in us a sure and certain hope in the One Whom Joseph served. By God's grace we're allowed to do what we can't do in our own circumstances – we're allowed to see the end from the beginning.

In Romans 15.8-9 Paul writes, "Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promise made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy." Much of the OT is tied up in that statement. In the OT God promises, "I'm going to send the Seed of a woman Whose heel the serpent will strike, but Who in turn will crush the serpent's head. It is through Abraham's descendants that this Seed will be born. He will be a blessing to all the nations of the earth."

Paul tells us that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Seed of the woman, the Descendant of Abraham, the promised One, the final Lamb of God. The writing of this epistle to a group of believers in Rome was a fulfillment of these promises. As God promised, the Good News about Abraham's son (Matthew 1.1) was proving to be a blessing to the nations of the earth.

God keeps His promises. God promised that those who were not a people would become a people, and those who were not loved of God would become the ones whom God loves (Romans 9.25). In the NT, as various Gentiles respond in faith to the Apostolic message, becoming followers of Jesus Christ, God's promises to Adam and Abraham are being fulfilled.

The New Testament saints' hope was that Jesus would come again and take them to be with Him forever and forever. If they died before Christ returned, they knew their souls would pass immediately into the Lord's presence, and then, at Jesus' return, their bodies would be raised from the dead, freed from the bondage of decay, and they would receive from their King the glorious inheritance of the saints.

The NT believers also hoped in God's promise to send the Holy Spirit to strengthen and equip them so they might embrace unflinchingly the truths revealed in Scripture, prepared to resist and overcome the temptations of this world, knowing they have been empowered, equipped and enabled to live as image bearers of their King.

God teaches us how to live. He gives us His sure and certain promises to motivate us. Furthermore He provides the strength and ability we need to live as His image bearers. Because of this sure and certain hope, the early Christians were able to love each other and their enemies with a love that impacted the Roman world. Because of such hope they were willing to die rather than to compromise what they knew to be true. Because of such hope they were supernaturally enabled to live the life they were created – and then recreated – to live. Because of such hope they began the slow but certain task of turning their world right-side up.

I've told you about my friend Pat Lindley who underwent a liver transplant many years ago. She gave me permission to share this story with you. While hospitalized at Emory University, the staff and particularly her nurses were amazed by what was happening all around Patricia. They were overwhelmed by the love and devotion shown to her by her husband, Gary. They were awed by the love, devotion and commitment of many, many friends who came to help care for her and to provide for her during the many weeks that she remained in the hospital. One of the nurses Patricia described as young, pretty, and hip. That nurse was so impressed that she asked

to spend a weekend at Gary and Pat's. She wanted to talk with them further, because she wanted to know, "What gives? What is this? How is this possible? The love I've witnessed is mind boggling."

What you do should be mind boggling. What you do is of eternal significance. Your life either bears testimony to the reality of the kingdom, or it brings disrepute upon the King. You will either be building up the kingdom or tearing it down. You will either be showing to others the reality of Who Christ is or you will be convincing them that Christian is just another word for hypocrite. Your attitudes, words, and deeds are of eternal significance. That's great to know. What more motivation do I need? What I do today and tomorrow matters. And God through me can turn my world right-side up.

In Titus 2.11-14 Paul focuses on another facet of this gem called hope.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Paul writes about God's plans for the future, He encourages us with the good news that we have the "blessed hope" of our Lord's "glorious appearing." As we've seen, hope is not wishful thinking. Biblical hope is knowing what God has promised, Who God is, what God has done in the past, and therefore being confident about what God will do. The "blessed hope" speaks of what is yet to come. God tells us how history will end. For those who are His – it's good news!

Peter tells us our "living hope" is guaranteed by the One who

died and rose again (1 Peter 1.3). It is by His resurrection that we have gained this inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. It is an inheritance which awaits us in heaven and will be ours when the Lord returns.

Christianity is tied to history. The God we worship is sovereign over all human events. Christianity is not just religious and philosophical ideas that float in space disconnected from the living of life from day to day. Christianity confronts us with a God who acts and reveals Himself in time and space.

The OT was viewed by Jesus as history – as the history of God's dealings with His covenant people. It reveals to us God dealing, in time and space, with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ruth, David, Isaiah, Daniel. It shows us God making Himself known to people just like you and me.

Think about Jesus. He's not just a wonderful philosopher spouting platitudes of religious importance. He is a man, the God Man. In time and space He was born of the virgin Mary, grew up in the village of Nazareth, lived a life of some thirty-three years, was arrested, was crucified, died and was buried. On the third day He rose from the dead. For forty days He appeared to various individuals, with whom He ate, drank and talked. He then returned to the Father's right side, where He now reigns over all creation, and from there He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Being at the Father's right hand, His present reign and His coming again, cannot be evaluated historically. But all the rest are subject to investigation. Christian truths are not simply someone's subjective thoughts and inner reflections. Christianity is tied to objective historical events. The God we worship is the One who reveals Himself in time and space, in human history.

In time and space Christ rose bodily from the dead. Paul's comments cannot be more pointed. "If these things have not occurred in time and space then our preaching is useless and so is your faith. If Christ has not been raised, our faith is a lie, and we are to be pitied more than all men" (see 1 Cor 15.12-19). But then,

immediately, Paul adds, "But Christ, has indeed been raised from the dead!" (1 Cor 15.20, paraphrase). Therefore, we are not to be pitied, our faith is not futile, because Jesus' resurrection and appearances are events that are part of the history of this world. He bodily rose from the dead and for forty days met with several different individuals and groups of people, including "five hundred of the brothers at the same time" (1 Corinthians 15.6).

This the Jesus Who promises, "I will come again."

History has a purpose. Its purpose is determined by God. God's purposes culminate in the coming again of Jesus Christ at the end of the age. Eschatology is the study of last things. There is much debate about the unfolding of the final events of history. We're not going to enter into that debate at this moment. I want us to focus on the essentials of eschatology – those truths that almost all evangelicals accept and believe.

Throughout the OT it was promised that the Messiah would come. The NT tells us the Messiah has come. His name is Jesus. Then, some three hundred and eighteen times in two hundred and sixty chapters, we're told that this same Jesus is coming again.

Jesus said to His disciples in John 14.3, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." Paul wrote in I Thessalonians 4.16-17,

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel with a trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. And after that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with him in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

In Philippians 3.20-21 Paul writes, "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His

control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body.” John says in Revelation 1.7, “He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him.”

When He comes, believers who have died will be raised. Death is real. Everyone will experience death unless Jesus returns before our bodies cease to function. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15.26 that the final enemy Jesus will defeat upon His return from glory is death.

Until He comes, death is for the believer a moment of transition. The soul and the body are separated. In Ecclesiastes 12.7 we read, “the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.” In 2 Corinthians 5.8 the apostle Paul writes that “to be away from the body is to be present with the Lord.” When Christ returns, the bodies of believers who have died will be raised. “The Lord will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4.16). “He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His spirit” (Romans 8.11). “He will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body” (Philippians 3.21).

One of my favorite NT passages to read aloud is 1 Corinthians 15.51-54. I can't read it aloud for you, so please read it aloud to yourself:

Listen, I tell you a mystery, We will not all sleep, we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. And when the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality then the saying that is written will come true: that ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’

As we have already seen, believers yet living when Jesus returns will be “caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so [they] will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thessalonians 4.17).

When He comes He will judge the heavens and the earth. Hebrews 9.27 reminds us, “It is destined unto man to die once, and after that the judgment.” Likewise, in Acts 7.31 we are told that “He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man that He has appointed.”

Knowing that all these things will one day come to pass, should profoundly impact how we live. For the believer, the promise of Jesus coming again should encourage and comfort us. Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians that we should encourage one another with these words: “He is coming again.” Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14.2-3). Therefore, “Don’t let your hearts be troubled” (14.1)

If there was ever a group of people who had reason for their hearts to be troubled it was the men gathered in the upper room on that night before Jesus was betrayed. Jesus had just told them, “They’re coming to arrest Me, try Me, and put Me to death.” We know from their behavior for the next two or three days that the disciples were befuddled and scared. To these men Jesus first spoke the words, “Don’t let your hearts be troubled.” I’m going away. But I’m coming back. And when I do, we’ll be together forevermore.

I was about twelve years old. I had heard this teaching all of my life. I was raised by godly parents. I think I loved the Lord, but I wasn’t confident about my relationship with Jesus. At about two o’clock in the morning, I woke up and found my room aglow with light. I looked out my window to find the sky on fire from one horizon to the other. My first thought, was “Oh, no!” I ran into my parents’ bedroom. Their bed was empty. I ran down the hall and peeked in

my sisters' bedroom. She was still in her bed, so I felt a little more comforted. I ran through the kitchen and out the door and found my parents standing in the driveway looking up at the sky at the aurora borealis, that is, the northern lights. Once Dad explained to me what was happening, I was greatly relieved.

But you know what? It wouldn't scare me today. If I wake up and my bedroom is aglow with light, this is going to be my prayer, "Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus, Come!"

Does the doctrine of the second coming of Jesus Christ thrill you or scare you? For believers there is a sense of awe as we anticipate that moment. When He comes we're going to be on our faces before Him. And yet, we are eager for that day to arrive. The older I get the more I pray, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus. Come quickly."

In 1994 *Focus on the Family* hosted a conference centered on the theme: "Believe Well, Live Well." During that conference the following illustration was used:

Pluck any man out of a church pew on Sunday morning and liken him to a neighbor who's still at home, pouring through the two-pound Sunday newspaper in his easy chair. Let's say the two are the same age and earn comparable salaries. Neither of them smokes, drinks or plays the lottery. Both floss their teeth, collect baseball cards and enjoy cheesecake.

Which man will live longer and enjoy the benefits of a stable marriage? Answer: The man (or woman) in the pew. In recent years, scientific research is backing up what common sense has told us for years; mainly, that church goers live longer, stay married and feel happier than those who say they don't believe in God.

Surprised? Maybe that's because studies proving religion is beneficial are often the best kept secrets of the health profession. Most researchers . . . don't know what to make of the findings. In fact, religion often mystifies

scientists or is perceived as guilt-inducing and, therefore, harmful.

Nevertheless, the secret is out— religion is good for your health and your marriage. But science is merely verifying what Scripture has told us for centuries: “The fear of the Lord adds length to life” (Deut 6.2).

Good theology leads to good thinking which leads to good living. As Dr. Dobson has said: “Believe well, live well.” Eschatology, that part of Christian theology dealing with the end times, should profoundly impact our lives. Our “blessed hope” should impact positively how we live.

In January of 1966, I had an operation on my knee. Following the surgery, the doctor told me that if I did my exercises for the next six weeks, I should be ready to play baseball for my college. That was all I needed. The doctor had given me hope. I had good reason to believe that he knew what he was talking about. So I did my exercises and six weeks later was playing baseball. His words of hope changed how I lived my life. They were all I needed to give my life focus and purpose — at least, for the next six weeks.

Our “blessed hope” should change our lives.

And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him. How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. *Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.* (1 John 2.28-3.3)

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. *It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.* (Titus 2.11-14)

In 1 Corinthians 15.58 Paul says to us, “My dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” Clearly, not only does our hope encourage and comfort us, it also motivates us to live lives characterized by the “love” Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 13.

Because of God’s supernatural work at Calvary on our behalf and because of His supernatural work within us, we are able to love as we have been loved. One of the consequences of such love is that we are filled with a sure and certain hope. And because of our “blessed hope” we are able to exercise a love that is patient and kind; that is free of envy, boasting and pride; that is not rude, self-seeking or easily angered; that does not delight in evil and rejoices in the truth; that always protects, trusts and hopes.

The ability to love God and others in this manner gives us hope. Certainly, there is nothing “natural” about such love. Our culture uses the word “love” to describe the most selfish and self-centered of emotions and acts. One individual uses another individual for their own pleasure, and we call it “making love.” The Bible calls it lust. Within marriage, the husband and wife don’t “have sex” – they make love to each other. The world is fixated on having sex. But it knows little about making love.

Likewise, while there are many gentle and kind people in this

world, only by God's saving and enabling grace do we learn to love with the love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13.

When we find ourselves able to love in this manner, it gives us hope. It gives us hope because God is obviously at work within us. If He weren't, we wouldn't have the ability to love with the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13. But we do have the ability to love in this manner, because God *is* at work within us. Knowing that God is at work within us produces in us a quiet, but radical confidence. Confident that God loves us and is at work within us, we are radically committed to fulfilling His purposes, eager to be found image-bearers of Him.

God's promise to us:

In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. (Romans 8.28-30)

This is our hope. It is a hope which cannot be shaken even in the midst of the most terrible circumstances. In fact, when times of trouble come, our hope increases when we see the further evidence of God's supernatural activity in our lives. We will moan and weep when our lives are impacted by tragedy. Such things should not be. They remind us that we still live in a fallen world. But we will not weep as those who have no hope.

We weep, confident that God has done and will do as He promises. Such confidence gives us a sure and certain hope that motivates us to a radical obedience. As we read in 1 John 3.3, "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure." Remember Paul's teaching in Titus 2.11-14 – having such a

hope we say “no” to ungodliness and worldly passions, we live self-controlled, upright and godly lives, we are eager to do what God calls good, and we desire above all else to hear from our Lord these words: “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25.21).

How wonderfully complex all this is. God saves us by having God the Son die on our behalf to pay the penalty for our sins. God saves us by sending God the Holy Spirit into our lives. The Holy Spirit Who enables us to believe, Who motivates us to confess and repent of our sins, and Who equips us to live as image bearers of our triune God. The Holy Spirit gives us the supernatural ability to love, and therefore to trust and hope. The presence of such love and hope in our lives is the evidence that we have indeed been saved.

By grace we have been saved. By grace we have been given the gift of faith. We have not been saved because of the good works that we have done. We have nothing of which to boast. God has saved us. He has re-created us. We are His workmanship. Furthermore, He has ordained, before we ever lived, that there would be certain good works that we would do to the glory and praise of His Holy Name (Ephesians 2.8-10).

There are many who have not experienced that confidence, that hope; they do not have the ability to love with the kind of love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13, and therefore, being neither sure nor certain about their relationship with the Lord, they do not have a confident hope in respect to the future. To such as these, I make this plea: embrace Jesus as your Savior and Lord and know that today God can begin a new work within you — recreating you into a man or woman who radically loves both God and others. If you will confess and repent of your sins and embrace Jesus as Savior and Lord, God will begin to remake you in the image of His Son. When you see the evidence of God's work in your life, you will begin to experience that sure and certain hope which I have been writing about.

Believer — that sure and certain hope is yours. You have the supernatural ability to love with the kind of love Paul has described for us in 1 Corinthians 13. You have this ability because God first loved you. Because of God's love for you and in you, you have a sure and certain hope. Love always hopes. Why? Because the one who has been enabled to love in this manner, knows that "he who began a good work in (you), will carry it on to completion until the day

- Chapter Thirteen -

LOVE ALWAYS PERSEVERES

I Corinthians 13:7

The Pegasus Bridge was Major John Howard's objective. It spanned the Orne River just outside of Saint Marie du Mont in the northwest corner of France on the western edge of the beaches where the Allied troops intended to come ashore. It was just after midnight on June 6, 1944. His men were the D Company of the 6th Airborne Division of the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry, British Army. His orders were simple and clear: "Secure the bridge and hold it until relieved."

They arrived in France via gliders. With the element of surprise working in his favor, Major Howard and his men quickly took possession of the bridge and secured it, suffering one casualty.

For the next thirteen hours they hung on despite constant fire from heavy rifles, mortars and rockets. Then, at 1:00 p.m., on the afternoon of June sixth, Major Howard and his men watched in amazement as a British commando unit, undeterred by heavy enemy fire and the presence of Nazi troops, marched toward them, with bagpipes belching a battle tune used by the British army for centuries. They were led by three British generals.

They came marching in very smartly and it really was a wonderful sight. They were all over six feet tall and they were wearing red berets and they were in battle dress, and they were marching in time. And you may call it foolishness but we thought it sheer inspiration to see them coming down the road. For sheer bravado and bravery it was one of the most memorable sights I have ever seen.

Reaching the bridge, one of the generals shook Major Howard's hand and said, "Good show, old chap." Major Howard and his men were relieved. They had held the bridge until relieved. They had persevered until the end.

In 1 Corinthians 13.7, Paul teaches that love perseveres. To persevere is to endure, to be steadfast, to hold until relieved. When I was boy, I served for a short while as night watchman at Harvey Cedars Bible Conference. Every hour a clock had to be punched with keys found throughout the hotel to assure the insurance company that every nook and cranny had been checked on a regular basis. Those were terribly long and boring nights. I longed for the morning and was ecstatic when the sun finally appeared. I learned to appreciate the emotion of the Psalmist when he wrote: "My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning" (Psalm 130.6)

Paul teaches us that love perseveres. Love hangs in there. Love keeps on keeping on. Just as a soldier mans his post until relieved, and just as a watchman continues his rounds until the sun has come up, so Christians persevere until the Lord returns. As believers we eagerly await the coming of the Son. Major Howard and his men waited for the arrival of three generals. We await the return of the King.

Often the immediate comfort of our present circumstances lessens the eagerness of our anticipation, and at times our naive optimism about what the future might bring clouds our anticipation of the Lord's return. I can remember when I was younger reading the apostle Paul's words in Philippians where he says, "For to me to live is Christ, but to die would be gain" (1.21) To my astonishment, Paul then wrestled with which was better – to continue to live or to go to be with the Lord. Paul concluded, "For your sake I believe I'll stay here, but it would be far better to go and be with my Lord."

I didn't get it. Many of you know what I'm talking about. I wasn't yet married. I had many things yet to experience and do. I

had a life to live. But it doesn't take many years of living with adult responsibilities to understand Paul's longing. I wait with eager anticipation for the Lord to return, and while I believe the Lord still has things for me to do, I look forward to going to be with Him.

Major Howard may have been impressed when he looked up and saw those three British generals all over six feet tall wearing their red berets (I'm impressed by anybody over five feet ten), but if Major Howard were a believer, I would tell him, "You haven't seen anything yet! Just wait until the Commander-in-chief arrives on the scene."

There will be a loud command, the archangel's shout, a trumpet call, and suddenly the dead will rise from the grave, the Lord will appear in the clouds, and we will be caught up in the air to meet Him and accompany Him as He comes to earth (1 Thess 4.16-17).

John provides this description of that coming moment in time:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. And on his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." (Rev 19.11-16)

Paul tells us, "The end will come, when he hands over the Kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion,

authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:24-26). Reflecting upon these things, Paul writes in Romans 8:18, 22 and 23. "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us . . . We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."

The prophet Isaiah tells us about a great feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine — the best of meats and the finest of wines. He tells us that on the day of these feasts, God will destroy the shroud that enfolds all nations, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us" (Isaiah 25:6-9).

We live with this hope, with the anticipation that one day the Lord shall come again and make all things right.

I am confident that during the thirteen hours Major Howard's men held the bridge across the Orne River, if they had been asked, "What do you really want out of life?", they would have said, "We want the General and his commandos to show up, that's what we want." Their focus was on the arrival of their commanding officer.

What do you want? What do you eagerly anticipate? That's an important question. We give a great deal of energy and time to the accomplishment of our life's goals. "I want to get an education. I want to get married. I want a family. I want a good job." Those are all good goals. But they're short-term goals, even if they require the next forty or fifty years to fulfill. The ultimate goal and objective for all who name the Name of Jesus is for the King of Kings and Lord of

Lords to return. When we know what the future holds, we eagerly desire His return, so that we might talk, walk and commune with Him forevermore.

I know that there are those who think we are crazy. It sounds like a fairy tale – but it isn't. His return is as certain as any history that has already been written. This is what will come to pass and believers live in eager anticipation of that day.

How we live our lives demonstrates how eagerly we anticipate His return. How we live today, tomorrow, this week, the rest of this year, or for however many years we are given, testifies to our ultimate hope. We await the King of kings.

Until He returns, we persevere. We keep on keeping on. God has graciously sent the Holy Spirit to dwell within us, supernaturally equipping us with love for God and others, a love that “always perseveres.”

The writer of Hebrews tells us that “we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved” (10.39). In this light we read in verse thirty-five of Hebrews ten, “So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised.”

Not only has God instructed us to persevere, He has also equipped and enabled us to do what He commands. He knows that living life in this world is tough. At times we feel like a watchman, stumbling around inside a large hotel in the middle of the night. Even though the rooms are filled with people, he feels alone. At times we feel like a soldier sent to the front wondering if he'll ever find relief from the constant barrage of enemy guns. The Lord knows all this is true. That's why He doesn't simply command us to persevere – He also supernaturally equips and enables us to carry out His orders. “I'm not just asking you to persevere, I'm also

promising to supply you with the supernatural strength and ability needed to persevere. I will give you what you need to keep on keeping on. You have My Word on it.'"

Have you ever had an enemy? Someone who hated you? Someone who accused you of being sinful, who questioned your motivations and branded your actions as wrong and immoral? What really hurt was that the accusations contained just enough truth to make you feel terribly uncomfortable.

Have you ever had a champion? Someone who understood what you were going through. Someone who knew a great deal about you. Someone who knew what you were up against and stood there with you, through thick or thin, come fire or high water, encouraging and helping you to keep on keeping on.

If you name the Name of Jesus, knowing He is God come in human flesh and that He died at Calvary to pay the God-appointed penalty for your sins, then I've got great news for you. You have a Champion.

You also have an enemy. Satan. Satan is at war with God. He hates God and hates anything or anyone associated with God. He hates the creation. He hates the Kingdom. He hates the citizens of the Kingdom. He hates you and me. He desires to destroy us. He wants to keep us from living lives that encourage others to glorify our Father in heaven.

He is a formidable foe. He is a roaring lion prowling about looking for someone to devour. He hurls at us the fiery darts of wickedness. He slanders us to our face, hoping to discourage and defeat us with lies that contain just enough truth to terribly upset us. He slanders us before others, even before God.

In Revelation 12.10 the apostle John calls Satan "the accuser of the brothers . . . that he accuses . . . before God day and night." The third chapter of Zechariah presents a graphic illustration of this truth. A man named Joshua is pictured standing before the Lord. This

is not the Joshua of Moses' day, but a Joshua who lived hundreds of years later and served as Israel's high priest. He stands before the Lord, representing the children of Judah.

Standing right next to Joshua is Satan, slandering him before the throne of God. "Look at this individual, he is dressed in rags. His clothes are filthy, tattered and despicable." It was true. Joshua stood there dressed in filthy, tattered rags. He was a sinner, like you and me. There had been moments when his words, actions and attitudes had been despicable. Even the good things he may have done were filthy rags in the Father's eyes (Isa 64.6). Whatever good works he had done did not gain him merit with God. Even the best of his good deeds fell short of the righteousness demanded by God. Satan's accusations were true. They must have been like a dagger to Joshua's heart.

But, Joshua is not standing there alone; standing there with him is also his Champion. And it is his Champion Who speaks these words, "Remove from him those dirty rags because I am going to dress him in the unblemished robes of My perfect righteousness."

If you name the Name of Jesus Christ, Satan hates you, and will do his best to slander you. He will whisper in your ear all kinds of horrible things about what you've said, done and thought. His words will sting. At such moments you need to remember that Jesus is standing right there with you. Because of Christ, no matter what Satan says or does, no matter what you've said or done, the grace of God at work in your heart cannot be overthrown. And when Satan accuses, your Champion will speak in your behalf: "I have stripped him of his dirty rags and filthy garments and in their place I have wrapped him in the robes of My righteousness!"

Paul wrote at the end of Romans 8, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything in all creation, nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vs. 38-39).

The love of God that is ours because of what Jesus Christ accomplished at Calvary is a love that perseveres. If you are loved of God, there will never be a day when He does not love you. He will always love you. If God has taken hold of you, He will never let you go. He will always hold you in the palm of His Hand. God's love perseveres. He is forever your Champion.

Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians 13 that "love always perseveres." God gives us the ability to be image-bearers of Him. Therefore, He has given us the ability to love as we have been loved. We have been given the supernatural ability to love with a love that perseveres.

When Satan whispers in my ear slanderous comments upon my wardrobe, I try to remember to rebuke him, reminding myself that I am dressed in the robes of my Savior's righteousness, and nothing Satan can say or do can strip from me this seamless garment of sinless perfection.

The prophet Isaiah writes, "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, He is the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not grow tired or weary." Then Isaiah tells us, "Therefore, He gives strength to the weary and He increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:28-31).

Our ability to put one foot in front of the other, to keep on keeping on, to persevere, is because of the supernatural work of God within us. We are frequently weary. We are feeling terribly weak. It is not unusual to find that you just aren't sure you can put one more foot in front of the other. But, God gives us the strength and ability to do what He commands. Despite the strong headwind Satan hurls in our face or the dead weights he straps to our legs, God enables us to stay in the race. He renews our strength and empowers us to run without growing weary.

During high school one of my sons decided to become a masochist; he joined the cross-country team at school. It is an incredible sport. I ran track in high school, but never further than 220 yards. But in cross-country you run, not on a flat surface, but up hills and down hills for 3.1 miles. You run in heat, rain, cold, snow; on dirt, grass, pavement or frozen tundra. What amazes me is not the three or four who finish at the top. If I had the ability to run like that, I might even find the sport acceptable. What amazes me is the runner who finishes a full 4 minutes after the race has been won. You look at his face, and you know he can't be having a good time. But he keeps putting one foot in front of the other. If I have no chance of placing near the top, I'm going to quit. What's the point? But there he is, running and running, finishing maybe 79th. Then, the next time he races, he cuts 10 seconds off his previous best time, and he's pumped.

Cross-country is a great illustration (even Isaiah used it!) because not many of us finish in the top three or four. Most of us lag minutes behind the first place finisher. The only way we can keep putting one foot in front of the other is because God gives us the supernatural determination to keep on keeping on. He Who does not grow tired or weary pours out on us His supernatural grace, providing us with the strength to take one more step, to go one more day, to keep on keeping on.

God gives us the supernatural ability to persevere, but He doesn't turn us into robots. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, He gives us the grace, power, authority, and gifts we need. But then, we have to do those good works that He has prepared for us to do, and the only way we do that is by getting up in the morning, determined to do what we know the Lord wants us to do.

In the morning, as I sit on the edge of my bed facing a new day, this is my prayer: "Today, I must persevere. And I will. Not simply because I am determined to do so, but because I am filled with the

Spirit of God, and therefore, have at my disposal the supernatural power that raised Jesus from the dead. It won't be because of my strength, but because of His." The believer should begin each day hearing the Spirit speak these promises: "I'll give you everything you need to do what I have for you to do. But you must choose to put one foot in front of the other. I'll give you the supernatural ability to do that, but you must do it. Remember, I'll be with you, always. Remember, nothing can ever separate you from My love."

But now, let me make an important observation. The supernatural gift of perseverance is more than the ability to hang in there and to keep on keeping on. Even the world can find reasons to hang in there and persevere. Some do so for the sake of their reputations. Some persevere for the sake of making money. Some keep on keeping on out of concern for family and others.

The Christian's determination to persevere is motivated by love. The reason the Christian perseveres is because of his love for God. He loves God because he knows that God first loved him. Knowing that God loves him, he trusts the Lord. He knows that God has promised in Psalm 75 that "when the earth and all its people quake, it is I who hold its pillars firm." Therefore, even when faced with difficult circumstances that are beyond the believer's ability to understand, he perseveres. He perseveres because he knows that God loves him and wants for him only what is best.

In Acts 16 Paul and Silas have been arrested and thrown into prison. Prison in those days was not like prison in the United States. It was dark, damp and smelled awful. Not only were you placed behind bars, your hands and feet were chained to the wall of your cell. That is why Acts 16.25 is so surprising. "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them." In the midst of terrible circumstances, because of their confidence in God's love and, therefore, their love for God and others, they were persevering, eager to testify about God to their cell mates.

God's love for the believer and the believer's love for God enables the believer to keep on keeping on. The believer is also motivated by his love for others. The believer knows that his life is not his own. He knows that his God-given responsibility is to serve God and others. He knows that God has instructed him to consider others better than himself.

Paul wrote Philippians while in prison; yet, the two words that appear most frequently in this book are "joy" and "rejoice." If you read Philippians 1:12-26 slowly and out loud, you will understand why Paul could persevere in the midst of terrible circumstances. He perseveres because he knows that he is loved by God. Therefore, he loves God and is eager to show God's love to others. Because God is at work within him, he finds the supernatural strength needed to carry on and to do what God has for him to do.

Without such love it is easy to turn and run at the first hint of inconvenience or trouble. Our sinful nature and our fallen culture encourage this selfishness. "You've got to look out for number one. If it cramps your style, if it's inconvenient, if it's uncomfortable, or if you don't like it, then just forget it." Our cultural litmus test is to ask, "What's in it for me?"

In Acts 13.13 Paul and Barnabas reach Perga. They have been accompanied by Barnabas' cousin, John Mark. But there in Perga, he leaves them and heads for home. In Acts 15.38 Paul says, "He deserted us." We don't know why he quit. Perhaps he became homesick. Perhaps he was overwhelmed by the opposition to the Gospel that Paul and Barnabas were experiencing. Perhaps he was tired of constantly dealing with Gentiles. Perhaps, since John Mark was Barnabas' cousin, he was upset by Paul replacing Barnabas as the leader of their missionary team. Take any one of these reasons and use the litmus test. John Mark asked himself, "What's in this for me?" The answer he came up with was "Not much." So he quit and went home.

But John Mark's response is not unique. Peter, even after his

show-stopping sermon in Acts chapter two, was tempted to look after himself instead of focusing on what God would have him to do. In Galatians chapter two Paul tells us that he had to rebuke Peter because his attitude toward Gentiles was sinful. Life had become somewhat uncomfortable for Peter. He had many Jewish friends and they knew that he spent a great deal of his time sharing the good news about Jesus with Gentiles. These Jewish friends complained. "Peter you've got to choose. It's either us or them." These were his life-long friends. So Peter withdrew from ministering to the Gentiles. He wanted to appease his buddies and maintain their friendship.

Paul says in Galatians 2.13 that Peter's attitude and behavior impacted Barnabas to the point that Paul's companion came close to treating Gentiles the way Peter was treating them. Peter's impact upon Barnabas illustrates something we talked about earlier — you don't live unto yourself, you don't die unto yourself; what you do impacts those around you. Peter's actions profoundly impacted Barnabas, who was nearly led into sin because of Peter's example.

One of the marvelous things that Scripture does is show us the sins of our heroes. Sin is so natural to us. It is so natural for us to cave in and compromise. It is so natural for us to bow to ourselves or to our peers. I know young people wrestle constantly with what we call "peer pressure." Don't fool yourself; that same pressure still exists as we grow older. It is so easy to cave in and to compromise, to do whatever it takes to please our peers, to do whatever is necessary to make our lives comfortable. It is natural for us to love ourselves and be concerned to take care of number one. When we are more in love with ourselves than we are with God or others, we find it easy to cave in. We have a thousand justifications for why we are the way we are. And since we can't seem to come up with a good answer to the question, "What's in this for me?", we stop trying to do what we know is pleasing and right in God's sight.

The only thing that can keep us from such sinful activities is a passionate love for God and others.

If you have genuinely believed that Jesus Christ was God come in human flesh and that he died on Calvary's cross to pay the God-appointed penalty for your sins — if that is the confession of your heart as well as the confession of your lips, then God has sent the Holy Spirit to live within you. If the Holy Spirit is filling your life, you will be passionate about demonstrating your love for God and others.

The grace that saves is the grace that enables. You have the power — the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead. It is the Holy Spirit within you. The point is not whether we can or cannot do what God intends for us to do. It is whether we will or will not be obedient. If we have experienced God's saving grace, then we are recipients of God's enabling grace. But, even though we are supernaturally equipped, enabled and empowered by God, we still need to daily commit ourselves to persevere in our love for God and others.

Of course, there will still be times when all of us compromise what we know is true, and we decide that the fight is just too hard.

When I was in ninth grade, my best friend Louie and I decided that as the oldest kids in school we were going to protect the nerds. Through the years we had watched those kids get picked on by all the bullies, most of whom were early impersonators of Elvis. Therefore, Louie and I decided to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. About three or four days after our grand decision, we turned the corner in the hallway and found one of those "in our care" being bullied. We rushed to his rescue, pulled him away from his tormentor, placed him behind us, and then turned to deal with the bully. But when we turned back we found standing in front of us, not one, but about five or six Elvises. Suddenly, I wasn't sure that protecting nerds was all that important. Suddenly I took the litmus test, "What's in this for me? The friendship of someone who isn't all that popular? Hey, have at him. I'm out of here."

That's exactly what John Mark and Peter did. Both John Mark

and Peter looked at the Gentiles and said, "They're only nerds. I'm out of here. I'm history." Far too often we are unwilling to fight. I'm not talking about physical combat, but about a battle that rages within us. We are not willing to battle our own ego and pride. We are unwilling to fight our own emotions. We are unwilling to fight to control our words and actions. Instead, we willingly justify whatever flows from our mouths and whatever actions we choose to take. We find that easier than fighting to do what we know God wants us to do. Far too often we're not even willing for the sake of our spouses or children to struggle to do what God would have us do. We aren't willing to make the effort to live before them the kind of life that models Jesus.

But, here is what is distinctive about believers when they compromise their witness before a watching world. Sooner or later their hearts are broken by their loveless acts of compromise. They confess and repent of their sins. They experience God's forgiveness, and they start again.

I don't know what happened after Paul rebuked Peter. We're not told. But I find it interesting that probably fifteen or twenty years later, when Peter writes his first epistle, he describes Gentile believers in I Peter 2.9-10 with the same words used to describe the Israelites in Exodus 19. Peter, whom Paul had to rebuke because of his attitude towards the Gentiles, within twenty years had fully embraced Gentiles as his brothers in the Lord.

This same Peter had denied three times knowing Jesus. After Peter had denied the Lord for the third time, he looked up, to find Jesus staring at him. The Scripture tells us that his heart was broken. Scripture says he wept bitterly. I've been there. If you love the Lord, you've been there. You have sinned, and then sensed His eyes upon you. Your heart was broken. Rejoice that your heart was broken. It indicates the Spirit of God is at work within you, the same Spirit Who provides you with the strength you need to do the Father's bidding.

John Mark deserted Paul and Barnabas. But twelve years later in the fourth chapter of Colossians, Paul makes the off-handed observation, “And, oh yes, by the way, John Mark is with me here in prison” (Col 4.10). Five years later, imprisoned in Rome, Paul writes to Timothy asking him to “get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry” (2 Tim 4.11). It was this same John Mark that the Lord used to write the second gospel.

Jonathan Edwards wrote that the love which possesses the believer is a supernatural love that will “continue and endure, notwithstanding all the opposition it may meet with, or that may be brought against it.” The God who loves you is the God who enables you to love. He is the God who empowers you to persevere in that love. Even when you falter and fail – and you will – He is the God who forgives, restores, and allows you to start again.

Jeremiah's circumstances are awful. He is suffering terribly. Judah has been overrun by the armed might of Babylon. The city of Jerusalem has been destroyed. The Temple has been burned to the ground.

Jeremiah is depressed. He is hated and despised. He feels deserted and alone.

This is what he writes in Lamentations 3.19-23: “I remember all of my affliction, I remember all of my wandering, I remember all of the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me” (Lam 3.19-23).

However, Jeremiah doesn't stop there. Note what follows. “Then I stopped and I called to mind things that I know are true and they gave me hope. This is what I know is true: I know that God loves me; I know that His compassion never fails; I know that every morning His faithfulness is great. Great is His faithfulness!” Many of you immediately think of one of the great hymns of the church.

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with thee;

Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;
As they hast been thou forever wilt be.

Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see:
All I have needed thy hand hath provided —
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

These words were written by the prophet Jeremiah not as a celebration of Judah's defeat of the invader. These words were written in the midst of ruins. The people had been carried away into captivity. The temple had been burned to the ground.

How can a man stand among the ruins of God's Holy City, knowing the Temple has been burned to the ground, realizing that many of his fellow citizens have been carried away in exile, look to the heavens and sing, "Great is your faithfulness"?

Many unbelievers would find Jeremiah's response an example of irrational and blind faith. But it isn't. Jeremiah's faith is a faith that understands that God is sovereign, that He knows the end from the beginning, and that He knows what He is doing even in the midst of terrible circumstances. It's a faith that remembers that God knows the end from the beginning. It is a faith that knows God's promises. "I love you. I will never let you go. All things will work together for the good purpose of helping you to become more and more an image-bearer of My Son Jesus Christ."

Sometimes, to accomplish this purpose, God has to burn away the dross. He has to eliminate what isn't important so His people can understand what is important: loving God with all of our heart, soul, strength and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves. Sometimes, to accomplish His purposes, God does the most inexplicable things. I've been there, grieving and weeping with those mourning the loss of a loved one. Sometimes it's a grandparent or a parent. Sometimes it's a mate. Sometimes it's a child. And, with Jeremiah, my heart is joined to theirs as we confess to God, "I remember all of

my affliction. . . . I remember all of the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me”

But then, by God's grace, we also come to the place where we can use the words of Psalm 40.1-3 as an expression of our faith: “I waited patiently for the Lord; He turned to me and He heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, and out of the mire and out of the mud.” He lifts us up and sets us down upon the solid Rock. And by His enabling grace we begin to find the strength to sing, “Great is Thy Faithfulness. . .”

God's promises to us are many. But, there is only one way to find out if God's promises are yea and amen. And that is strive to live as He commands, knowing when and if we get it right, it is because God is at work within us, so that we might both will and do His good pleasure. It is by God's supernatural grace that we are empowered to live as He would have us to live, but then it is our responsibility to decide to live as He would have us to live and to make the effort to do so.

We are not saved by works. But the reality of our salvation will be evident. If there is no evidence of life, there is no life. Jesus said in Matthew 10.22, “He who stands firm to the end will be saved.” Again, in Matthew 24.12-13 He tells us, “The love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

The perseverance of the saints is one of the great doctrines in Scripture, and it is also one of the most abused. Christians talk about the preservation of the saints, and rightfully so, for Scripture teaches that God will preserve His people throughout all eternity. But those whom God *preserves* are those who *persevere* in their determination to live a life pleasing to Him. “Once saved, always saved” is a biblical sentiment. But the question is how do we know we're saved?

Many believe they were saved because at some distant point in their past they mouthed the right words, despite the fact that for many years they have shown no desire to know God and to do

those good works which He created them to do. They have not persevered, but they believe that they are being preserved because of a religious formula they once mouthed.

Those whom God preserves are those whom God supernaturally enables to persevere. If the professing believer has shown no inclination to persevere in doing those things pleasing to the Lord, he or she has no biblical basis upon which to be confident that God is preserving them. Once saved, always saved is true if one is saved. Those who have been saved are those whose lives are characterized by the love that Paul defines for us in 1 Corinthians 13. Those whom God preserves are those who persevere in the faith.

You may know what it is to be weary and weak. You wonder how you're going to make it one more day. I want you to know that by God's grace and power He will enable you to persevere, and not just to persevere, but to soar like an eagle. He will equip and empower you to live in such a way as to show forth Christ to those with whom you come in contact every day.

A good friend of mine told me about a woman whom his pastor called "the most Christ-like woman" he had ever known. She embodied a love that always persevered. Having naively married an unbeliever, who turned out to be an alcoholic who was physically and emotionally abusive, she prayed earnestly for him for years and faithfully extended Christ's love to Him, despite having more than ample Biblical grounds for divorce. Her young son begged her to leave this man, yet she consistently answered, "But I love him." She continued to steadfastly persevere in her love for him for decades, despite seeing no glimmer of response. In her steadfast and persevering love, she prayed earnestly for him through the years. After her husband suffered a debilitating stroke, she loved and cared for him, day after day after day. Even to this day her love for him has persevered as she continues to serve as his primary caretaker. My friend was sure of his facts because this woman who most profoundly demonstrated to him what it means to love with a supernatural love

that perseveres is his mother.

The apostle Paul was confident of victory. He referred to his fellow workers as soldiers. He called upon Timothy to endure hardship like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. He could call upon the Ephesians to put on the full armor of God so that they can take their stand against the Evil One's attacks (6.10). In his final epistle, this was Paul's testimony, "I have fought the good fight. I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4.7).

Jonathan Edwards insisted that "the Christian, while he remains in this world, is . . . in a state of warfare, and his business is that of the soldier. . . of the cross . . . whose great duty it is to fight the good fight of faith."

Therefore, I suggest for you another prayer with which to begin the day. "Today, I do battle against the Evil One and his attempts to undermine my efforts to honor my Lord. Today, I fight that sin which 'so easily besets me' (Heb 12.1, AV) so as not to disgrace His Name or His Banner. Today, I fight knowing that He gives me the supernatural strength I need to do battle. Today, I fight knowing that the battle is the Lord's. Today, I fight knowing that victory has already been won. Today, I will fight with a supernatural love that perseveres."

Let me close with the words of a hymn I loved to sing as a boy on Sunday evenings at church. In its stark simplicity, it sums up for me what it means to love God and others with a love that always perseveres.

Who is on the Lord's side? Who will serve the King?
Who will be His helpers, other lives to bring?
Who will leave the world's side? Who will face the foe?
Who is on the Lord's side? Who for Him will go?
By Thy call of mercy, by Thy grace divine,
We are on the Lord's side, Savior, we are Thine.

Not for weight of glory, nor for crown and palm,

Love Always Perseveres

Enter we the army, raise the warrior psalm;
But FOR LOVE that claimeth lives for whom He dies;
He whom Jesus nameth must be on His side.
By Thy love constraining, by Thy grace divine,
We are on the Lord's side, Savior, we are Thine.

Fierce may be the conflict, strong may be the foe,
But the King's own army none can over throw.
Round his standard ranging; victory is secure;
For His truth unchanging makes the triumph sure.
Joyfully enlisting by Thy grace divine,
We are on the Lord's side, Savior, we are Thine.

- Chapter Fourteen -

LOVE NEVER FAILS

1 Corinthians 13.8-13

God isn't fair. He doesn't give us what we deserve. Instead, by grace through faith, He gives us what Jesus deserves.

"The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6.23). That's God's judgment. He can't ignore it. And we cannot deny the fact that we are born sinners and freely choose to sin – to rebel actively against the Lord or to go passively our own way, doing our own thing, without any thought or concern for Who God is or for what God has said. This is the bottom line: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3.32).

We are sinners. God has said since day one: "If you sin, you will die. Not simply physically. You will die spiritually. You will be cut off from Me – from all that is good."

God's judgment is right. The facts of the case are obvious. So, God chooses to become a man. He chooses to humble Himself. He chooses to die in our place. Having no sin of His own, He takes upon Himself the sins of His people and dies to pay the penalty for their transgressions. On the third day He is raised from the dead, triumphant over sin, death and the grave.

And now, God graciously, mercifully and lovingly sends the Holy Spirit to give us eyes to see, ears to hear, minds to understand, hearts to believe, and wills to obey. We are enabled to see the Christ hanging upon Calvary's cross, to hear the explanation of why He suffers there, to understand the significance of what we are being told, to believe it is true, and willingly, to strive to live our lives in faithful obedience to the One who died that we might live.

If God had not freely chosen to do these things, then all people would stand condemned before the judgment seat of God. In fact, we are already dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2.1). But

by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ on Calvary, we have begun to live a life that will never end.

I attended public schools until going off to college. It was troubling and confusing to me to know that there was hardly anyone else in my primary school, junior high or senior high, who believed what I believed. I couldn't figure that out. I knew I was not the brightest bulb in the package. I knew there were many far more intelligent than I. So why did I believe all this stuff about Jesus, and they didn't?

Only in my latter teens and early twenties did I begin to understand that the reason I believed was because God had chosen, before the foundations of the world were put into place, to love me, to be gracious and merciful to me, a sinner. It didn't have anything to do with my intelligence. It didn't have anything to do with my innate goodness. It had to do with Jesus.

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, having embraced Him as Savior and Lord, it is because God first loved you. The reason He chooses to love you is because He chooses to love. And the reason He chooses to love is because it pleases Him to do so.

By grace, the Holy Spirit comes, changes your stone-cold heart into a heart alive unto God, grants to you the gift of faith, and then equips, enables and empowers you to live as Jesus commands. It's a package deal. It's all or nothing at all. If Jesus is your Savior, then Jesus is your Lord. If He is not your Lord, He is not your Savior. But if He is your Savior and Lord, it is because He has first loved you. By grace you are loved and by grace you are able to love even as you have been loved.

The love of God for you will never fail. Never. He has loved you since before the world began. He has loved you throughout your time here on earth. He loves you at this very moment. And He will love you for all eternity. His love for you will never fail.

As Paul thought about these truths, his heart overflowed with

doxology:

Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11.33-36)

I grew up during a time of “planned obsolescence.” You bought a toaster, a radio, a stereo, or a television, and after a few years you threw it away and bought a new one. But for thirty years we owned one living room sofa, a hand-me-down from my parents, which they purchased in 1956. It withstood the onslaught of my sister and me, my six children, and a few of our grandchildren. That sofa's history is quite impressive.

We now live in an age of throw-away marriages. People fall in love, get married, fall out of love, and get divorced. The celebration of fiftieth wedding anniversaries will soon become a rare event. When I share with someone personal information and tell them that I've been married for forty years to a woman I still love deeply, and that we have six children and twenty grandchildren (to date) – all of whom we dearly love – many are stunned, or at the least, impressed.

But far more impressive than our sofa or marriage is a love that never fails.

In Joshua 21.45, the children of Israel, have begun to take possession of the Promised Land. Joshua reminds them that “not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel has failed. Every one has been fulfilled.” In Deuteronomy the Lord promised to be with them as they entered the Promised Land. He would be with them as they began to settle down. And He would be with them when they were forced to do battle against their enemies, granting them victory and the blessing of peace.

After they entered the Promised Land, they won, by God's grace, battle after battle. The cities of Jericho, Ai, and others fell before them. God did what He promised. Not one of His promises failed. They failed. They failed to drive out all the pagan inhabitants of Canaan. The consequences of their failure to believe that not one of God's promises would fail were disastrous.

Several hundred years later, God called the young boy Samuel to be His prophet. To Samuel would be given the very words of God. Therefore, none of Samuel's prophecies would fail. He confirmed God's judgment against the house of Eli, he anointed Saul as King, he announced the fall of the house of Kish, he anointed David ben Jesse as Israel's next King. "The Lord was with Samuel . . . and he let none of his words fall to the ground" (1 Samuel 3.19).

"The grass of the field may wither, the flowers may fall, but the word of the Lord will stand forever" (1 Peter 1.24-25)

The God Whose promises never fail, Whose words never fall to the ground but stand firm forever, tells us in Romans 8.38-39 that nothing will ever separate us from His love which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord. God keeps His promises. He keeps His word. His words never fall to the ground. Instead, they stand firm forever. And therefore, when He tells us that nothing will ever separate us from His love – nothing ever will.

In 1 Corinthians 13.8 Paul contrasts the grace of God's love with several spiritual gifts. Paul teaches that prophecy, God's word given through His chosen instrument, will cease. This wonderful gift of prophecy is only temporary. It will cease. The author of Hebrews continuously compares our status as NT believers to that of OT saints. He repeatedly describes our situation as "better" – we have a better hope, a better promise, a better sacrifice, a better word. What we have by grace through faith in Jesus is the fulfillment, perfection and completion of all that was promised in the Old Testament. For example, all of the sacrifices of the Old Testament have ceased because in Christ's death at Calvary they were perfectly fulfilled.
Jesus

has offered up the final sacrifice, and therefore in Him the Old Testament ceremonial law has been perfectly fulfilled.

God's holy, infallible word has a problem. The problem isn't God's word. We are the problem. We are sinful men and women, and therefore, when we read and wrestle with God's revelation, we do so with minds of limited understanding and discernment. There are some fundamental truths which are understood and believed by almost everyone who takes seriously the authority of Scripture. But there are many things taught in Scripture that we do not yet properly comprehend.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13.10 that there is coming a day when perfection (*teleios*) will come. On that day prophecies will cease. Prophecies will cease because perfection will have been achieved. The word *teleios* is used often in the NT in reference to the second coming of Jesus Christ. "When the perfection has come," Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15.24, "Jesus will hand over the kingdom to God the Father." When Jesus comes again, we shall know even as we are known. There is coming a day when sin will no longer cloud our minds and cripple our understanding.

I don't believe there are still prophecies to be added to holy Scripture. But the NT believer knew far more about the "mystery" of God's purposes than did the OT saint. The glorified saints in heaven will know even more, for to them will be revealed that final word of prophecy that clarifies throughout all eternity God's great "mystery" and plan. I believe Jesus will have a final word of prophecy to speak to us in the eternity that lies ahead. And it may well take that long for Him to tell us all that we still do not know.

Paul also says that there will come a day when tongues will be stilled. Tongues were in part a supernatural means for sharing the Gospel with those with whom communication would have been impossible because of an inability to understand each other's language. When Jesus comes, that need will no longer exist.

Furthermore, Paul teaches that some day “knowledge will pass away.” The word knowledge speaks of our ability to understand the Scriptures and apply its teachings to our lives. The knowledge we now have will become as nothing compared to what we will then possess. John writes in 1 John 3.10, “Dear friends we are now the children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” Try sitting down and writing a paper explaining what it means to say, “And we shall see Him as He is.” There’s so much we don’t know or clearly understand. But I do know that seeing Him as He is will be far greater than anything I can possibly imagine!

Paul says that what we now see is but a poor reflection of God’s truth, but one day we shall see clearly. In Chattanooga, even on a clear night, because of all the city lights, only a few of the brightest stars are visible. But when you look up at the sky in the north woods of Minnesota, you can see millions of stars. Someday, my poor eyesight which limits my ability to see will be 20/20. (I’d really like it to be 20/10, so, like Ted Williams, I could just one time in my life see the spin of a baseball as it nears home plate and be able to judge which way it is going to break! But I digress.)

Prophecies will cease, tongues will be stilled, knowledge will pass away, but love will never fail. Throughout all eternity God will continue to love us, and we will love Him free of the restraints of sin. We will understand as we have never understood His love for us. Likewise, we will love one another as we ought.

Until that time, our love, which is meant to be a reflection of God’s love, will falter. We will have moments when we treat each other unkindly. We will at times be envious or proud. We will on occasion prove to be rude, self-centered, angry, and revengeful. There will be times when we will choose to delight in what we know is evil. Our love for God and others will often falter.

But it will never fail. God is at work within us, and He will not

allow us to continue in sin. We will experience what David experienced when the prophet Nathan pointed the finger at him and said, "You are the man." David had sinned horribly, yet, when confronted by God's prophet, his heart broke. He fell on his face before the Lord, begging for forgiveness and repenting of his sin. And the Lord forgave him and renewed within him the ability to love even as he was loved.

Nathan still stands before us. It may be the prophetic word of God written in Holy Scripture, read, proclaimed, or shared by a friend. It may be the inner whispering of the Holy Spirit bringing to our minds a portion of God's revealed Word. It may be a sermon. It may be a song. Whatever it is, however God chooses to break through, He will. And when He does, we will be humbled and broken, we will confess and repent, and we will be forgiven and restored.

Then, once more, we will discover the supernatural ability to love as we have been loved. The believer's love for God and others may falter, but it will never fail, for it is a supernatural gift freely given to them by the One Who loves them with a love that will never let them go. Such love is the distinguishing characteristic of a believer's life. Jesus said, "Men will know that you are my disciples because of your love for one another." It is this supernatural love which provides us with countless opportunities to share with others the Good News.

Our ability to love God and others will falter, but it will never fail, for God will never let us go, but continually will call us back to Himself, supernaturally equipping us with the ability to love as we have been loved, to love with a love that never fails. The grace that saves is the grace that enables. God gives to His people the supernatural ability to love as they have been loved. He has given them the ability to love with a love that is patient and kind, that does not envy or boast, that is not proud or rude, that is not self-seeking or easily angered, that keeps no record of wrongs, that does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth, that always protects, trusts, hopes and perseveres, that never fails. The grace to show such love for God and others is described by Paul as "the most

excellent way."

Some may think it sounds too good to be true, but it's not. The ability to love in this manner is the evidence of God's supernatural work within us. It is a foretaste of heaven. In this world, despite external circumstances that threaten to overwhelm us, we can love as we have been loved. By God's enabling grace we can, in this life, experience God's presence and power, and out of our love for Him, love as He has loved us.

Think about heaven. It is there that God dwells. We will live in His immediate presence. We will see the Shekinah glory of the Lord. We will walk and talk with Jesus. In heaven we will find many of those whom we have loved above all others in this world. Someday we will see again parents, brothers, cousins, uncles and aunts, grandparents. Someday we will talk again with many who were dear friends to us while in this world. Furthermore we will meet and talk with Adam, Noah, Abraham; with Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Ruth; with David, Hezekiah, Josiah, Isaiah, Daniel, Esther; with Mary, Joseph, Peter, John, and Paul. There will be no more one-sided relationships, no interpersonal tensions, no uncertainties, no misunderstandings. Never again will our relationships with others be injured by jealousies, or disturbed by sinful weaknesses, or harmed by the pain of prolonged separations. Instead we will experience the fullness of love in a setting of perfect peace and tranquility.

But even now we can experience a foretaste of heaven, for to love in the manner described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 is precisely that – a foretaste of heaven. And to experience that foretaste should be the overwhelming desire of our hearts. We should live with heaven in view. The God of heaven should be the focus of our lives. We should live in anticipation of that city with foundations. Our eyes should be fixed on Jesus. Our concern should be to do that which will bring glory and honor to our Lord. Our deepest desire should be to hear from Him the words: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

We should be concerned above all else to love in such a way as to glorify Him. But we should also be concerned to love in such a

way as to provoke the unregenerate to a holy jealousy. In Romans eleven Paul explains that God has chosen for His covenant people the Gentile nations of the world, and, for a time, has turned His back upon Israel. Paul suggests that the one reason God has poured out His blessings upon the Gentiles is to make the people of Israel jealous.

Following the death of a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, I was approached by a man whom I knew well and knew to be a man of few words. With some hesitation, and with obvious embarrassment, he said to me, "You know, I have always wanted whatever it is that fellow had." Obviously, it was an opportunity to share with him the Gospel. The life of our departed friend provoked in this man a holy jealousy, and provided me with an opportunity to tell him the Good News.

So let me ask you – the life you live before others, before family, before co-workers, before fellow students, before those with whom you play – does the life you live provoke in them a holy jealousy? Do they look at your life and think, "I don't understand exactly what it is they've got, but I want it"? Do they want what you have because it is obviously of great worth?

That life which reflects – like the moon reflects the glory of the sun – the reality of the Father's love is a life that will provide others with a foretaste of heaven, provoking in them a holy jealousy. Therefore may God graciously empower us to love as we have been loved. May God graciously move us to seek "the most excellent way." For God's sake and the sake of others, may we love with a love that is patient and kind, a love that does not envy or boast, a love that is not proud, rude, self-seeking, or easily angered, a love that keeps no record of wrongs, a love that does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth, a love that always protects, trusts, hopes and perseveres, a love that never fails.