

# YOUR PARTS IN GOD'S PLAN

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Or, Children of the Heavenly Father

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### **Children of the Heavenly Father**

#### CONTENTS

Introduction	4	
One	Your Parts in God's Plan (1): Worship	8
Two	Your Parts in God's Plan (2): Work	13
Three	Your Parts in God's Plan (3): Warfare	20
Four	Knowing God the Father	28
Five	Imitating God the Father	36
Six	Honoring your Father and Mother	46
Seven	Conversing with Our Heavenly Father	57
Eight	Giving Thanks to the Father	65
Nine	The Father's Grand Design for Your Life: Holiness	73

## Author's Preface

### **Origin of this book**

Although my study of Paul's letter to the Ephesians began in 1973, a great deal of this book results from my life among the Chinese.

While in graduate school, I taught a Sunday school class on Christian doctrine, using Ephesians as the text. Week by week, I memorized a portion of this letter, meditated upon it, and then expounded it. Several commentaries helped me understand Paul's thought at that time, especially Calvin and Hodge. The New Bible Commentary, as well as Francis Foulkes' books on Ephesians, also gave me insight. In 1975, we moved to Singapore for six months. There I bought Watchman Nee's *Sit, Walk, Stand*, a brief but brilliant outline of the teaching of this epistle.

Later, we lived for almost ten years in Taiwan, where I taught at the China Evangelical Seminary. Although I never taught a course on Ephesians at the seminary, one of my Greek students at CES wrote a graduation thesis on Ephesians 4:1-16 under my direction. His meticulous and thoughtful research on Paul's doctrine of the body of Christ greatly increased my own knowledge of this crucial topic.

I spent a delightful year studying Ephesians with the Campus Evangelical Fellowship staff workers. I was supposed to be the teacher, but I learned a great deal about Ephesians from these godly and well-read Christian leaders. I also spoke often on practical daily living from passages in this book to the young adults' fellowship at Friendship Presbyterian Church in Taipei.

Meanwhile, I had gleaned much from the sections on Paul in George Ladd's *A Theology of the New Testament*, Herman Ridderbos' outline of the theology of Paul, and works on Ephesians by John Stott and F.F. Bruce. My wife gave me Calvin's *Sermons on Ephesians*, another classic exposition. I have also benefitted from Andrew Lincoln's learned commentary on Ephesians in the *Word Biblical Commentary* series, and from Peter O' Brien's volume in the *Pillar Commentary* series.

Later, I taught Ephesians to the men of a local church. Our English-language Chinese Bible study group spent several months on a study of the epistle; I learned much from our discussions. Portions of this book were woven together with freshly-composed material to produce a brief commentary, which was then translated into Chinese and published in Taiwan in 2002. In 2012, I taught an intensive, one-week class on Ephesians at the Central Taiwan Theological Seminary, for which I used William Larkin's Handbook on the Greek Text of Ephesians.

No other New Testament book has provided me with more insight and encouragement than Ephesians. Some have called it the "Switzerland of the New Testament," meaning that although small in size, it excels all others in beauty. All of God's Word is inspired, of course. I do not mean to detract from other portions of the Bible in my enthusiasm for this small epistle by the Apostle Paul. Nevertheless, I pray that the meditations which follow will enrich your life, as they have mine.

## Introduction

### **Authorship**

I attended a liberal seminary. Our New Testament professor was a believer, but he had drunk deeply from the polluted wells of negative German criticism. Imagine my disappointment when he spent only one lecture on Ephesians, and devoted the entire hour to arguments against Pauline authorship! Sadly, some so-called Evangelicals have also been infected with this critical poison.

The question is a simple one, despite the complexities which some scholars like to import into the discussion: When the writer refers to himself as "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God," did he lie, or tell the truth? The one who wrote, "Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak truth with his neighbor," and referred to "the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive..." – could this man have falsely claimed to be the apostle?

Some scholars believe that pseudonymity was a well-accepted literary technique in the first century, but Donald Guthrie's *New Testament Introduction* has long ago shown the weakness of this theory, as have many studies since then.

Critical scholars, including Andrew Lincoln, say that the theology of Ephesians is too "advanced" for Paul. They then dare to assert that an unnamed writer in the late first century penned a theological work more profound and rich than the writings of Paul himself! This argument is so weak one wonders why otherwise intelligent men could accept it.

I assume that Paul wrote this letter, along with Colossians, while in prison, probably at Rome, probably towards the end of his career. His language rises to new heights, to be sure, but his thought does not depart from the basic direction set in earlier writings.

### **The Text of Ephesians**

When memorizing Ephesians in the mid-seventies, I used the then-popular Revised Standard Version, which is based upon the type of text now found in the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament* and Nestle's editions of the Greek New Testament. Most scholars, liberal and evangelical alike, believe that this text preserves the best readings of the available Greek manuscripts.

I differ. Along with a growing number of textual critics (of whom I am not), I now think that the so-called Received Text – more accurately known as the Majority Text – is more accurate. To give one example: In 3:21, the NU text reads "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus..." That simply does not make good sense to me. The Majority Text has, "To him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus," which does have meaning.

Textual problems do not feature large in the chapters which follow, but I offer this opinion as an encouragement to my Chinese brothers and sisters to use the New King James Version of the Bible for their English version, and *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson), edited by Zane Hodges and Arthur Farstad.

## **Relevance of Ephesians for Chinese**

Ephesians speaks to many concerns widely held by Chinese:

### The desire for a father

Traditionally, Chinese, with their teaching on the family, have exalted the position of the father. He is expected to be the benevolent leader in the home. In addition, teachers and those in authority see themselves as surrogate fathers, who are to be respected and obeyed, and who care for those under them. In the past, the Emperor was to be "father and mother" to his people.

But many fathers fail to live up to the ideal. They are often too distant, and do not show enough love to their children, especially their sons. The same is true for other men in authority.

In Ephesians, Paul shows us just how much God the Father loves his children, and how we can have access to the Father through faith in Christ. This satisfies a deep longing in our hearts.

### The need for unconditional acceptance

Chinese ethics has many good teachings, but tends (like all non-christian ethical systems) to be legalistic. That is, human moral teachings can make no provision for failure and sin.

But Paul shows how we are accepted in God's beloved Son Jesus. We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness for our sins. We are saved by grace and live in grace.

### Unity among mankind

Chinese love peace, and seek harmony in human relationships. Chinese have long held the ideal of "all men are brothers," and "unity under heaven."

In Ephesians, Paul shows how people of different races, cultures, and classes can come together into one new society, united by faith in Christ, and ruled over by him. In Christ alone do we find the true unity for which all men seek.

### Harmonious personal relationships

Chinese seek to have harmonious personal relationships. They do not like to quarrel, or confront others. They prefer to maintain peace with other people.

In Ephesians, Paul shows us how to deal with conflicts in such a way that we can have true unity. He teaches us how to maintain both our commitment to truth and our desire for love.

### Moral uprightness

As a nation, Chinese have traditionally been deeply concerned for moral integrity and uprightness. They have criticized the Western countries for their moral decadence. Recently, however, Chinese have experienced growing moral breakdown within their own societies.

Ephesians shows how we can live morally upright lives, by the power of God.

### Family life

Chinese have always highly valued the family; they are famous for this. The family has come under great stress in Chinese society lately, however.

Ephesians teaches us how husbands and wives and parents and children can fulfill their proper duties, and thus enjoy satisfying family life.

### Victory over evil spirits

Chinese have much experience with evil spirits. With traditional Chinese religion on the rise, we see much more demon possession, and even Christians feel the power of Satan in their lives.

Paul shows us how to defeat Satan and all his wicked demons, and how to live a victorious Christian life.

### Individual's relationship to the group

Chinese tend to value the interests of the group more than Western societies. They rightly see that Westerners are too selfish and individualistic.

But Chinese also want to have individual freedom and meaning. Ephesians shows us how we can find true satisfaction by living for others.

### Meaning in life

Like all peoples everywhere, Chinese want to have meaning in life. Recently, however, the breakdown of traditional ways of thinking, and the collapse of communism, as well as the changes brought by modernization, have all introduced questions about the true meaning of life.

Ephesians shows us that the meaning of life is to play our part in God's plan to unite all peoples in Christ.

You can see why this small Epistle has so much to offer Chinese!

## **How to Read This Book**

As with several other books by me, including *The Lord's Healing Words*, *Jesus: The Complete Man*, and *Christ the King*, this volume is intended to be read slowly, one chapter at a time.

There is a good bit of repetition in the following pages; this is intentional. I believe that we need to remind ourselves of certain truths often, so that they sink into our thinking.

May God bless you as you meditate on Paul's Letter to the Ephesians!

## **Chapter One: Your Parts in God's Plan (1): Worship**

I would like to write about your parts in God's plan. My goal is to think with you about God's grand design for human history and for our own individual lives.

In chapter one, verse 10, Paul states emphatically that God indeed has a plan. In fact, he works all things according to his plan which Paul variously terms his will, his good pleasure, his purpose. In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul draws back the curtain of God's eternal purpose and displays for us a few facets of his marvelous strategy.

### **WHAT IS GOD'S PLAN?**

The goal of God's working in history, Paul tells us, is to "bring all things together under one head, even Christ."

What do we see when we read the newspaper, watch the news, listen to our friends, or peer into our own hearts? Conflict. Enmity. Strife. War. Revolution. Separation. Secession. Divorce. Estrangement. Misunderstanding. With rare exceptions, we do not see unity, harmony, peace. To the contrary, we find ourselves in a broken, fractured world, striving to keep the scattered parts of our life together, or to re-assemble the shattered pieces. We long for intimacy with others, an end to our isolation. We ache for races and peoples at war with each other, and cry out for peace. At an even deeper level, we yearn for a closer relationship with God. We would like to sing our hymns of praise with more conviction, and to sense God's peace more fully.

When Paul reveals to us God's plan, therefore, his words fall like dew upon a parched and thirsty land. Let's review what he tells us:

God's plan is to bring unity to this broken world. Unity of two types: Unity with God and with other men.

#### **Unity With God**

##### *Power of Sin*

We were dead in sin, walking around in trespasses against his holy law. We had defiled ourselves with various passions, worshiping the creature rather than the creator. We were darkened in our minds, and depraved in our conduct, sinking ever deeper into the mire of a multitude of evil desires.

But God has chosen us to be holy. He has made us alive together with Christ, and raised us up with him. By the same might power that brought Jesus out of the tomb, God has given us new life. His Holy Spirit, indwelling each true believer, now impels us to strive for that holiness without which no one can see God. With the Spirit in our hearts, God can even call us saints: not that we are already blameless, but that he has begun the process of sanctification first by pronouncing us holy, and then by implanting in us a new power for goodness that will result in complete Christ-likeness when our Lord returns (although not before). Believers can tap the unlimited resources of this power for good whenever we turn in faith to God through Christ.

##### *Penalty for sin*

Because of our sins, we were sons of disobedience, like the rest of mankind. We were children of wrath. That is, we were not only dead in sin, darkened in our minds, depraved in our conduct, but we were also doomed. Destined for eternal separation from God.



The rich mercy of God has worked a transformation, however. He has saved us from his wrath and places us securely at his right hand in Christ, so he can continue to demonstrate his kindness to us forever. We are his beloved children, in Christ. He has done this by redeeming us from our sins. We were slaves of the world, slaves of Satan, slaves of self, and thus subject to God's wrath. But Jesus, God's only Son, came and paid the price of our release from captivity. We are free now to enjoy God's favor, in Christ. For he has shed his own blood that we might know the forgiveness of sins and the favor of our heavenly Father.

### Union with Other Men

As gentiles, moreover, we were deprived of our inheritance. We had no rights. Paul says we were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenant promises God had made to his people, and therefore without hope and without God in this world.

In Paul's day, Jews and non-Jews could not eat together. The Law given by God through Moses forbade God's people from having intimate contact with those who had not demonstrated their faith in God through circumcision and obedience to the regulations of cleanliness. If you weren't descended from Abraham, you were outside the gate looking in. Just imagine: Non-Jews had none of the privileges of worship accorded to God's people. They couldn't sing the psalms. They didn't have the light of God's law: they couldn't serve God. They had no right to the promises God had made to his people, to be with them and be their God. They couldn't share in the inheritance.

But, shouts Paul, now all believers in Christ are one in him. He is our peace, and has made us both one; Jews and Gentiles alike. By dying on the cross, he has abolished law-keeping as the price for fellowship with God and his people. By dying for a world of sinners, he has broken down all the walls of performance, prejudice, and pride that keep people apart, and has made all believers into one new man, of which Christ himself is the head. We are fellow-heirs now with all God's people. To us belong the promises, particularly the promise of the Holy Spirit, and eternal access to God our loving Father. He even condescends now to dwell within us as individuals, and to bless our assembly with his gracious presence. "The strife is o'er, the battle done. The victory of Christ is won." The war is over. Peace at last! Peace with God, whose righteous anger was poured out upon his Son instead of upon us. Peace with other believers, our fellow-citizens, our fellow family members in the household of God.

God has had this grand design since eternity, when he chose us and predestined us. The decisive battle was fought and won at Calvary and on Easter day, when Jesus finished the work of paying for our sins. Now at God's right hand, Jesus pours out his Spirit upon all who truly repent of their sins and fully trust in Christ alone as savior. This Spirit guarantees that the work of sanctification will someday be complete, and makes the possession of our inheritance sure and certain. Meanwhile, we bask in his favor as beloved children.

There – that's God's plan. To unite people from every race and nation to himself in Christ, and thus to each other. To level the walls that divide us, and form us into one living temple, Christ Jesus himself being the corner stone. He is building a body, with Jesus the head. That is the goal of history. Empires rise and fall; armies march and statesmen frame treaties, seeking to build a new world order. Their efforts are doomed to frustration. But God's grand strategy for bringing people together in Christ proceeds without hindrance. In the end, all people will bow to one Lord. Either grudgingly, gnashing their teeth in remorse, or gladly, rejoicing in the final victory of the Lamb who rules as lion over all his creation.

## HOW DOES GOD EFFECT THIS PLAN?

### Proclamation

Paul says we are saved by faith. Faith in what? Faith in God's message, preached to us by God's messengers. He speaks of the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. He also calls it the gospel of peace, because those who receive it with sincere faith cease to be enemies with God, and become reconciled to him in Christ. They also discover peace with their neighbors, as we have seen.

Who proclaims this gospel? Jesus came and preached peace to those who were near, and to those who were far off. The Holy Spirit revealed this mystery to the apostles and prophets, and they passed it on to others. Beginning with the believers scattered by the persecution which broke out when Paul supervised the murder of Stephen, ordinary Christians have gone all over the world bearing testimony to their Lord. Believers throughout the ages have taken the Good News of salvation by grace through faith in Christ to their neighbors across the street and to others around the world. Through their witness, people lost in darkness have been able to hear a word of light, of life, of love. Individuals, families, tribes, and even nations have been transformed by the word of God communicated through human messengers.

Today, many in the church make decisions about education, work, travel, not solely on the basis of their won pleasure, but also – and primarily – with a view to doing their part in God's plan. They share the gospel with their neighbors, fellow-workers, and fellow-passengers. They choose majors that will equip them to serve God better. They accept overseas assignments, or study abroad, to enable them to carry God's word beyond the shores of America. They plan their vacations with a view to visiting other missionaries, or learning more about other cultures. They are not professional preachers, but they have heard the call to follow Jesus, and have become fishers of men.

Here's the point: God's plan to bring people from every nation in to fellowship with each other and with himself through faith in Jesus Christ includes you and me – at all times, and in all places. Your life has meaning and purpose: You can bring words of liberation to people enslaved to sin, Satan and death. Teaching Sunday school, encouraging a neighbor who's going through a divorce – in a multitude of ways, God can use you to share his truth with hungry souls.

### Performance

God brings about reconciliation by proclamation, as we have seen. He also uses the performance of good works. You can share God's love packing lunch for your son, taking a meal to someone who is ill, or contributing food for famished Africans.

God's truth shines through Christians when they refuse to commit sin or compromise the Gospel. When we love our family members, do our work faithfully, obey the laws of the State, or simply provide practical help, we demonstrate the love of God as followers of his Son Jesus.

### Prayer Power

But both good words and good deeds lack power without God. "Apart from me," said Jesus, "you can do nothing." That is why you find two marvelous prayers in Ephesians. Paul knew that only the Spirit of God could make his words and his works useful in God's hands to help bring about that union in Christ which he so eloquently described. Only God can open the eyes of our hearts to see God, his resurrection power and his redeeming love. God the Father – in communion with the Son

and the Spirit – decreed the salvation of a vast company of people to be saved by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ the Son, by the power of god the Holy Spirit. The Spirit uses the prayers of God’s people to open blind eyes, soften hard hearts, and save lost souls.

God delights to hear our prayers, for they show our trust in him and reliance upon him for our own needs and the needs of others. He has willed to effect his magnificent design for history not only by the proclamation of the gospel, the performance of good works, but also by the faithful prayers of his people.

## CONCLUSION

Your life has meaning and purpose. If you are a believer, God has reconciled you to himself through faith in Christ, and has brought you into a family that includes brothers and sisters from every nation in the world. You are on the winning side. The American Empire, like all others, will eventually disintegrate. Some think that it may fall sooner rather than later. The Chinese are poised to gain hegemony in East Asia and perhaps the entire world, but others will contest them. Even if they succeed in dominating the globe, their days of glory will also soon come to an end. If we pin our hopes on any earthly power, we shall suffer bitter disappointment.

Christians, however, serve a God who rules from heaven. He governs the nations with his mighty power, directing all events to accomplish his eternal purpose. He WILL succeed in bringing men and women of all sorts into his everlasting kingdom under the headship of Jesus Christ!

What, then is our primary part to play in this magnificent plan?

### Worship!

That is right. Our first priority in life, if we are to conform our lives to the will of God and fulfill our role in his grand design, is to declare his glory.

Watchman Nee, who wrote the classic book on Ephesians called *Sit, Walk, Stand*, noted that Paul assigns three positions to believers: We are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. We walk into the good works which God has prepared for us to perform. We stand in his strength against all the wiles of the devil.

Before we can walk or stand, we sit. That is, before we work for God or engage in spiritual warfare, we worship our King and Savior. That is why Paul opens the letter to the Ephesians with words of praise: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...” In the first chapter, he repeatedly tells us that we are to live “for the praise of his glory...”

“Praise the LORD!” “Declare his glory among the nations” cried the Psalmists over and over. In fact, if you look carefully, you will discover that the most often repeated command in the Bible is to praise God.

Yes, there is work for us to do. Yes, we must wage warfare against the spiritual enemies who oppose us. But first we praise God. While we are walking in love, we praise God. And while we stand against the devil, we praise God. “Let the saints be joyful in glory; let them sing aloud on their beds. Let the high praises of God be in their mouth, and a two-edged sword in their hand” (Psalm 149:5-6).

We worship God in private by hearing his word and responding in prayer, especially praise and thanksgiving. We join others in worship as we sing of the glories of the Lord in the assembly of his people. Alone or with others, we rejoice and rest in the victory of God. Contemplating the certainty

of victory, we go forth boldly to do our parts in his plan, by the power of the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead.

To God be the glory, great things he has done. To God be the glory, great things he will do!

## **Chapter Two: Your Parts In God's Plan (2): Work - Ephesians 4:1-6:9**

### **WHAT?**

What part do we have to play in God's plan? Since his plan is to unite his people from every race and nation into one body, with Christ as head, our role is to work together with others to bring people together into union with Christ and with each other through faith and love.

Remember that God works out his plan through people, who engage in proclamation of his truth, performance of good works, and prayer. He uses ordinary people like us to effect his marvelous strategy. Each one of us is a watchman on the wall: The defense of the city depends to some degree on how faithful we are in doing our duty.

What exactly, does this mean? Paul tells us in some detail in the central portion of the letter to the Ephesians.

### Unity

4:1ff He begins by stating the priority of unity. The first three verses state the theme of the next three chapters, and present us with a great challenge: To do everything we can to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. That is, to bend every effort to maintain that unity which God has given us in Christ.

We were at one time alienated not only from God, but also from each other, by our sins. In Christ, however, we have received reconciliation not only to an angry God, but reconciliation with others. We are one body in Christ, and have one Holy Spirit, one Lord Jesus, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is over all, through all and in all of us.

Actions come from attitudes, so Paul exhorts us to humility, patience, forbearance, love. We are to make unity our ultimate aim.

Paul hastens to add that we are not thereby all the same. Each has a gift, received from Christ the ascended Lord. Each, therefore, has a unique role to play in building up the body of Christ. Some have offices in the church, and exercise public ministries, like evangelists and pastor/teachers. But their function is to equip the saints - that's us - for the work of ministry. The ministers of the church, therefore, are all the believers. All have abilities that we must exercise if the body is to grow properly. Our goal is nothing less than maturity in Christ, which means knowing him and becoming like him in attitudes and actions.

### Truth and Love

Each one must play the role assigned to us in helping others grow up into a deeper knowledge of Christ and conformity to his moral image. In this growth process, the body needs two essential nutrients: truth and love.

Falsehood surrounds us, and even infects the church itself. We all have the duty of becoming alert to the idolatries of our age, exposing them, and countering them with truth from God's word, so that all of us can grow together.

Paul urges us, therefore, to renounce all falsehood. No more lies of any kind. Love requires truth, honesty, even frankness. Dishonesty destroys the unity of the body. So does any unhelpful word, in fact. The high standard set before us calls for nothing less than measuring each word by a very straight rule: Will what I am about to say help the hearer at this particular time?

What about when I'm angry about what someone has done to me? Anger alerts us to a problem. How we address the problem determines whether we are builders, or blasters, of the body of Christ. Jesus told us what to do when others offend us: Go to the person directly, and try to set things right. If that doesn't work, then take one or two others with you and see if they can't help you communicate. (Matthew 18:15-20) Don't harbor grudges, Paul warns, for if we do, Satan gains a foothold and uses our resentment. The usual bitter fruit of buried anger is anger wrongly expressed – in bitterness, rage, brawling, slander, disputes, and malice of all kinds (4:31).

So, let us speak the truth in love, and thus build the body of Christ.

That includes sharing the gospel with others. We can do this at home, with our family members; at school and work, with our classmates and co-workers; in church, with fellow believers and seekers. We can speak the truth in love as we travel back to Asia to visit family or attend meetings. We can do it on the airplane, in the restaurant, at home.

Since 1988, I have visited China four times. Each time, God has opened doors for me to share the gospel with several hungry people. One time, for example, when a physician and I were met in Shanghai by the car from the China Youth Travel Service, we said to the woman assigned to us: "We hear there are lots of churches in Shanghai. Are there?" With a tone of voice that indicated no interest whatever, she replied, "I don't know," and so we dropped the subject, but we prayed for her that night.

The next day, however, as we were being driven to the airport, she said, "I often take groups to temples and churches. I like the churches better, because they are quieter. But when people ask me questions about Christianity, I don't know what to say. Could you tell me what Christians believe?"

We spent the next forty-five minutes explaining the Gospel to her. Then she asked, "Can any sin be forgiven?" "Yes," we answered. Then, with tears in her eyes, she asked, "Can even a serious sin be forgiven?" "Yes! Jesus is the Son of God! His blood is able to cover over any sin that we commit!" How grateful we were for this precious opportunity to share the good news of Christ.

One little verse seems to interrupt the flow of Paul's discourse on speaking the truth in love: "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need" (4:28).

Although I do not understand why it is in this place, my guess is that Paul wants us to use our money

the way we use our words: to help others. Which raises an interesting question: Why do you work? To earn money, of course. But what do you plan to do with your money? Use most of it for yourself and give a few pennies to others? Or use as little as possible and have a large surplus to share with those in real need?

Many Christians from other parts of the world cannot quite understand how American Christians can live like kings and queens while hundreds of millions suffer from famine, earthquake, flood, and ignorance of basic health, not to mention of the gospel. That's a good question. The same question applies to prosperous Chinese believers in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Western countries, and even in parts of Mainland China.

The Apostle returns indirectly to this theme in chapter five, when he warns us to renounce lust. He refers primarily to sexual lust, since lust kills love. Having told us to love each other, as God loved us and as Christ loved us, he quickly clarifies his meaning. He's not speaking about what both ancient Romans and modern people call love – he calls that lust.

What's the difference? Lust seeks self-satisfaction, while love seeks to satisfy others. I don't have to tell you that we are immersed in a flood of filth in this country. Our senses are bombarded with temptations to lust from virtually every magazine, book, movie, or TV program we see, not to mention the songs we hear and the ads that succeed in capturing our attention.

We need to renounce all this. Not to "participate in the unfruitful works of darkness" (5:11). Not even to expose ourselves unnecessarily to others who tempt us to lust. Jesus, Paul, the apostles and the prophets all unite, however, in commanding us to flee all that incites us to satisfy self at the expense of others.

Recently a Chinese Christian friend of ours took another friend to the movies. The film was so filled with sexual immorality that our other friend felt that she had been defiled by what she saw. I wonder how many Christians are watching TV programs and going to movies that depict lust and immorality? Is this a good testimony? Is it a good use of time and money?

That's the negative side. The positive is to live wisely, making the most of the time, seeking to know and do God's will. And what is that will? To unite people of all races and nations in Christ. We should plan our day, our week and our year with this one goal: How can I best help build the body of Christ? "The days are evil" (5:16). We're at war, and cannot afford a peacetime mentality. Furthermore, there is great joy in doing God's will.

Does Paul want us to live lives with no joy? Of course not. He addresses the question of merriment when he forbids drunkenness. With drugs and alcohol affecting more and more people, we need to ask, what are they looking for? A good time? Perhaps they want to forget pain, or experience a high, or just feel good. But God has answers for those longings: Himself. Fullness of the Holy Spirit brings a deeper joy. And that fullness can be gained and expressed, by directing our minds toward God and singing his praises to each other.

## Mutual Submission

The final expression of the Spirit's fullness is mutual submission. Most of us value our independence, so the idea of submission to anyone sounds strange. When you think of it, however, Christianity means submission: submission to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, in faith and obedience. This God dwells in other believers, so submission to other Christians really means nothing other than submitting to the God who dwells in them.

What about submission to non-believers? God does not indwell them, but he has commanded us to obey all human authority, except when authorities try to force us to commit a sin. When we honor and obey non-Christians in authority over us, then, we are honoring and obeying the Lord from whom all authority derives.

What does mutual submission look like in practice?

Wives, obey your husbands, and give them respect. Not because they are smarter, or stronger, or better, but because the husband represents Christ, the head of the church, to whom redeemed believers willingly submit.

Not long ago, I attended a Chinese church house meeting. The man who was leading the Bible study had never done so before. When it came time for people to share, his wife said, "I'm so glad it was my husband's time to lead the study. He never reads the Bible, nor does he pray, so this gave him a good opportunity to learn more about the Bible." What do you think that man felt like? Did his wife show respect to him?

"Husbands, love your wives" with the same sacrificial spirit that motivated Jesus' death for his church. Not because she is beautiful, a good housekeeper, helpful, or even respectful, but because she represents the church, for whom Jesus died. We cannot command our wives to honor or obey us, but we can set an example of self-sacrifice and loving leadership that will reduce some of their hesitations and remove some of their excuses.

A Chinese woman in Charlottesville said recently, "I can't believe in Jesus because my husband, who is a Christian, does not set a good example. He does not read the Bible or pray, and he loves his work more than he loves me." Can we blame her?

"Children, honor and obey your parents." When you are young, obey them. When you have assumed full responsibility for your life, show them the honor they deserve as your elders. When they are old, care for their emotional and material needs as best you can.

Parents, submit by sacrificing your own time to bring your children up in the training and instruction of the Lord. Once again the Bible flies in the face of our age. We exalt the high achieving man or woman with a slim briefcase, a power suit, and tickets to a distant location for an important meeting. But who's taking care of our most precious resource? Who's showing them the love and care they need to grow into healthy adults?



Recently, I talked with a non-Christian Chinese man married to a Christian woman. He said that she had found a job two hours away, so she moved to that place to live during the week, and came home on weekends. She did this while her son was in high school. The family did not need the money, but she enjoyed her work. Do you wonder why her son and husband are not believers?

"Slaves" – or students, or employees – "obey your masters," teachers, bosses. Not just the good ones, but the irritating ones as well. Do all your work as if you were serving the Lord Jesus, who is our real master in heaven. Those in positions of authority, likewise, must remember that they have a master in heaven, and treat their subordinates fairly and gently.

Submission to others, then, flows from our submission to God himself. In fact, we can measure our maturity in Christ by how willingly we sacrifice our own desires in order to serve others.

In all this, we seek to achieve and maintain unity with others. We make war on all that divides, such as resentment – for we forgive as we have been forgiven; money – for we give freely to those in need; lust – for we seek others' satisfaction, not our own; laziness – for we strive to know and do God's will, not our own; gender – for we refuse to take part in the war of the sexes that now ravages our land; generation – for we close the gap with respect and gentleness; and class – for we give to everyone his due, with humility and justice.

## **WHY?**

That's a high standard, a daunting challenge. Why should we accept this assignment? Why go to the trouble of self-denial in order to benefit others?

As always, the Bible gives ample reasons for doing our duty.

### For God's sake

The first reason is, "For God's sake." We have been chosen, justified, renewed, cleansed, forgiven, incorporated into the family of God, gifted with the Spirit. God has loved us – we should love others.

How can those who worship only one God be content with divisions in our midst? How can we grieve the Spirit, dishonor our Lord, and disobey our God by nursing grudges and indulging shameful passions?

Paul says, "Be imitators of God, as beloved children. Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us." God himself said, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

### For others' sakes

The second reason is, "For the sake of others." I had a boyhood friend named Stanley Wolf. Stanley's mother had died. His father once told me that Mrs. Wolf had lived by the light of only one word, "Others." Her ethical code might have been incomplete, but she was on the right track. You can make an impact on this world, right where you are, by dedicating yourself to the noble task of helping others

know and love Jesus better, and thus enjoy closer union with him and with his people.

All this has a great deal to do with the worldwide spread of the gospel, a matter dear to the hearts of all true Christians. Here's how:

We are a city set upon a hill. Others are watching us, and judge our religion by our relationships at home. When they see divided churches, wanton sexual license, thoughtless waste, luxurious living, mindless entertainment, endemic divorce, rebellious youth, irresponsible parents, lazy workers, and greedy managers – when they observe the moral failures in the church, how can they respect Christianity?

The Chinese communist government lashes out at what it calls "spiritual pollution," imported from the West. The Muslims call America the "Great Satan." Any western missionary will tell you the most formidable obstacle he faces is the odor of decay emanating from Western culture. But what about the reputation of Chinese churches? Are we also free from reproach?

So, if you want to influence the spread of the gospel in China, bend every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the bond of peace.

One other remark along this line. Paul repeatedly reminds us that no man is an island. He commends the Ephesians for their love for "all the saints." He prays that they may be able to comprehend the love of Christ – with "all the saints." He tells them to pray for "all the saints." The church of Jesus Christ overflows all borders. Unless each member of Christ's body worldwide does its part, the worldwide church cannot grow properly.

That means that we must concern ourselves with "all the saints," not just the people we know. Our spiritual gifts, our money, our time, our prayers – these belong to Christ, who died for the whole church, not just for people in our church or family.

When we make a church budget, we need to include overseas missionary work at a high level. When we think of using our gifts, we need to consider going overseas, for a short or long term, as witnesses of Jesus through our profession. Several mission agencies take Chinese doctors and other professionals to China on short trips that allow you to practice your specialty in a way that everyone knows you are a Christian. When we travel, we should go not just as tourists, but as ambassadors for Christ, praying for opportunities to share the gospel.

#### For our own sake

Self-denial hurts. Sacrifice involves pain. Giving means losing. But – Living for God's will is good for you. This investment pays handsome dividends. For example: As we love others, we gain a deeper experience of God's love for us. Since all believers are members of the body of Christ, anything we do for another Christian benefits the whole body, of which each of us is a part.

- Forgiving others denies Satan a foothold in our lives.
- Renouncing evil desires marks those who have been delivered from the wrath of God that comes upon the disobedient.

- The husband who loves his wife is actually loving himself.
- Obedient children have the promise that things will go well with them.
- Honest workers will receive a reward from God himself.
- When we share the good news of Christ with others, we receive great joy.
- Finally, those whose lives prove that they love Christ will enjoy peace and grace forever.

## HOW?

Let me conclude with a few suggestions about how to play our parts in God's plan. The Spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak. We need help and strength from outside to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the bond of peace. Once again, Paul supplies the answers in chapter 4, verse 20-24:

### Renounce

First, we should renounce our old way of life. Put off the old man. It was rotten anyway, corrupted by the lies that led it into various lusts. Decide you want to change. Throw away those books, magazines, records, tapes. Turn off the TV, and spend the evening with your family. Invite friends for dessert and prayer instead of going to the movie. Get rid of your alcohol and drugs. Tell that so-called "friend" you're busy Saturday night, and invite him to church on Sunday instead. Do whatever you have to do. Just say "no!" to everything that keeps you from doing the will of God.

### Renew

"How can I do **that**?" you ask. By the renewing of your mind, replies Paul. Garbage in, garbage out. Replace the garbage with truth. Listen to Christian music. Read the Bible. Read missionary prayer letters, or Christian biographies. Feed your mind on truth, not fiction. When you have the liberty to choose, associate with people who build you up, not tear you down – unless you are deliberately and prayerfully seeking to help them see and know more about God. Identify idols of the heart and replace them with truths from God's word. Take advantage of opportunities to learn more about Christ. Sunday school, Bible studies – all can help.

We renew our mind also by reaching out to others. Pick a ministry and begin spending some time on it and see how that helps your perspective. May I urge you to consider focusing on at least one of your church's missionaries? Pray for him, write to him, invite him to your home when he's in town, even consider a trip to visit him on the field.

As our minds are being renewed, we can put on the new man. Daily. Step by step. Not instant perfection, but steady growth into Christian maturity. New goals. New priorities. New habits. New friends. New sources of entertainment. New freedom. New power. New joy. New life, for ourselves, and for others around the world.

You are a watchman on the wall. If you play your part in God's plan faithfully, the city of God on earth will grow and the kingdom of God will advance around the world.

### **Chapter Three: Your parts in God's Plan (3): Warrior**

#### *Introduction*

In previous chapters from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we have seen that God has a comprehensive plan for the entire world: To head up all things in Christ. That is, he intends to reconcile to himself a vast company of people chosen from every race and nation. He is bringing them together under one head, even Jesus Christ, his only Son. He employs the prayers of believers, the preaching of the Gospel of reconciliation, and the performance of good works by Christians to build a unified church based upon truth and love. We are all pilgrims, on the way to the heavenly city. As we proceed, we have at least three primary duties.

Ephesians chapters one through three tell us that the first of these is worship. When we meditate on God's grand design, our hearts thrill with wonder and awe, and our lips utter unfeigned adoration.

The second role is that of the worker. Knowing that God is building a body of people to reflect his character, we must set to work. Each one of us has a niche in the edifice we call the living church. Simply put, our job is to foster true Christian unity – founded on truth and love – and to oppose all that divides. Ephesians chapters four through the first half of six explain this responsibility in detail.

But there is another key role for you and me to play: That of the warrior, as Paul teaches us at the end of his letter to the Ephesians.

This chapter will focus on the pilgrim's purpose. In a word, that purpose is to wage warfare for our king.

Ephesians 6:10-22

Let us ask three questions of our text:

#### **WHAT does Paul exhort us to do?**

The answer: Be strong in the Lord. Or, as the Greek has it, be continually strengthened.

In other words: Stay in training. Build up "your armed forces." Maintain battle readiness. Prepare for rapid deployment and instant counterattack.

Notice how Paul's words diverge from those we hear all day. Our culture cries out: Fulfill yourself! Protect yourself. Provide for yourself. Advance yourself. Satisfy yourself. Love yourself.

All these reflect a peacetime mentality, as if there were no war in progress. They assume a goal of personal peace and affluence, as Francis Schaeffer used to say. Notice also how they all focus on the self: Be self-reliant, self-sufficient, self-centered.

But Paul says, be strengthened – not in yourself, but – in the Lord. Every true believer is in Christ. The faith that God has given us unites us to our living head. We are members – individually and collectively – of the body of Christ, the church. We derive our strength from our risen Lord. He enables us to live triumphantly. Being strengthened in the Lord involves faith in him, a constant trust in his power and love. It also requires a faithfulness to him and to his people, as we shall see.

Paul adds, for emphasis, "and in the strength of his might." That is, in his mighty powers. The power of God raised Jesus from the dead, and gives new life to all who truly trust in him. You have at your disposal a mighty source of energy and strength, for you to be continually strengthened by God, who

dwells in his Son Jesus.

We answer the first question this way: Paul commands us – not to be comfortable – but to be strong and ready.

The next question arises naturally:

### **WHY? Why go to all the effort?**

Are we really at war? Must life be a constant struggle? What about the happiness I was promised when I heard the gospel – “Believe in Jesus, and things will go well for you.” Why must I live on tenterhooks, never relaxing, never lowering my guard, never just settling back and letting life happen? C’mon, Paul. Why so serious? So extreme! War is ugly, expensive, messy, dirty. People get hurt. You might even die.

Once again, Paul’s answer comes with ruthless clarity: Because we are in a desperate struggle. There IS a war on. A deadly foe assaults us from every direction. It’s total war, with no safe place to hide. Even the living room couch may be the center of a fierce battle. And there is no truce – this is a protracted conflict that offers no respite. That relaxing hour you spend in front the TV may be the occasion of some of Satan’s greatest victories.

Let’s look more closely at this conflict.

#### The fact of war

We can see the struggle in our own personal lives. Do you love God with all your being? Do you feel close to God? Do you naturally commune with him? Do you always obey his clear commands? Or does your flesh tend towards neglect of God and disobedience to his word? Do you struggle with gluttony, lust, materialism? Are you tempted to pride, dishonesty, resentment?

How about relationships with others? Do you love your neighbor as much as you love yourself? Is everything just fine in your family, with no conflict? How about your friends, colleagues, classmates, roommates and neighbors?

If you’re like me, you struggle in many areas of life. You don’t find faith, hope and love just naturally flowing out from your heart and watering the garden of your life.

Now look at the community. Do peace and harmony rule? James Hunter has alerted us to the culture wars that threaten to tear this nation apart. Controversy over abortion, homosexuality. Feminism. The plague of pornography that leads to sex crimes and broken families. The newspapers headlines chronicle a daily regress in anarchy.

What about our nation and the world? We read of wars and rumors of wars, as old empires crumble and allow long-buried passions and ambitions to erupt. Islamic countries really do intend to dominate the world. Russian nationalists haven’t given up their dream of a great Slavic power, and they have thousands of nuclear weapons. Some experts predict a major depression, which will radically alter Modern civilization as we now know it. No one knows whether they are right, but the Scripture would seem to support the thesis of a book I have almost finished entitled *The Great Reckoning*.

How can a nation that lives like Sodom and Gomorrha escape God’s judgment? How can a country that has reveled in luxury and world dominance like Babylon avoid the judgment that falls upon every proud and self-indulgent people? How can those who take the lives of millions of innocent babies expect God to treat them differently from Hitler’s Germany? Japan suffered from her military

aggression; shall we not also pay for our cultural aggression, which has projected immorality and greed to almost every corner of the globe? How can governments and citizens that spend money like a drunken sailor not end up in the gutter?

When the crisis hits us, intense conflict will rage all around us. Are we ready?

Yes – we’re in a vast struggle, and the stakes are very high.

### Nature of the conflict

But let’s not be deceived about the true nature of the conflict.

Our unbelief and disobedience towards God derive from our own sinful flesh, which too easily follows the course of this world. But the prince of the power of the air temporarily rules this fallen world, and he prowls around constantly, seeking some to devour.

Purveyors of sexual immorality and lawlessness may or may not be aware that their power comes from Satan, who deceives and disarms the opposition, leaving the way open for the spread of filth and violence. Nationalism, racism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism – all seem to be making ominous advances. Remember who’s behind them. The great liar. The adversary. The enemy, who has been a murderer from the beginning. He orchestrates much of what we see on the news, to keep us from knowing the loving God, and from building the Christian unity God intends for his people.

### The devil’s tactics

Paul tells us to arm ourselves against the wiles – or schemes – of the devil. That’s because this ancient liar employs deceit as his major weapon.

Paul gives us two objectives: to withstand, and to do everything. It follows, then, that Satan would hinder us from withstanding, and from accomplishing all God would have us do.

*Standing firm:* Let’s think of standing firm in terms of faith and hope. Looking at the first three chapters of Ephesians, we conclude that:

Satan doesn’t want us to believe that God has chosen us to be holy and blameless; or that he has predestined us to be his sons through Christ; or that he has redeemed us from his own wrath by the blood of Christ; or that he has a plan to save millions from around the world; or that he has given us the Holy Spirit; or that he has promised us an eternal inheritance with Christ. Satan wants you to doubt God’s love and his power, his wisdom and his word. He wants you to lose faith, and forsake your hope.

*Doing everything:* Your spiritual foe would also hinder you from doing everything God commands.

“Doing everything” can be interpreted in terms of love. Let’s take a few examples from the last half of Ephesians:

God says: preserve Christian unity with humility and meekness. The devil says, “You have your rights! Don’t let them treat you that way!”

God says: “Use your spiritual gift to edify others. Satan replies, “Don’t work so hard” Or, “Look how gifted you are! Don’t you think you’re a bit more important than others?”

God says, “Speak the truth in love.” Satan whispers, “A little lie won’t hurt anyone.” Or, “Tell it like

it is. Don't hold back. Just let him have it!"

God says, "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind." Satan objects: "The Bible's boring. Sermons are dull. Teaching fellowships and Sunday school are a waste of time." Or, "You have to watch TV to know what others are thinking. You need to listen to the world's music to be able to identify with them."

God says, "Give your surplus income to the needy." Satan counters: "Your house is too small. Your wallpaper's out of style. Your car's already two years old. Stay in a hotel this summer instead of a dingy old cabin. You really do need that new dress."

God says, "Walk in love, as Christ loved you and sacrificed himself for you." Satan says, "Fulfill those desires. You have to look out for 'number one.' After all, no one else will."

God says, "No immoral or impure person will inherit the kingdom." Satan replies, "No one is looking. Go ahead and switch to that sexy TV program."

God says, "Covetousness is idolatry." Satan answers, "Here's a new catalogue; just relax a few minutes looking at their new products." Or, "Just see those commercials as an art form."

God says, "Walk as children of light." Satan objects: "Don't be so serious about life. Loosen up! Have some fun! Go to that movie; you don't have to be affected by what you see and hear."

God says, "Make the most of the time." Satan replies, "Hey look, everybody's gotta have some down time, a chance to let your guard down, to ease back and just be passive. You can start that Bible study plan tomorrow."

God says, "Be filled with the Spirit. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to each other." Satan mocks, "Do you want to be some kind of religious freak?"

God says, "Wives, be submissive to your husbands," Satan retorts, "In this day and age? And to that wimp? You gotta be kidding." Or, "If you submit to him he'll walk all over you."

God says, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her." Satan disagrees, "Stay at work an extra hour and you'll climb that ladder faster. Go play tennis with your customer, and sales will rise." Or, "How can he ask you to love someone who's let herself go?" Or, "You mean that shrew? Forget it!"

God says, "Children obey your parents." Satan says, "That was okay when parents were reasonable, but your folks live in the Dark Ages." Or, "If you do what they say, all the kids'll laugh at you."

God says, "Fathers, bring up your children in the nurture and instruction of the Lord." Satan says, "Leave that to your wife. Or to the Sunday school teacher."

I could go on, but you get the point: Satan will strenuously resist all the good works you attempt, no matter how small they may seem to you. Any step of obedience and faith will meet stiff opposition.

Finally, then, we ask ourselves,

### **HOW can we win this war?**

First of all, we must be strong in the Lord. We are weak, but he is strong! We must rely on the immeasurable greatness of his power towards those who believe! Like Paul, we can do all things in

him who continually strengthens us. The arm of flesh will fail us, but God's power will not!

The God who raised Jesus from the dead also raised us from spiritual death. We are free now to obey his commands, by the power of his Spirit. We are no longer slaves to sin; our resurrected Lord has given us liberty to follow in his steps. Let's turn to him for strength, and we'll find it.

But we need to put on the whole armor of God. Use the weapons he supplies, and the victory is ours. Had David tried to fight Goliath with Saul's sword, he would have stumbled over his own armor. But he used the sling that God had long trained him to wield, and gained the victory.

What weapons, then has God issued to his troops?

The first five elements of our arsenal are defensive, in keeping with Paul's first command: Stand firm. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you, if you do it in God's strength.

*TRUTH:* Put the belt of truth around your waist

The word of truth is the gospel of salvation for those who believe. As we trust in that Gospel, we can withstand Satan's assaults on our faith and hope. As we hold to the truth in love, we can resist the false doctrines that blow through the church. Truth engenders holiness and righteousness, and protects us from lusts of deceit, by which Satan would entice us away from God and his will for us. Truth strips the façade from the empty words by which Satan seeks to lull us into thinking that sin has no consequences, and that immorality and greed will not call down God's wrath upon sons of disobedience. Truth provides the most potent antidote to the ever-present tendency to foolish diversions that would eat up our precious time and distract us from our purpose in life.

Where do we find this truth? The Psalmist said, "Your word is truth." Jesus said, "I am the truth." The Old and New Testaments were written by men inspired by the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus calls the Spirit of truth. As we immerse ourselves in the words of the Bible, we find the power to resist Satan's wiles.

*RIGHTEOUSNESS:* Put on the breastplate of righteousness

Some interpreters take this to refer to the imputed righteousness that is ours through faith in Christ. No doubt about it, we receive the gift of righteousness freely from God when we repent of our sins and turn in sincere trust to God, whose Son Jesus died for sinners upon the cross. God credits his righteousness to our account, and we are justified. But Paul probably refers here to actual, practical righteousness. What he called "good works which God has prepared for us beforehand, that we should walk in them" earlier in this letter.

Basically, this righteousness has already been illustrated for us in chapters four through six. I won't take time to repeat Paul's exhortations. We need to note, however, that whenever we do what is right, we make it easier to obey God the next time. Creatures of habit, we build on previous actions. Build habits of justice and love, and you will find that Satan has less with which to accuse you or tempt you.

*GOSPEL OF PEACE:* Have your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace

We wear different types of shoes for different activities. Most people wear dress shoes Sunday morning, and will change into less formal – and more comfortable! – shoes this afternoon. The Roman legionnaire wore solid leather shoes that enabled him to march across the Empire on those magnificent roads, and to stand firm locking shields with his comrades, to withstand any attack.

By being ready at all times to share the gospel, we take a stance that can transform any moment into a victory for truth. That doesn't necessarily mean we preach on the street corners. For most of us it



means living a life that makes others thirsty to know what gives us hope. And then being able to give them a drink.

Let me illustrate with an example from my first semester in graduate school at U.N.C. in Chapel Hill. It was the first big test of the semester. Everybody was anxious. My classmates ran around the classics library, frantically reading notes and asking questions. I had studied hard and prayed for help on the test, and was not in the least bit worried. They all knew I was a Christian, had been to seminary, and had served as a pastor for two years. One of the girls, a delightfully outspoken Jewess, turned to me and asked, "Doyle, how come you're not nervous like us? How can you be so cool, calm, and collected?" My moment had arrived. The library fell silent. Angels readied their harps for a hymn of triumph. Smiling, I opened my mouth and replied, "I took a tranquilizer."

Can you believe it?! First and goal on the one yard line and I fumbled the ball. And you know what? I never again had such a clear opportunity. For the next three and a half years I regretted my folly and searched for another opening, but in vain.

What was the problem? I wasn't ready. I didn't have on my gospel shoes.

*FAITH:* Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one

Be sure of this, Satan will send deadly missiles your way. One man called them scuds: schemes cunningly used by the devil. When doubts and distractions assail us, faith will defend us.

But not just any of old faith. Not a "Pollyanna" wish that all will be well. Or the "faith n faith" of the health-and-wealth preachers. No, faith in the clear promises of God, found in the Bible and interpreted according to their context. God will not necessarily give you health, or wealth, or unbroken happiness in this world. He may choose to test you with poverty, sickness, and failure. But he will never leave you nor forsake you. He will grant grace sufficient for your needs. He will give daily bread, and strength to endure. God does love you, and will guide you through the valley of the shadow of death into eternal life.

Use faith as a shield. Resist the devil's lies, and he will flee from you.

*SALVATION:* Take the helmet of salvation

By grace you have been saved, declares Paul, through faith. By the atoning sacrifice and triumphant resurrection of Jesus, God has saved his people from the penalty of sin: there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. By the resurrection power of Christ, He is saving us from the power of sin: sin has no more dominion over us. That is, as we resist Satan and rely on God, we shall increasingly gain victory over sin. Finally, when Christ returns, God will deliver us from the presence of sin.

Don't let anything shake your faith in God's salvation. Nothing can separate true believers from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. He ever lives to make intercession for us at God's right hand. In his resurrection power, we are more than conquerors. Keep this helmet firmly fixed over your thought life, and you will enjoy great peace and power.

*THE SPIRIT:* And the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God

Now Paul opens up the door of the great hangar to display our offensive weapons. More accurate than any smart bomb, packing a deadlier wallop than any Tomahawk missile, God's word tears down Satan's strongholds and smashes his defenses.

By the word of God, Paul means the words of the Bible used in particular situations.

Satan said, "If you're the son of God, turn these stones into bread," Jesus replied, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." He didn't invent those words, but chose them from the Old Testament record of the wanderings of the Jews in the wilderness. He had at his command the entire arsenal of God's word, and selected that sentence which applied best in his situation.

Then Satan quoted another Old Testament passage, to try to get Jesus to avoid the way of the cross. He misapplied the Bible, attempting to trip Jesus up. But Jesus rejected that false interpretation, and responded with another sentence from the wilderness wanderings, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God."

Jesus overcame Satan's third attempt with yet another word from the Pentateuch.

You can do the same. What are your main temptations? Search the Scriptures for words that speak – in context – to your situation. Memorize them, meditate on them, and then quote them – aloud, if necessary – when temptations arise.

But God's word can also win offensive victories. Whenever we take the gospel to a person or place where it has never before been properly presented, we go on the attack. The actual use of God's words will eventually win the day. We can quote the Bible to refute error and to spread the truth.

Don't be ashamed of the very words of the Bible. We may have to disguise their source for a while, and quote them as our own, in certain circumstances. But God's word will level Satan's kingdom.

Whenever you support the work of preachers – at home or in the other lands – you are indirectly wielding the sword of the Spirit. But you can do it here, also. The opportunities are endless: Play Christian music. Decorate your house or office – tastefully – with words and phrases from the Bible. Send cards with Bible quotations. Write letters to the editor and use the Bible. Start a discovery bible study with your non-Christian friends.

Whatever you do, have faith in the power of God's word to cut through lies and establish the truth.

Finally Paul commands us to:

*PRAY* in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me...

Napoleon declared that an army marches on its stomach. He meant that troops must be adequately supplied in order to succeed. A Christian has applied that to the church this way: The Christian army advances on its knees.

- Do you seek victory over bad habits? Pray
- Do you yearn for harmony with your spouse? Pray
- Do you need wisdom on the job? Pray
- Do you want to see the slaughter of innocent unborn children stopped? Pray
- Do you want to stem the tide of filth and lawlessness? Pray
- Do you long for the gospel to spread to the two billion who have never heard the name of Jesus? Pray

Paul gives some detailed instructions about prayer. We'll conclude our discussion of the Christian warrior with these.

Pray on all occasions. At all times. We need stated times for prayer: set aside a regular time for concentrated prayer, and don't let anything distract you. But we also need to pray as we walk through the day, casting all our cares on God, knowing that he cares for us.

Pray in the Spirit. Prayer is hard work. Our flesh resists it. Ask for the Spirit to strengthen you. Ask him also to guide you so that you pray according to God's will.

Pray with all kinds of prayer. Praise. Thanksgiving. Confession of sin. Intercession for others. Petitions for yourself. Use all the varieties of prayer that God has given us. He's eager to listen.

Be alert. Guess who doesn't want you to pray! Guess who will distract you in a thousand ways from the one activity he fears most? Turn off the TV. Drop that novel. Go home early, so you can get up early and pray.

Pray for all the saints. Not just for yourself, or your family. Intercede for your friends, their marriages, their children. For leaders of the church. For Christians in government. For believers around the world, many of whom suffer for their faith. For all the saints.

Pray also for me, entreated Paul. The mighty apostle, in prison for his faith, asked for prayer that he would be bold in preaching the gospel. If he needed it, how much more do the preachers in churches today? The radio Bible teachers. The missionaries we support.

We are all pilgrims on our way to the heavenly city. God has given us purpose in life. Although we face a deadly foe, God wills for his truth to triumph through us, and for his kingdom to come with power. May we all be loyal soldiers of our risen Lord!

## **Chapter Four: Knowing God the Father – Ephesians 1:1-14**

### *Introduction*

A few years ago, I talked with a woman from China who had attended an evangelistic meeting. She said she had not yet believed, but went on to admit that she wanted to become a Christian. When I asked why, she replied, "I want a father."

Several years earlier, I participated in a men's breakfast. Next to me was a Christian counselor, who had just returned from a weekend seminar on substance abuse. He was all excited about a new treatment which a psychiatrist from New York had shared. The speaker had observed that, from birth to about eight, children greatly need to see the warm, accepting face of their mother. At about eight, they begin to need even more to see the loving, but firm face of a father. Lacking either, or both, they will often turn to substance abuse to dull their pain. This Christian psychiatrist told the audience that he would take his counselees through a study of the Bible's use of the phrase "face of God." He would direct their attention to God the Father. More often than not this exposure to God as Father would liberate alcoholics and drug abusers from their addiction.

We all have a deep desire for a father. This longing even affects politics. The traditional Chinese emperor was supposed to be "father and mother" to his people. Do you remember the American presidential debate in Richmond in 1992? One of the questioners asked the candidates, "We are like children. How will you meet our needs?"

The revelation of God as Father sparkles as the crown jewel of New Testament doctrine. No other religion has such a God. Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism present the worshiper with either sophisticated atheism or polytheism. Islam portrays Allah as an almost impersonal Fate whose will can only be submitted to. Communism and its twin, modern secular humanism, have no god at all. A friend of mine recently told me of a conversation with an elderly woman, who was a self-confessed atheist. Death was not far off. Stoically, she admitted, "I have nothing to look forward to."

But Christians believe in "God the Father Almighty." Instructed by our Lord Jesus, we pray, "Our Father who art in heaven..."

In this book on Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we are holding up this multi-faceted jewel for closer examination. This chapter introduces the topic.

### **WHAT IS GOD THE FATHER LIKE?**

Using only Ephesians chapter One as a quarry, we can mine many priceless stones:

Theologians sometimes divide God's attributes into two kinds: The greatness of God, and the goodness of God.

#### The greatness of God

For example, we learn that God is the absolute sovereign of the universe. He is Lord, master, God – the only true God, as the entire Bible proclaims in countless ways. He is unique. There is no other.

As sovereign ruler, He

- Has a will. He is personal, not impersonal. He has a plan, which he carries out with total control over all events. He works all things according to the counsel of his will.
- Naturally, that means that He is omnipotent – all-powerful. He works, and none can resist. He demonstrated the greatness of his power when he raised Jesus from the dead, and seated him at his right hand, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...
- He leads out the stars, calling them all by name, and he guides the course of the sparrow.
- His power is matched by his wisdom, intelligence and knowledge. He is all knowing and all wise. We comprehend only the fringes of his ways, so Paul speaks of the mystery of God's will. (This is not impersonal mind, however, as the Christian Scientists and others believe, but the active, ruling wisdom of an infinitely great being.)
- Such a God must also be omnipresent – he fills heaven and earth. We cannot go anywhere – the height of heaven or the depths of the sea – where he is not.
- We are, of course, speaking of a Spirit. The first Soviet cosmonaut taunted believers when he claimed that he did not find God in space. He would not, for he looked in the wrong place with the wrong eyes for the wrong type of god.

Our God is not only the sovereign ruler of the universe. He is also our creator. Paul speaks of the foundation of the earth. God made all that we see out of what is invisible. Before the world came into being, he already was. He is eternal, free from the limits of time. When we observe what God has made, we conclude that he possesses matchless beauty, order, variety, complexity, and simplicity. Our God, in short, is glorious, marvelous, as his works declare.

As the Maker of the universe, God holds title to all we see. He owns everything. He is immeasurably wealthy, which is why he provides for all our earthly needs and can promise an inheritance to his children. Unlike the so-called 'gods' of all other religions, our Creator stands outside of, and above, the created order. He dwells in heaven – a phrase denoting a realm above and beyond this three-dimensional world. He is full of glory – in contrast to our earthbound finitude and weakness. He is a transcendent God.

There you have it – or rather, him – a great God. An infinitely vast Being who surpasses all other beings, including our earthly fathers. They are weak and sinful. And, to our unutterable sorrow, they are mortal. Some have already passed from this life; others will leave us before long, and we shall be bereft, orphans in a vast and lonely universe – unless we know God the Father.

## The goodness of God

Many of us believe that God is great, but we have doubts about his goodness. Let us see what the Bible teaches us:

### *Our God is a revealing God*

He deigns to open the vault of his mysterious being and declare to us who he is and what he wants. He spoke in many ways to the Old Testament fathers. He spoke supremely in the person of his eternal Son, who became the Man Jesus. He speaks through the words of the prophets and apostles, inspired as they were by the Holy Spirit of God.

God can be known, although we cannot know him at all except as he shows himself to us, and he does this clearly in Jesus. We cannot know the Father unless the Son, Jesus, reveals him to us. But Jesus has declared to us the Father, he has explained him, by word and deed. God wanted to have fellowship with his creatures, so he has disclosed himself to us enough for us to come to know and love him, even if we don't fully comprehend the depths of his mystery.

### *He reveals himself as a holy God*

He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him. How could he select us to become holy and blameless if he himself were not holy and blameless? When Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up in the Temple, he heard the angels cry, "Holy, Holy, Holy," as they covered their faces. They – and he – were in the presence of a God whose garment of righteousness has no stain of impurity or injustice.

“God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.” All he does is just and right. He does not resemble the idols of the pagans, ancient or modern. He is not capricious, arbitrary, irritable, partial; he does not lie, cheat, or steal. When he exercises wrath, it is the settled opposition of justice to injustice, and the opposition of holiness to sin and impurity.

### *He shows himself to be a gracious God*

God is not only light; he is also love. He is a giving God, as we shall see in a moment. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father," writes Paul. His grace doesn't come to us from a stingy heart, grudgingly. No – he lavishes grace upon us.

What is grace? When God bestows gifts upon the unworthy, that is grace. Unmerited favor. Love to the unlovely and undeserving.

He's not mean, vindictive, petty, and unforgiving, like us, and like some of our fathers. He does not withhold affection, or remain distant. He comes to us with a warm embrace, eager to surround us with affection and acceptance. The Father and the Son have loved each other in the Spirit from all eternity; that is why Jesus is called the beloved. When he predestined us for adoption as sons, he did so in love. God is love.

### *Our Father is faithful*

We find his faithfulness alluded to in the words "plan for the fullness of times," and "Christ," for God had promised his people through the OT prophets that he would send a Messiah, a savior, and that he would bring in a new covenant, written on the heart by the Spirit. The coming of Christ effected the beginning of the consummation of that plan, and demonstrated God's faithfulness.

He keeps his promises, including those to bless sinners who believe in Christ. He does not lie, or change his mind. Sometimes the Bible pictures him as repenting of what he's done, but this is an anthropomorphism - a way of speaking that describes God in human terms.

Throughout the Bible, the faithfulness, fidelity, trustworthiness, steadiness, reliability, and integrity of God are always emphasized. He does what he says. Word and deed match perfectly. His revealed will provides structure to our lives. He keeps his promises, unlike human fathers. He also carries out his threats to punish the disobedient – again, unlike many human fathers. You can count on God's steadiness, like a rock.

### *Our God is a Triune God*

Christians worship God the Father, through the mediator, God the Son, by the power and ministry of God the Holy Spirit.

Is God female? No, in the sense that he is not God the Mother. All the pronouns referring to God in the Bible are masculine. God is Father, and he has a Son, Jesus, who is also God, equal in power, eternity and glory, but subordinate in the carrying out of the plan of creation and redemption.

Is God androgynous? No. Although he transcends sex, he does not transcend gender. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, all have masculine pronouns in the Hebrew and Greek. Male and female as we know them come from one source, but our Maker is not female. He is masculine, and in relation to him, we are all feminine, for he initiates, and we respond.

In some sense, then, he is masculine. But he transcends sex as we know it. He includes some of what we call "feminine" qualities in himself. What we know of as male and female were created in his image, so what we call feminine must find its origin in God our Maker. As a small indication of this, the word "compassionate" – often applied to God in the OT – refers originally to the womb, and also applies to the tender compassion of a mother for her children.

God the Father, then, is not cold and harsh, although he will execute his divine and righteous wrath against all unrepentant sinners. But he is also warm, compassionate, tender, like a mother with her infant child, towards all who turn to him.

### **WHAT HAS GOD THE FATHER DONE?**

We have glanced very briefly at the attributes of God the Father. Now let us direct our attention to his

actions, as Paul enumerates them in Ephesians One. One word sums up God's action toward us: Blessing.

The Old Testament concludes with God's threat in Malachi to smite the land with a curse, but the New Testament announces the year of God's favor, and the blessedness of those who believe. In the Old Testament, the father blessed his son, signifying not only his praise and favor, but also a promise and prayer for prosperity and well-being. Old Testament blessings were primarily temporal and material, with some exceptions.

But the blessings God gives us are spiritual. They are in the heavenly places, Paul says, in contrast to earth and its enjoyment. These blessings come to us in Christ, because of his merit, not ours. Thus, they can never be revoked. That is why Paul uses the past tense: God has blessed us. It's a done deal, a completed act. God's blessings will not be confiscated from us if we fail to live a sinless life, as we certainly will. These blessings are complete: He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. There's nothing missing, nothing left out, nothing lacking that we really need for happiness, except perhaps our own understanding of God's goodness towards us.

God has blessed us. What are these blessings?

### Holiness

He has chosen us to be holy and blameless. In the second chapter, we read that:

We were once slaves of the world, the flesh and the devil. We followed our passions and desires. We were, in a word, unholy. As a result, we all have a sense of shame. We hide our true selves from God, from each other, and even from our own conscious mind. In fact, much of our life is a cover-up for uncleanness and guilt. But God – before the foundation of the world – chose a multitude to become holy.

He carries out his plan in three stages:

First, he declares all believers in Christ to be sanctified. As the theologians say, we are positionally holy as soon as we truly repent and trust in Christ. Jesus said, "You are all clean through the word which I have spoken." Paul says that Jesus washed the church with the water and the word. We are, to use the old word – sanctified – saints, because God has declared us to be.

Second, God makes us progressively holy by the work of the Holy Spirit in us. That is what we also call Christian growth, growth into greater likeness of Jesus and of the Father.

Finally, God will raise us up and give us new bodies, perfectly free from the stain of sin. We shall be, as Augustine said, not free to sin! We shall wear garments of white, symbolizing our total purity and blamelessness before God. We shall be perfectly holy.

That is the destiny to which God has called us!



## Adoption

“He predestined us for adoption as sons unto himself.”

We were children of wrath, separated from Christ, without God, headed for eternal punishment in outer darkness. We had no right to access to God our Father. We were shut out of the throne room. Not all people are children of God, as many imagine. By birth and our own disobedience, we are children of wrath; disobedient creatures, rebels deserving capital punishment. But now, we who were once far off have been brought near, through the blood of Christ, who has reconciled us to God.

Paul likes the metaphor of adoption: God has chosen to bring new people into his family. Family planning, if you will, on a grand scale. If you are a true believer, you are a wanted member of God's forever family. You are unique, special, priceless. Even more than Abraham Lincoln's children could interrupt a cabinet meeting at any time, you have full and free access to the throne room of heaven.

But that's not all! God also has promised you an inheritance, of which we shall speak more in a moment. For now, we should note that Paul uses the word sons for a reason. He does not mean to disparage the worth of daughters. On the contrary, he employs an ancient Biblical custom to illustrate the newly elevated status of daughters. You remember that in the Old Testament, the eldest son received a double portion of the inheritance. Daughters received none, unless the family had no sons at all. To say that we were predestined for adoption as sons means that all of us – men and women alike – now stand in the position of the eldest son, with full rights to an ample inheritance.

God has adopted us, Paul says, “unto himself” – a crucial phrase missing from the NIV translation. God wanted children for his own possession and enjoyment, not just theirs. He wants fellowship, intimacy, communion with each new member of his expanding family.

As sons, we have a rooted relationship with our Father – one that will not suffer the effects of time – since God is eternal – or our performance, since the initiative lies entirely with God. This was God's decision before time, not ours in time. As a result, true children of God have eternal security. We were dead in sin, distant from God, disinherited – now we have full rights, like the eldest son, and we bask in the sunlight of God's infinite grace, richly lavished upon us.

We must go on to the next blessing.

## Redemption

“We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.”

God cannot tolerate the presence of sin and wickedness. He must establish justice and punish wrongdoing. He did this by sending his own blameless son to die on behalf of sinners. Jesus paid the price for our sins with his own blood.

The result? We are redeemed – from the curse, from the penalty of sin, from wrath, from performance as a way of earning God's favor. This is no gimmick. God has accepted the sacrifice of his son, so that

we can go free! We have a clear conscience, not because we commit no sins, but because those who confess their sins receive forgiveness from God the Father.

### Knowledge of His will

All these blessings would be enough, but there's more! God has revealed to us the mystery of his will, the plan he has held close to his heart since before the foundation of the world, but which he has now made known through his holy apostles. What is that plan? To head up all things in heaven and on earth in his son, Jesus.

I do not have to describe to you the pain of separation and alienation. We see its sad consequences daily – divorce, racial conflict, ethnic strife, wars. But God has a grand design for all of history – to subjugate everything under the lordship of Christ. He unites all true believers into one new body, with Jesus as head. In Christ, there is no male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave or free. Yellow and white, old and young, rich and poor, all have equal access to the Father, through the Spirit. God will surely accomplish what no United Nations can bring about: true universal harmony, in Christ.

Those who do not now believe will then bow the knee to Christ and acknowledge his lordship. That means that not everyone will be saved. Sadly, those who persist in unbelief will spend the rest of eternity separated from God. They will suffer an infinitely higher degree of separation from others, also. There will be no love, joy, or peace in hell. That is why we go into all the world and preach the Gospel!

He has granted us not only insight into this plan, but also an important part in it. Each one of us has a role to play. Your life has meaning and purpose. God intends to enlist you in a grand army, one that marches on its knees; an army of conquerors over all that divides people from each other and from God. In your city, our nation, and around the world, you have a key function to perform: your life, your prayers, your words, your offerings – all can be used to bring others into fellowship with the Father, through faith in the Son, by the power of the Spirit.

### Inheritance

But what about our personal future? What hope do we have? As unbelievers, we were without God and therefore without hope. But now in Christ Jesus we have been adopted as sons. Fathers delight to pass on an inheritance to their children. That is why we ask lawyers and financial advisors to help us with estate planning. We are thinking about our children's future.

God the Father has promised us an inheritance infinitely greater than anything we could leave to our children. He promises his adopted children nothing less than the world! As children of God, we are joint heirs with Christ, to whom God has promised to grant dominion over all the earth. This inheritance will not be taken away through estate taxes, inflation, greedy relatives, or anything else. We are guaranteed to come into the full enjoyment of it when Christ returns.

### The Holy Spirit

That brings us to the last and greatest blessing mentioned by Paul in this magnificent passage: God

has given us the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Paul elsewhere speaks of the Holy Spirit as THE blessing which God promised to all spiritual children of Abraham, that is all true believers in Christ.

God secures our future inheritance of full communion with himself and his son, by pouring out into our hearts the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. In other words, God the Father has blessed us by giving us – not just holiness, sonship, forgiveness, insight into his plan, and a future hope, but by giving us himself.

How should we respond to God's lavish gifts? How can we repay him for meeting all our deepest needs? Let us note just three appropriate responses contained in our scripture passage for today:

**Faith:** We receive the blessing of God through faith in his Son Jesus. We "repay" God for his goodness merely by taking the cup of salvation and drinking it. We honor God by accepting his love, believing his promises, relying on his grace, resting in his favor. Simply entrust yourself to him – past, present and future, body, soul and spirit.

Faith will naturally lead to works. Those who have truly believed the gospel of salvation will live for the glory of the Savior. If we have received the Spirit by faith in Jesus, he will gradually remold us into the likeness of Christ and of the Father. The supreme goal of all God's children is to honor our Father, in word in deed, all the days of our lives.

And finally, praise. Our faith lags behind, our works remain incomplete, but we can offer up the sacrifice of praise. We can, like Paul, bless the Father who has so richly blessed us. We can open our lips to show forth his praise. Forgetting our weak and sinful selves, we can enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise. We can join the heavenly chorus, singing Alleluia to the one who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. With the seraphim, we cry out, "Holy, holy, holy." We echo the words of the apostle, and sing praise to God for his glorious grace.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

## **Chapter Five: Imitating God the Father – Ephesians 6:4**

“And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.” (NKJV)

### *Introduction*

#### **Where are the fathers?**

One recent book in English said that the "absentee father is the curse of our day...."

The author meant that when fathers are not present in the lives of their children, everyone suffers. Children without fathers grow up without a proper sense of being loved or limited, and as a result they inflict great damage upon themselves and others. Although this has been especially apparent in the Black families of urban America, we can also see the effects in Chinese society.

#### **Who are the "fathers"?**

When Paul uses this word, he refers, first and foremost, to biological and adoptive fathers. Contrary to popular opinion, they bear the primary responsibility for the nurture and education of their children. The Bible clearly teaches that God intends for fathers to take the lead in this all-important function of the family: the protection and education of the next generation.

#### Parents, including mothers

We know from other passages of the Bible, however, that the word "fathers" can also refer to both parents as a unit: father and mother together. God intends for both father and mother to work together in this vital task. It is simply too much for one person to do well. That is one reason why the Fourth Commandment says, “Honor your father and your mother.” Father and mother work as a team, each contributing a different perspective and personality to this most difficult of all challenges.

#### Christian Leaders and Teachers

But Paul also speaks elsewhere of himself as a spiritual father to new believers.<sup>1</sup> From his letters, we learn that all those in positions of spiritual leadership play the role of father to younger Christians.

Since this passage speaks primarily to fathers, the rest of this chapter will be addressed mostly to them. But Paul's instructions to fathers, as we have seen, apply to almost all of us, for most of us have others under our care. I would urge the reader to attend carefully, therefore, to what follows.

#### **WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE OF "FATHERS"?**

Don't exasperate your "children." Don't provoke them to anger needlessly.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:15

Children will become angry with their parents for all kinds of reasons; that can't be avoided. But fathers can try to reduce the occasions when our children become exasperated, discouraged, and disheartened because of what we have done. We can do this by trying to head off problems before they occur. And this happens when we do our best to imitate God our Father.

Let's look at a few ways in which we can seek to avoid provoking our children to anger by imitating God the Father.

### Goodness of God

To begin with, consider the goodness of God towards us:

#### *Be fair, impartial*

God is just and fair. All he does is right. He is not partial. He doesn't play favorites. Fathers should try to be fair, too, especially in disputes between siblings and the application of house rules. Kids can spot injustice a mile away, and will cry "Foul!" if we don't! They also become angry if they think we're not being fair and just.

#### *Reward their good conduct and honest efforts*

God differs from us in many ways. For one thing, he is both a perfectionist and easy to please. Think about it: he requires nothing less than absolute holiness, but he expresses pleasure with our feeble efforts. We can do the same: Hold to high standards, but reward honest attempts to please. We shouldn't be like the dad who looked at a report card with four A's and a B and said, "Why did you get the 'B'?"

#### *Forgive their sins*

I love Psalm 103, verses 10-14: "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his loving kindness toward those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he is mindful that we are but dust."

We all go wrong. Kids often know when they've done wrong. If they don't, we can tell them right out. When they express sorrow for their offenses, good fathers will embrace them and say, "I forgive you."

Even when we have to administer punishment, we can do so without wrath. When it's all over, we should express total and complete forgiveness, and act as if it's all right, which it is. Few things will dishearten a contrite child more than bringing up his faults and failings after they've already been dealt with. Let's be like God who, the psalmist says, "Does not always strive with us; nor will he keep his anger forever."

### *Exercise authority*

Psalm 103 goes on to say, “The LORD has established his throne in the heavens; his kingdom rules over all.” Our God is a monarch; a patriarch.

America has gone on such an anti-authoritarian binge in the past generation that we have lost all concept of true patriarchy. Contrary to the popular stereotype, the biblical patriarch is not a petty tyrant, lording it over those who are really his moral and intellectual superiors. No, biblical fathers imitate God the Father, who rules with love.

My father was the unquestioned authority in our home, but I never heard him raise his voice or utter an unreasonable command. He didn't have to; we all respected him, and he almost always showed consideration for us. Being human, he failed. When he did, it hurt. But that didn't make me question his right to direct our home.

Today's fathers need to re-capture a true definition of authority. Loving leadership. Sacrificial, serving, but not subservient to the wishes of those under his care. When fathers abdicate their authority, others step in. A power vacuum does not last for long. The authority of the negligent father (and the mother with him) will be displaced by that of immature peers, gangs, TV characters, rock stars, professional athletes, teachers, professors, and others who have not earned the right to guide our children's lives.

Even when the mother thinks she has to assume the responsibility of leading the home, the effects are not always good. She may believe she is doing right, but it sends the wrong message to children; they learn to disrespect their father. No, she should show a submissive spirit to her husband, even as she prays that he will fulfill his responsibility better.

### *Plan for their welfare*

Do you know the meaning of the word 'providence'? That describes a God who, foreseeing all that would come to pass, makes provision ahead of time. Thus, God provided a ram for Abraham to sacrifice instead of his son Isaac.

Good fathers plan ahead for their children's welfare. Not just estate planning and planning for their education – although that is essential – but plans for their moral and spiritual growth. Thoughtful fathers will anticipate temptations their children will likely face, and pray for wisdom about how to overcome. They will make job and career decisions partly on the basis of how they think these will affect their children in the coming years. They will choose neighborhoods, schools, churches and friends the same way.

### *Communicate that they're wanted*

God makes no secret of his love for us: As Paul says in Romans, God demonstrates his love for us, in

that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.<sup>2</sup> Not only so, but he has left us the entire record of the Bible, which declares repeatedly, the LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We read, furthermore, that we are accepted in the beloved; and that God will never leave us nor forsake us.

Wise fathers will tell their children they love them. They will also demonstrate their love unmistakably, so that there can be no doubt. I have read that it takes six positive, encouraging statements to counter-balance the effect on a child of one negative remark. We need to repeat, in a multitude of ways, that we love and accept our children. That's what God does!

### *Listen to them*

Throughout the Bible, we see that our God is a listening God. He hears the prayer of the righteous; he attends to the cry of the poor. He's always ready to listen, even to the most outrageous complaints by discouraged believers.

Good fathers listen, too. They take time to be available. Children often ask their fathers to spend time with them. What if we say, "Not now. Later. I'm busy"? Aren't we telling our children that they are not really important in our lives?

People talk about quality time. That's a useful concept, in some ways. We do need to give our children our full attention. Otherwise, they'll sense we aren't really listening, and lose heart. But there's no substitute for quantity time. People, especially children, don't open up and voice their deepest concerns on command. "Now I have fifteen minutes to spend with you. I'm all ears. What's on your mind, honey?" No, we have to be there a lot of the time. It's on the long walks, during leisurely meals, riding in the car, right after we've turned out the lights at bedtime, that a child opens up. "What is God like?" "How do you know Jesus is alive?" "How did you decide to marry mama?" "What would you think if I told you I had a girlfriend?"

Depending upon which survey you read, the average American father spends between 30 seconds and five minutes with his children each day. No matter how you slice it, that's too small a piece of our time. Let's be like God – always ready to listen.

### *Comfort them in their sorrows*

Paul calls God the "Father of all mercies and God of all comforts." God is not only near to the brokenhearted, he also binds up the broken hearted. He comforts us in all our troubles. He restores the soul.

When Junior runs to us with a wound which seems small in our eyes, that's not the time for a lecture on toughness or a stern, "Don't cry!" We first express sympathy, hopefully with a warm hug and a kind voice. We listen to the cry of the afflicted. Then, if necessary, after we've demonstrated that we care, we may have to give some fatherly advice about avoiding trouble or enduring pain.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 5:8

### *Keep your promises*

Few things discourage and anger children more than broken promises. God knows that. He keeps all his promises. Not one good word which God spoke to his people failed to be fulfilled, records the Bible.

Wise fathers make few promises, and keep them. Even when it hurts, the righteous man keeps his oath. On the very rare occasion when we have to break a commitment, we need to express our great sorrow, and do our best to make up for it at an appropriate time. Kids may have short memories when it comes to their hasty promises, but they remember ours well. Let's imitate both them and God, remember what we've said we'll do, and do it.

There's another promise we need to keep: Our marriage vow. Yahweh is faithful. He remained faithful to Israel, despite her adultery. Jesus, the bridegroom of the church, has promised, "I will never fail you nor forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

Hardly anything will arouse the justified anger of our children more than to leave their mother (or father, if you are a wife). There is simply no excuse for walking out on your promise to be faithful to your spouse for life. Unless you want to wreck your children's future, you'll keep that promise you made years ago.

### *Treat them according to their age*

Through his apostle, he gave spiritual milk to some believers, knowing they weren't ready for meat. He only reveals what we can handle at any given time, and only requires what we can do. Let's watch how our children are growing, and adjust our treatment of them accordingly.

That means that when they begin to mature, we should give them more and more freedom, along with increasing responsibility. We should hold them accountable for their actions, of course, but also allow them to make mistakes – and suffer the consequences. Fathers – and mothers – often don't allow their children to grow up. That breeds resentment and hidden rebellion in youth. Eventually, their anger will show itself in anti-social behavior. Far better for us to give them more and more space to experiment with choices and learn how to be responsible persons.

### Severity of God

We've looked at God's goodness at some length. Now for a few brief words about his severity.

God is not only love, he is also light: He demands righteousness and holiness. He has said, You shall be holy, for I am holy.<sup>3</sup> He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 11:44, 45; 1 Peter 1:16

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 12:10



Fathers should set high standards for their children. We should insist on integrity, truthfulness, generosity, love, and all the other virtues taught in the Bible. We need not only to keep our promises to bless our children, but also carry out our threats to punish them for wrongdoing. That brings us to the second part of Paul's instructions, which we shall treat much more briefly:

To bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.

*Discipline: education by training*

Some versions translate training with discipline, which means education by training. This word is used in two ways in the Bible.

## **Teaching**

The first refers to teaching, positive instruction in general.

II Timothy 3:16 says that the Bible is suitable for training in righteousness. In Titus 2:12, Paul tell us that "the grace of God has appeared ... training us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age."

Moses tells us how to teach our children in Deuteronomy 6:1-9, 20-25:

First we set an example:

- Hear God's word, 1,4

We do this by daily Bible reading, study, meditation, and by going to church, teaching fellowships, small groups, Men's Training, Vacation Bible School, and other Bible learning opportunities.

- Observe God's word, 1

That is, we don't just expose ourselves to the word of God; we attend to it, focus on it, and decide to believe and obey it.

- Fear the LORD your God, 2

We fear him more than we fear others' opinions, the loss of our job, the anger of our children.

- Keep all his commands, 2

We hold ourselves to high standards of obedience. We're subjects of a heavenly king, soldiers in his army: we resolve to do what he says, or die trying.

- Love the LORD your God, 4

As we think about what he's done for us, we set our affection on God more than anyone or anything else. He is first in our lives. We find contentment in him alone, and delight most of all in him. We determine to seek his kingdom and his righteousness more than possessions, position, power, or passion.

- Memorize his word, 6

Believing that man lives not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, we take the time and trouble to memorize it. That takes work, but we know we won't be able to overcome temptation, or instruct our children, unless we have God's word hidden in our hearts.

Then we teach God's word to our children, 7ff:

- Diligently

We do it diligently, not halfheartedly or negligently. Other than loving our wives, this is the most important work we have to do, so we attend to it carefully.

- At all times

Sit at home: We teach God's word when at home, through devotions at supper; Christian videos, TV programs, music, and books.

Walk by the way: We teach it when we're driving, through listening to Christian tapes and talking with them.

Lie down: At bedtime, we teach through our prayers and words to them.

Rise up: At breakfast, when most people are grumpy, we pray for ways to communicate God's truth.

- Sign, frontlets, 8

We decorate our house tastefully with Scripture quotations, 9. We take advantage of every opportunity to bring our children under the influence of God's word, like Sunday school.

- When they ask the meaning of all these commands, 20 ff

When they ask, we'll have answers ready. We'll repeat God's gracious acts. We'll say why we ought to obey God: It is good to obey him! There will be a reward for obedience, and it will be for us righteousness if we obey. We'll have to be creative, but that's a challenge, and men like a challenge.

- Tell them stories

I began by telling simple Bible stories. When my daughter tired of that, I shifted to dramatizations of Bible stories. As she grew older, I invented long tales of children who learn about God's ways through the adventures they face.

### **Chastisement for sin**

The other meaning of this word “discipline” is chastisement: what we sometimes associate with discipline.

The letter to the Hebrews tells us more about how God disciplines us, and how we should discipline our children:

Hebrews 12:3-11

- Discipline demonstrates love, 6
- Discipline includes the rod and rebuke, 5b

Some people question the use of the corporal punishment, using a light stick, or one's hand, with small children, especially now with horrible tales of child abuse filling the press. No Christian advocates harming a child by beating. But any honest student of the Bible will admit that God's way is to administer pain so that we learn the lesson. We simply will not learn by words alone.

- Discipline inculcates respect, 9
- Discipline brings holiness, 10.

That is because, as Peter tells us, suffering can purify the soul. (1 Peter 1:6-7) As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says, suffering can teach us obedience, as it did Jesus, who was morally flawless. (Suffering teaches obedience: Heb 5:7-8) Even Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered.

Examples of failure to chasten show us just how crucial it is for us to discipline our children:

The priest Eli failed to rebuke his sons for their greed. As a result, both he and they lost their lives, and the priesthood was taken from his family. David refused to discipline rebellious Absalom. He paid dearly for that neglect: Absalom led a revolt that nearly cost David both his kingdom and his life, and Absalom ended up dead.

- Discipline hurts, 11

Sure, it seems painful; it is painful. But discipline yields fruit: it brings righteousness. For that to happen, however,

- Discipline must be accepted, 5,9,11

Some children will not heed our rebuke. There's a limit to what parents, even the best of them, can do. I spoke with a pastor from another town recently. Like many other parents, he was frustrated by the knowledge that his son had willfully turned away and was walking the path of folly. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't do our best.

Discipline – whether it's a spanking or withdrawal of privileges, isn't enough, however. Discipline must be preceded by teaching; we've already looked at some ways in which we can instruct our children in God's word. But, in a fallen world, teaching general principles is not enough; there must be warning about specific sins and rebuke for specific failures. We wish it were not so, but in a fallen world, we often learn through failure and mistakes, when these are accompanied by verbal rebuke and correction.

So, we may interpret the command, "Honor your father and mother," with these words: "Son, that means I want you to speak respectfully to us." And when he fails to do so, before you chasten your children, you say, "And that is what I mean by disrespectful speech."

*Instruction: education by teaching, especially warning and rebuke*

That is why Paul adds that second word: Admonition, warning, rebuke.

We need to warn our children by pointing out others' sins, as Paul did when he reminded the Corinthians of the sins of the Israelites in the desert.<sup>5</sup> But we also need to warn and rebuke them for their own sins.

## **WHY DOES GOD GIVE "FATHERS" THIS BURDEN?**

All this takes time, hard work, and great patience. When so many other fathers are out making more money or having more fun, why should we be investing so much time and energy on a project that might not succeed?

Two reasons, at least:

His glory: all fatherhood comes from him (Ephesians 3:14)

How can we glorify God the Father unless we treat our physical and spiritual children as he treats us? We deny our faith in God as Father if we fail to reflect Jesus' teaching about God as Father in our own dealings with those under our care.

Our good: this command – like all others – is good for us, too!

*"Children"*

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:1-12

It's good for our biological and spiritual children to hear God's word, because only the word of God can make them wise unto salvation. Only then will we help them avoid unnecessary trouble and reach their full potential in this life.

### *"Fathers"*

And it is only when fathers do their job properly that they will be trained and qualified for leadership positions in the church and in the world. God said that he had chosen Abraham (Genesis 18:19 ff) so that he would command his children to keep the way of the LORD to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has spoken to him: namely that he would become a great and mighty nation and be a blessing to all the nations. We benefit when we obey God's command to teach our children. And we suffer great and lasting pain when we fail this most basic duty; our children become a source of shame and sorrow to those who let them go their own way.

### **HOW CAN "FATHERS" FULFILL THEIR RESPONSIBILITY?**

I've outlined a truly awesome task. How can any mere mortal hope to carry it out? Think of the problems we face. In words taken from earlier in Ephesians (2:2-3), opposing us are no less than:

The World: the media, our children's peer groups, much of the educational system, the pervasiveness of drugs, alcohol and rock music. Perhaps even our own family will stand in our way. Some wives say they want their husbands to lead, but drag their feet when it actually happens.

The Flesh: our own laziness; our ignorance; our career ambitions; our love of pleasure; our fear of disapproval – all these make us hesitant to do our job as fathers.

The Devil: Satan hates God the Father. In fact, he hates all fatherhood. He'll do anything to obstruct our smallest attempts to mirror God before our children or to train them in knowing God.

So, do we give up? Real men don't. They press on. They rise to the challenge. But how? Not in their own strength. They know that God has given us spiritual weapons for spiritual warfare. They rely on the Holy Spirit and prayer. They also seek help from others. They read books, listen to tapes, attend seminars and classes. They ask for prayer. They enlist other men and older youth to help give their children godly models. They move heaven and earth in their efforts to imitate God. They know that too much depends on how well they discharge their God-given duty. They love their children, they love their wives, and they love their God.

### **Chapter Six: Honoring Your Father and Mother – Ephesians 6:1-3**

If you were to stand in the Roman Forum two thousand years ago and say the word *pietas*, everyone would know exactly what you meant. Today, in any gathering of Chinese, the phrase *xiao xun* conveys a precise meaning. The corresponding words in Korean and Japanese would be equally clear. Like the Latin *pietas*, Chinese 'syau shwun' refers to the fundamental ethical value, the one upon which others are built, and without which society crumbles.

But if I were to ask most Americans to define the English translation of these words, "filial piety," some of them might be hard pressed to answer. That is because our society has largely turned its back on this basic ethical rule, one deeply embedded in the Bible itself. I refer, of course, to the Fifth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother."

It was not too long ago that loving your mother – if not your father – stood towards the top of most people's commonly-accepted values. I believe that is changing, however.

In America today, for example there is a bumper sticker that says, "Love your mother." This exhortation does not refer to the one who carried you in her womb for more than nine months,  
nor the one who lost countless hours of sleep so that you could have your tummy filled at any time of the day or night,  
nor the one who washed your stinking diapers,  
nor the one who wiped up the messes you made each time you ate,  
nor the one who taught you how to walk,  
nor listened to you ask "why" ten thousand times,  
nor the one who did your dirty laundry year after year and made thousands of trips to the supermarket to get the kind of food you liked,  
nor the one who prayed for you to escape temptation,  
or the one who wiped the tears from your eyes,  
or sent you off to college with fear and trembling,  
or watched you give your heart to another as you found your life partner,  
or listened while you talked about the difficulties of those early years of marriage,  
or shared advice as you tried to bring up children, suddenly appreciating what she had been through with you so many years before.

No, they want you to love your earth mother, Gaia, the "new" goddess of modern paganism myths or legends; the goddess of the environment, of nature, of all that comes easily, and of nothing that takes work or sacrifice or toil or self-control or forgiving your enemies or restraining your sexual impulses or thanking your creator or confessing your sins – not the sins of multinational corporations, but your own sins – or trusting in a crucified and risen savior, one who will soon return and create a new heaven and a new earth.

But we worship not mother earth, but God the Father, and his Son Jesus, by the Holy Spirit. And this God, through his prophet Moses, his Son Jesus, and his apostles, has said, "You shall honor your father and your mother."

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

### Literal parents

First of all, it applies to all children. We must esteem, honor, and show respect for our parents, biological or adopted.

How do we show respect? With our tone of voice, our choice of words, our listening attitude, our body language. We demonstrate honor by attentiveness, not interrupting, asking questions and listening to their answers. When I was young, men rose when women entered the room, and younger people rose when their elders arrived. That showed respect. We neglected these courtesies at our own risk.

One summer day, for example, my mother came into the living room while I was reading a book. She'd been working hard all morning, while I had lounged comfortably on the sofa. She wanted to change all that, so she issued a string of commands: "I want you to make your bed, pick up your clothes, take out the trash, rake the yard, and sweep the porch." To understand what follows, you need to know that my Father was a Naval officer, used to having others under his command. When my mother spoke, I ignored her glance, casually turned a page, and parroted words I had heard my father utter many times: "Right. I'll put a man on it right away." Never one to be outwitted by an uppity teenager, she barked, "I want you on it, now!" And I jumped. I also learned a lesson.

As we grow, we show our honor by seeking our parent's advice, and taking it very seriously. They are not, after all, as ignorant and out of date as many teenagers and college students foolishly imagine. We can ask them about our friends, hobbies, courses, major, summer plans, career choices, and – most important of all – marriage partner.

Honoring parents means also to receive correction from them. Proverbs tells us that foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child. We all need to accept correction and even chastisement from our parents, for only then can we develop good habits and overcome faults. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it: We had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them.

We can demonstrate our honor by showing them our affection. Teenagers may want to do this when their friends aren't looking, to escape ridicule, but they ought to do it, nevertheless. If you're away from home, you can call, write, or visit as often as possible.

Naturally – as all Chinese know – we honor our parents by doing our best in school. They know that success in academics will make later life easier, and we should try to work as hard as possible, without ruining our health.

We display honor also by speaking well of our parents when we can, even if others defame theirs.

Perhaps I can give you some ideas by telling you about my own mother.

She was always home when I returned from school.

She remained faithful to her marriage vows.

She rarely complained when my father's duty took him away.

She was a strict disciplinarian; she made us eat everything!

She wouldn't tolerate disrespect or disobedience.

She was frugal and always bought things on sale. But she was also very generous.

She and my Dad saw to it that we had plenty of good times as a family.

She read to me when I was little.

Desirous of giving me a good education, she made me take Latin.

She also made me take piano until I was 13 (though I now think she shouldn't have let me quit as early as I did).

When my teachers were too lenient with me, she insisted that they grade me more stringently.

She taught me manners.

Even when I was very young, she included me in adult conversation and didn't send me off by myself.

A college graduate, she was well-read, knew a great deal about current affairs, and could talk to anyone.

She was always hospitable to strangers, often inviting people home for dinner.

She made me go to church when I was a young boy.

But she also gave me plenty of freedom: For example, I walked a mile home from kindergarten.

Perhaps most of all, when she discovered she was pregnant with me even though I was the last of five, the oldest of whom was retarded, and complications from her pregnancy forced her to stay in bed for six months, she didn't abort me.

Now allow me to say a few words about my deceased father.

He always treated my mother with respect and courtesy. He treated his five children the same way. He encouraged us to work hard in school, but put no extra pressure on us. He lived his own life with the strictest integrity, giving us a good example. Although he was not an active Christian, he encouraged us to go to church and to fear God. He taught me many things about life.

When our parents are aged, then we need to give them the best care we can. Hear what Paul writes: "If any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents, for this is acceptable before God." (1 Tim. 5:3-4) That may mean bringing them into our homes, although it doesn't necessarily involve that. But caring for older parents does entail spending lots of quality time with them, rather than making them think they come last on our long list of things to do.

When we returned from Taiwan in 1988, one of our chief goals was to help my wife's sister in Richmond take care of their mother. We had been based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and this would require moving to Virginia. Almost without exception, our American friends thought we were foolish to leave Chapel Hill, where we had many friends and a ministry to a large Chinese population. Our Chinese friends, however, all advised, "Do it. God will bless you."



We did, and he has. For two years, my wife drove to Richmond once or twice a week. We wish we had done more for her mother before she died, but we do not at all regret moving to Virginia for her sake. And God has richly blessed us with a new home church and a new ministry, both among Chinese and among Caucasian Americans.

Chinese have traditionally emphasized filial piety. Much of that emphasis is according to the Bible, but I have some questions to ask:

Does a child have to send large amounts of money home to parents who may not need it? If the father is alive and able to provide for his wife, do the children have to burden themselves economically?

Does a child have to bow down before the picture of a deceased parent, either at a funeral or afterwards? Much has been written about this. My view is that bowing to any picture violates the Second Command. Early Christians accepted death rather than offer incense or bow their heads to an image of the Roman Emperor. Korean Christians have shown us that we can demonstrate respect for departed parents in many ways without engaging in practices which might confuse non-believers and lead them to think we believe our departed forbears are in a position to help or to harm us.

Finally, Paul tells children to "obey your parents." Respect means nothing if we disobey the express will of our parents. There are some limits to our obligation to obey, which I shall address in a moment, but the command still stands: Children must obey their parents.

To forestall confusion, let me clarify what I think this does NOT mean: At marriage, a man "shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife." He and she are then no longer under the authority of their parents in the same way. They must establish a new authority structure. They run their home not as their parents tell them to, but as they see fit. They rear their children as they think God leads, not necessarily following all their own parents' wishes.

Submission does not necessarily imply silence. We may express our unhappiness with a directive we consider particularly harsh or unsuitable. We can explain why we would rather try to achieve our parents' goals in another way. We can ask them to change their mind, all in a respectful tone of voice. We do not have to keep our mouths totally shut when we think those in authority over us have made a wrong decision.

A grown man or woman should not follow their parents into sin. For example: if your parents pressure you to choose a career that would dishonor God, or marry a non-believer, you should refuse. How you do that is crucial, and the principles apply to our relationships with all in authority, so we'll outline them briefly:

If you are given a command you think you ought not to obey, try to find out what the intent was. What goal is your father trying to achieve? You will probably agree with all or part of his goal. Then pray for wisdom about different ways to achieve the same goal, and go to your father with this alternative plan. Speak humbly and patiently, as if you may work toward his goal in a different way. That often works, and you have avoided moral conflict.

There are many gray areas. Suffice it to say that unless your parents command you to violate a clear command of God, you should obey them. As children grow older, wise parents naturally give them more freedom and more responsibility. If your parents aren't doing that, you need wisdom to know how to respond.

We can understand the Fifth Commandment a bit better if we look also at what it forbids:

We should not dishonor our parents. That would include all forms of disobedience, including foolish activity: "A child left to himself brings shame to his mother," says Proverbs. Nor should we show disrespect in private or public. That can include the tone of our voice, our posture, as well as the content of what we say. American culture tolerates a lot more of this nowadays than before, but that doesn't justify violating God's clear command.

Talking about their faults can be tempting, especially when others are doing it, but this dishonors them. That, in my mind, raises profound questions about a great deal of psychotherapy and counseling, even Christian counseling. We have grown so accustomed to the Freudian way of thinking about adult problems that we expect to place the blame on parents. The Bible nowhere does that, however. God's word tells us to honor our father and mother, not to blame them for all our troubles.

I know that many suffer still from deep wounds inflicted upon you by your parents. In fact, if the truth were known, almost all of us carry scars from our childhood. We need not deny our pain or pretend that our parents were faultless. We can cry out to God, expressing our sorrow, disappointment, even our outrage. We can ask God to heal us and give us his peace and joy.

James said, "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." But some Christian counseling nowadays consists of confessing not my sins but my parents' sins. Healing does not come that way. If anything, healing eludes us, as we dig up the memories of real or imagined wrongs, dwell on them, and withhold our forgiveness. Sadly, other negative examples abound: Many of the cartoons make fun of parents and others in authority, as do movies, songs, and books. In fact, our whole society is on an anti-authority binge.

Another way we bring dishonor on parents is to demean or debase parenthood itself. We do that when we neglect our duties as parents, choosing our career over child rearing. When we separate sex from the responsibilities of marriage and family by having intercourse outside of marriage, we violate this command as well as the seventh one. When we engage in sex within marriage with no intention of ever having children, we work against the spirit of God's will. Homosexual activity is another obvious attack on parenthood, for homosexual behavior cannot result in parenthood. Likewise, our widespread practice of abortion on demand not only involves the taking of innocent human life, but also constitutes a direct assault on parenthood.

### Other authority

Second, it applies to us at all ages: Peter writes, "Honor all men" (1 Peter 2:17). As the Protestant Reformers rightly saw, this command lays the basis for all authority at every level of society, from the

nuclear family to the nation state. In this they agreed with traditional Confucian teaching.

Within the family, submission to authority includes the submission of wives to their husbands. Husbands ought to love their wives as Christ does the church; their obedience to that command would make the submission of their wives easier, but their disobedience does not justify insubordination, as Peter explains in his first epistle.

The Bible instructs slaves to obey their masters and masters to treat their slaves fairly. We can apply the same principle to the relationships between employer and employee and between teacher and student. We are also commanded in the Bible to respect and obey our teachers. Much has changed in America since I was in school. Chinese friends of ours are shocked to see feet on tables, food in classroom, sloppy dress, irreverent questions. I am sad to hear that this is beginning to happen in some Chinese societies, too. The Cultural Revolution was of course the greatest attack upon authority in Chinese history, and its effects are still with those who live in Mainland China.

God's Word also tells us to obey the government. That includes paying taxes, observing the laws (including the speed limit!), and refraining from insurrection. We are to obey police and speak respectfully of our political leaders. As Peter wrote, when Nero the Emperor was in power, we are to "honor the king" (1 Peter 2:17). Nero killed his wife, best friend, and mother; posed as the god Apollo; and burned much of Rome to expand his palace grounds. But Peter ordered believers to follow the example of Jesus and submit to the rule of ungodly and wicked men. Likewise, Paul wrote, "Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one..." (Titus 3:1)

Many people link with violent fanatics. We need to hear the words of the Apostles, follow their example and that of Jesus, and publicly renounce all forms of unauthorized violence. We have no right to take the law into our own hands, even when we think the government is derelict in doing its duty. That doesn't mean we approve of all the government does, or that we have to be silent when the government or others in authority, pervert justice. Christians can and should speak out when the government promotes abortion on demand or favors homosexual behavior. It does mean that unless they command us to commit a sin against God, we are to submit to authorities over us.

These authorities include our church leaders. "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine... Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses." (1 Tim. 5:17-18, 20) God has placed men in authority over us in the church. We need to listen to their advice and be willing to submit. We may not fully understand why they do what they do, but we need to submit our plans and programs for their advice and consent. Submission to church leaders means accepting church discipline when necessary. An outstanding example is the teaching of this church on divorce and remarriage. When we join the church, we take a vow to study its peace and purity. If we flout the laws of the church, we stand in violation against our own vows.

Lest anyone misunderstand, I am not saying that Christians should be meek and submissive to the point of allowing themselves to be led into sin by a wicked man like David Koresh. Those who followed him were not following God, for Koresh flouted many of the most basic commands in the

Bible. Cults, large and small, appeal to our innate yearning for caring authority, but they betray their real nature when they seek to control, rather than to guide. The Bible tells us to avoid such people, not to submit to them.

## God

We all had earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them, says the letter to the Hebrew Christians. "Shall we not much more readily submit to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness." (Hebrews 12:9-10) In the end, submission to authority stems from our submission to the God who made us and redeemed us. He has given us commands, including the following:

- "Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us." Ephesians 5:1-2
- "Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the lusts which were yours in your former ignorance, but like the holy one who called you, be holy in all your conduct, for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"
- "And if you invoke as Father the one who judges impartially according to each one's work, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your sojourning here (on earth)." 1 Peter 1:14-17

By submitting to people over us, we learn to submit to God, the fount of all authority.

## **WHAT IS SUBMISSION?**

What does it really mean?

If I had said to my daughter when she was little, "You there, Sarah! Take a large freshly-baked chocolate brownie, put on a heaping scoop of your favorite flavor of ice cream on top, add a generous helping of whipped cream, and top it off with some cherries. Now I want you to eat it all, do you hear? No back talk, just obey!" her obedience to my order would not be dutiful submission, but pure delight.

Or what if I said to a young husband, "Young man, see that wife of yours? I know she's beautiful, gentle, affectionate, cooperative, smart, hardworking, a good cook, a great mother, and a faithful companion; I also am aware that she's godly, fascinating, and very sexy. Nevertheless, God commands you to love her anyway. Understand? Just make a decision and do it!" Again, obedience would have been easy.

But real obedience looks more like this:

"Young man, I know your dad never has time for you; he leaves early, comes home late, and spends his weekends in front of the television. You're tired of asking him to play ball with you. He's mean to

your mom and messy. He never goes to church or reads the Bible, nor does he lead the family in devotions. But son, I want you to respect him as your father, and submit to his commands.”

Or, the words to a wife: “I know that your husband looks at other women, makes family decisions without asking your opinion, sleeps in on Sunday morning, and shows no interest in spiritual things. He criticizes everything you do and never helps around the house. He forgets your birthday and anniversary, and wouldn't think of buying you flowers or taking you out. But I want you to respect and honor him as your husband, and submit to his decisions, even when you think they are foolish and wrong.”

Many make the mistake of agreeing to submit to those in authority over them only when they admire, respect, and agree with their decisions. But Biblical submission has meaning only when we are asked or told to do something we don't want to do, by someone whom we may not at the moment fully respect or like.

## **WHY?**

I would be blind and deaf were I not to be unaware that submission to authority runs counter a strong current of American tradition, and completely violates the spirit of our age. We tend to think that if we submit to others, our precious freedom and even our very identity will be lost. Our next question, then, is why does God command us to honor and obey our parents and others in authority over us? We have an obsession with individual autonomy. We don't want to be accountable to anyone. We don't want anyone telling us what to do. So, why submit to authority?

### Submission Pleases God

“Children obey your parents in the LORD, for this is right.”

When we honor our parents and others over us, it pleases God. “The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all,” proclaims the Psalmist. God has raised his son Jesus from the dead and has given him all authority in heaven and earth. Standing before Pilate, who both represented a tyrannical imperial power and himself abused authority to an infinite degree, Jesus said, “You could have no power against me unless it had been given you from above.” God rules the world, and he does it through people he has allowed to occupy positions of authority. As wicked as they were, the Apostle Paul still termed the Roman authorities ministers of God.

### Submission Comes with a Promise

“Honor your father and your mother, which is the first commandment with a promise: that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.” (Ephesians 6:2-3)

Honor and obedience to authority carry the guarantee that it will go well with us. The writer of Proverbs promises his son that if he listens to his advice, the rewards will include long life, honor, grace, glory, and general prosperity. How do we understand this? Jesus obeyed both his earthly and his heavenly Father, and died before he reached thirty-five. This promise, like all others of its type,

stands as a general principle. Other things being equal, obedience to God brings earthly blessing. God may send suffering of various types into the lives of those who seek to follow him; then, their submissive spirit will result in deep inner peace, even when outer prosperity has been stripped from them, as it was from Job and Jesus.

Think about it: Children who obey their parents' instructions and warnings will avoid being injured by fire, traffic, and weapons; they will enjoy better health as they eat nutritious foods, care for their teeth, and get enough rest. They will stay out of trouble as they heed their parents' warning about harmful companions. They will get along better as they follow their parents' advice about courtesy, manners, and interpersonal relationships. The Bible teaches that "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child..." (Pr. 22:15) We need our parent's leading, guidance, and correction, to be safe and healthy, and to succeed in life.

Even when it's terribly painful, submission can yield a rich harvest of joy and peace. One Chinese friend of ours – the pastor of the church we attended – was thirty-five when he asked a church elder permission to marry his daughter. To his chagrin, the woman's father put him off repeatedly, offering one excuse for his refusal after another. As time went on, friends urged the two to get married anyway; they were both in their mid-thirties. But the pastor believed they should set a good example, so they waited – six years. When her father finally gave permission, the wedding was a glorious one. Fears that she would not be able to bear a healthy child because of her age and ill-health were dispelled when she brought a beautiful baby boy into this world. And his moral leadership in the church stands out.

God intends to work good to us through our parents and others in authority over us. Even when we think they're wrong, if they fail to respond to our prayers and our appeal, we can rest assured that God has controlled their decisions for our good and his glory.

#### Otherwise, it will not go well

What if we disobey? The Bible and all human experience testify that it will not go well with us. For one thing, we live all of life under authority; disobeying our parents will set us up for constant conflict with those over us, until we learn to obey or are broken.

Solomon prospered as long as he followed his father David's exhortation to serve the Lord fully. But when he turned aside to foreign women and foreign gods, his kingdom was plunged into endless turmoil, and his reputation forever marred. Ignoring his Father's advice, Solomon's son Rehoboam provoked a needless rebellion and lost half his kingdom.

I can say without hesitation that all the major trouble in my life has come from dishonoring my parents or others in authority, in one way or another. And I am not alone. Countless young people have been ruined by bad friends, drugs, sex and sex-related diseases, violence, and failure in work and marriage because they disobeyed their parents.

I am in the process of slowly re-reading a book I first read five years ago. It's called *The Transformation of the Inner Man*, by John and Paul Sandford. Although I would not endorse all the

authors say, I agree with their central thesis, that most – if not all – of our adult problems stem from some form of dishonoring our parents in our innermost heart and mind.

We need to ask God to show us in what ways we have responded to our parents' faults and failings with disrespect, resentment, and even hatred, so that he can free us to forgive them and live as joyful children of God.

## **HOW CAN WE DO THIS?**

How can we find the strength to honor and obey our parents and others in authority over us? Paul says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord." Like the rest of the Christian life, honoring those in authority can only be done "in Christ Jesus." That means at least two things:

### Jesus' example

We imitate his perfect example: As a boy and a youth, he fully obeyed Joseph and Mary. As a man with a mission, he proclaimed that "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work" (John 4:34). At another time, he said, "The son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do... I do not seek my own will but the will of the Father who sent me" (John 5:19, 30). Even later, he told his disciples, "If you keep my commands you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and abide in his love" (John 15:10). To quote from Hebrews again: "Jesus though he was a Son, learned obedience through what he suffered, and having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (5:8-9).

### Jesus' life in us

But we need more than his example. "In the Lord" also refers to Jesus' life in us, and our life in him, and we are united to him by faith. We were once children of wrath, but now in Christ Jesus believers are children of God by adoption – to use Paul's metaphors. John uses the metaphor of the new birth, saying, "To all who received him (Jesus) who believed in his name, he gave authority to become children of God. Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:12-13) "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God" (1 John 3:1).

Paul wrote, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26). "When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-6). "And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying out 'Abba, Father!'" By the power of the Holy Spirit, we obey God the Father by following the example of God the Son.

We need to learn obedience in small things, that we may be ready for obedience in larger tasks. The soldier masters the habit of instant, implicit obedience on the parade ground, so that he will respond immediately to commands on the battlefield. Whatever our sphere of obedience, when we honor and obey those in authority, we please God, we guarantee blessing for ourselves, and we bring honor and glory to the Son of God, who, although being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be

equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.



## **Chapter Seven: Conversing with Our Heavenly Father – Ephesians 6:18-20**

Someone has said that if you want to make a sensitive Christian feel guilty, ask about his prayer life. Most of us know that we don't pray enough. We feel vaguely uneasy about this, but usually don't exert much effort to change.

We need to ask: Why should we pray? If we could answer that question, then much of our problem with prayer would be solved. Perhaps we should approach the question from another angle: Why don't we pray? Here are some of the things I've heard people say:

“I'm too busy. Life has become more complex and demanding. Prayer takes time for concentration, and the demands of family, work, school and life in society just don't afford me that time. Even when I set out with the best intentions to pray during the day, the rush of events captures my full attention, and I forget to call upon God.”

“I'm too tired. When I get up in the morning I feel sleepy. I barely have enough energy to eat breakfast, without attempting something as demanding as prayer. In the evening, I go to bed exhausted, and often later than I should. The very idea of prayer makes me yawn.”

“I'm too capable.” We may not phrase it just that way, but we act upon this assumption: “I can handle it. Sure, I face some challenges, but I can deal with most of them. My education, technical expertise, experience – I can rely on these in any situation. I don't really need God's help.”

“I'm too small. God doesn't really care about the petty details of my life. He has to run the universe. With emergencies in various places, not to mention people suffering from cancer and AIDS, surely he doesn't have time for my concerns.”

“I'm too bad. I know God listens to righteous people. But would he listen to me? “

“I'm too mixed up. My marriage is beyond repair; my problems at work are insoluble; my cancer has advanced too far; my money's all gone. With all due respect for God, I really don't think he has what it takes to change either me or the situation I face.”

We could go on with other reasons why we don't pray more, but those are some of the main ones. Now let's ask:

### **WHY SHOULD WE PRAY?**

Limiting ourselves to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we come up with two basic answers: We are weak, and God is strong.

The first truth is disheartening: we are weak.

In Ephesians 6:10, Paul says, "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending

against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual host of wickedness in the heavenly places."

Yes – we are busy; we are tired; we are bad; we are small; we are mixed up. We've made a mess of our lives, with some help from others. We face challenges unprecedented in human history, with fewer resources than our grandparents enjoyed. Not only so, but we face a powerful adversary. How many of us would dare to walk alone into the boxing ring with the heavyweight champion of the world? Play basketball alone against Michael Jordan? Or single-handedly challenge a Los Angeles gang to combat? And yet we presume to do battle with Satan daily without drawing on the strength of God!

Who is that foe? Who stands between us and happiness? We often point the finger at other people at home, work, school. As we watch the government do things we think are wrong, it is easy to believe that our difficulties come from people in power. But Paul tells us clearly that we struggle NOT against flesh and blood, but against spiritual enemies. In fact, the enemies he mentions work not only in those who disagree with us, but in ourselves!

The other truth is more encouraging: God is strong!

Paul says we can be strengthened with the power of God. That power raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at the Father's right hand, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. That same strength is available to all who exercise faith. Then Paul reminds the Ephesians that God's power has raised them up from the living death of bondage to the world, the flesh and the devil. He has also raised us up – spiritually – into the heavenly places, where we are seated in Christ at the Father's right hand. Paul asserts the unthinkable: with God's armor on, we can actually stand against Satan, accomplish all of God's will for us, and then stand victorious on a battlefield from which our ancient foe has fled in defeat.

We pray, therefore, because we are weak, and God is strong.

He has also commanded us to pray. Paul states flatly, "Pray at all times in the Spirit." That's an apostolic order. No less than Jesus himself said, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation." He told a parable to the effect that we should always pray and not get discouraged. Until now you have asked nothing in my name, he told the disciples on the last night; "Ask, and you will receive" (John 16:24). He has promised to answer prayers: "Whatever you ask in my name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." (John 14:13)

Fortified with those truths, let's now ask ourselves:

### **FOR WHAT SHOULD WE PRAY?**

Again, we'll use Ephesians for our first answers. Let's begin with chapter one, verse 15: First of all, Paul thanks God for the faith and love he sees in the disciples at Ephesus. It is always good to give thanks to God, and especially when we begin our prayers. Then he asks God to grant them a spirit of wisdom and understanding. Some think he's referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit, others to the

ministry of the Spirit. Either way, we see that only by the Spirit can we really have insight. Insight into what? The knowledge of God.

### To know God

Paul asks God to give these people knowledge – of God. We need, first and foremost, to know God. Not just to know about God, but to know him, to have a relationship with him more intimate than with anyone else. To be more specific, he asks that they would know three things:

- The hope to which they've been called. What is our hope? That Jesus will return, raise us up with glorified bodies, judge the living and the dead, establish a new heaven and a new earth, and reign with us forever. Knowing the hope to which God has called us puts everything else into perspective and makes all temporal trials bearable.
- Second, Paul asks that God would enable them to see the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints. Some believe this refers to the wealth that the saints shall inherit when Christ returns. In other words, our hope is not just deliverance from death, but full enjoyment of the infinite riches that belongs to Jesus as God's Son, and which God the Father has promised to lavish upon us when Christ returns.
- Then, for those who doubt that we shall ever enter into this inheritance, Paul prays that God will show them the exceeding greatness of his power toward those who continue to believe. God's resurrection power will raise us, just as it brought Jesus up from the grave and into the presence of the Father.

Not only that, but, as we saw earlier, that power has already transformed our lives. As we continue to trust God, his power will change us more and more into the moral likeness of Jesus. We are not chained by the past! We're not bound by the sins of our parents, which the current lingo calls our dysfunctional family. Our past does influence us greatly, but we can trust God to work new qualities of faith, hope and love into our broken lives as we pray. Jesus Christ has been raised to God's right hand, over all other powers and titles, now and forever. Everything that would hinder his will has been made subservient to Christ. That includes our sin and the sins of others around us. No matter what happens, in your home, in your city, in the nation, or in this dangerous world, God the Father superintends it all, through his Risen Son our Lord Jesus Christ, for the good of his people!

What peace would we enjoy in our minds and hearts if we really knew and believed that truth! So Paul prays for the Ephesians, leaving us a model in our prayers for ourselves and others.

But there's more to knowing God! In chapter three, verse 14, we once again see the Apostle at prayer for his friends in Ephesus. He begins, as usual, with praise. "I bow my knees before the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." He worships God as Father, revealed to us in Jesus Christ our risen Lord. He knows that all that we call fatherhood, or family, gets its name from the original Father, God. Why does he worship the Father? Because God has revealed the mystery of his will to us through the Apostles. That will is to bring people of every tribe, race, and nation into unity in Christ through faith in the Gospel.

Now Paul begins his prayer. It's the most ambitious and sublime in all his letters, I believe. If Ephesians is the Switzerland of the New Testament, then this prayer is the Matterhorn. He reminds them of God's wealth, his glorious wealth. God transcends us in infinite beauty and goodness; no request threatens to exhaust his resources. Paul prays, first, that God would strengthen them by his Spirit in their inner man. For what purpose? That Christ may take up his dwelling in our hearts by faith. But doesn't Christ already live inside all true believers? Yes, he does. Allow me to make a digression here.

We have a way of saying to people: "Invite Jesus into your heart, and you will be saved." "How do I know if he's in my heart?" they ask. Then we use circular reasoning and say, "If you've said a prayer to ask him in, then he's come already." Many people erroneously believe that one becomes a child of God simply by repeating a prayer asking Jesus to come into their hearts. Then they say, "That person is a Christian, even when the evidence denies that assertion."

Forgive me if this offends you, but that is just not true. The Bible does not teach that we can merely say, "Lord, Lord," and be saved. God alone gives new birth, as and when he wills. He creates faith; we do not manufacture it, in ourselves or others. We can know whether we are true believers – not by whether we once said a prayer – but by whether God's mighty Spirit has created in us genuine and heartfelt repentance for sin, sincere faith in Jesus Christ as the sacrifice for our sins and as our risen savior, and a transformed life of growing love, especially love for other believers.

So what does this verse mean? Although those who have been born again through God-given repentance and faith already enjoy spiritual union with Christ, there is a sense in which we need to have Christ come again each day into our hearts and take up residence as king, as Lord, and as loving savior. Our faith flickers, our hope languishes, our love grows cold. So Paul asks God the Father to strengthen them in the inner man by God the Spirit, so that God the Son may be able to dwell in their hearts.

He goes on: "That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge."

Now he changes the metaphor. From our hearts as the home of Christ, to Christ's love as the soil into which we sink our roots, and the foundation upon which we build our house. As Christ dwells in our hearts, we become assured of his love: our souls draw nurture and sustenance from the gospel, the good news that we are loved by God. We have a sure and solid foundation for life: God loves me; I know it because Jesus died and rose for me.

With this beginning, we are ready for the next step: Full comprehension of the love of Christ! We grow, in other words, from the roots and the rocks of knowing Christ's love to the pinnacle and peak of his love!

Words fail Paul as he attempts to describe just how much he wants his friends to comprehend the love of Christ: how wide, how long and high and deep – don't analyze the geometry of that, or you'll get

lost. The point is: Having begun to know the love of God, we can and should progress in that knowledge. And not only we ourselves, but all the saints with us. Paul is praying for all Christians everywhere, as should we.

This knowledge of the love of Christ surpasses knowledge. We can know, but not fully comprehend. We can truly know, but never come to the limits of knowing, the love of God.

And now we reach the summit of this majestic mountain: “That you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” Paul refers to the love of God which was fully manifested in Christ. He dares to ask that the love which fills God and which dwelt fully in his Son Jesus will also:

- sink into every nook and cranny of our wretched lives,
- sweep away the last vestiges of doubt and despair,
- banish every trace of impure desire,
- brighten every dark and gloomy place,
- wipe away every sad and painful memory,
- expel every worthless idol, and
- thrill our weary souls with the refreshing breeze of the love of God himself.

He concludes by affirming his faith in God's power to work this psychological miracle: “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Can God fill our hearts with love? Yes! Let's not limit God. Let's keep offering this prayer until God answers. True, we won't fully comprehend the love of God until we receive our resurrected bodies at the return of Christ. But we can grow in this knowledge even now. Just think what would happen if we truly believed in the love of God the Father. Would we worry as much as we do? Would we pursue vanity and pleasure as we do? Would we fail to bring to our heavenly Father all our requests? Would we be so slow to praise and thank him?

Paul's prayer for the knowledge of God – his grace, his power, his love – to fill the Ephesians' hearts and minds taps the source of all real peace and joy. When we pray for ourselves or others, then, we begin by asking God the Father to reveal himself to them more fully.

### To serve God

Now turn to chapter 6, verse 18. Paul tells us to pray “for all the saints, and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel... that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.” When we pray for ourselves and others, we should ask God to help us serve him better. Paul served God by preaching the gospel, even in prison. You may be serving God by washing dishes, changing diapers, fixing meals, cleaning house; or making cabinets, programming computers, preparing lectures, seeing patients, grading papers, sweeping floors. Whatever God has led us to do, we can ask him for wisdom and strength to do it.

That's where many of our usual prayers fit in: In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us to ask for our daily bread. If you analyze your prayers, you'll probably find that they fall mostly into that category. We can and should beseech our heavenly Father to give us all that we need to live and work for him: A job, a car, a place to live, clothes, money, wisdom to know and do his will. These are legitimate requests. But notice how Paul puts the emphasis not upon his own personal peace and pleasure (he doesn't ask for deliverance from prison) but upon the fulfillment of his duty to God. Likewise, in the Lord's prayer, notice how Jesus directs our minds to God: his reputation, his authority, his will. He would have us see all our personal needs in the light of our one great need: to be the means by which God's name, kingdom, will are glorified, realized, actualized on this earth.

Jesus also tells us to pray for forgiveness of sins and freedom from further sin. What freedom and confidence would we have in prayer for ourselves and others if we asked for God to fulfill his will in our lives and theirs! We wouldn't have to worry about whether our requests were too small or too selfish. We could pray with liberty and assurance that we were asking according to his will, and that therefore we had obtained the requests made of him.

Now let's focus for a moment on Paul's specific request: He asks that he would be bold in preaching the gospel. Preachers of the gospel need our prayers! Whether at home or abroad, they face a wily enemy, the devil, who does all he can to ensure that lost souls do not hear or respond to the good news of reconciliation with our heavenly Father through faith in his Son Jesus Christ. Perhaps you could select one or two preachers or missionaries, and pray regularly for them.

That has brought us to our last question:

### **HOW CAN WE PRAY?**

We know we ought to. We know what to pray for: that we and others could know and serve God. But how can we actually increase our prayer life? Paul tells us (I'm going to follow the order of the Greek text here, which may not be the same as your translation.)

Use all types of prayer.

Include praise, thanksgiving, confession of sin, petition for your own needs, and supplication for others' needs.

Pray at all times, on all occasions.

It's a mindset. If we see ourselves as weak, and believe that God is strong on our behalf, we'll lift our eyes and hearts to him all during the day. We can come to him at any time – cleaning the house, entering the classroom, making a telephone call, driving. Short, pointed, “arrow” prayers will reach the throne of grace better than long repetitious ones. Cry out for help; give thanks; praise the Lord.

With all perseverance.

We need to keep at it. Maybe God won't answer us the first time we ask. He sometimes waits for days,

weeks, months, years, before granting our requests. Remember that prayer is not so much persuading God to do our will as it is bending our will to rejoice in his will. That's the part of perseverance that relates to quantity: keep at it. Don't lose heart. Be like the widow badgering the unjust judge until he gives in, or the friend at midnight banging on the door for a loaf of bread to feed his visitors, in Jesus' parables. In each parable, Jesus' point was that we have a loving heavenly Father, to whom we can bring each and every request, with full confidence that he will hear us and supply all that we really need.

When I was first converted, my older brother Peter suggested I keep a prayer diary, which I have done, on and off, for the past thirty-six years. In the diary, I often record the date of my prayer and the nature of the request. Then I leave a space for the check when God answers these prayers. A journey through my prayer diary would be an atheist's nightmare. How could you explain the disproportionately high ratio of answers to requests?

Two words of caution, however: I've found that God tends to grant the "daily bread" types of prayers pretty quickly. Those dealing with sanctification, holiness, deeper faith, stronger love, purer hope – these take longer. Usually they come gradually, as I learn to revise my idea of God's will and as God deals with root issues in the lives of my friends and me. Some prayers never seem to be answered. Not many. But some of the most cherished desires of my heart – idols, perhaps? – don't seem to matter that much to God. At least up to this point, I have to conclude provisionally that maybe they are not God's will. But I don't give up! I keep badgering him, as Jesus told me to.

Praying with others fosters perseverance. It helps to be able to concentrate when you're in a group of like-minded saints, all trusting God to work miracles. But we need quality perseverance, too. That's what Paul means by alertness: Focus, concentrate. Be alert, says Peter. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Surprise attack has always been the hallmark of successful generals. So, when you're relaxing before the TV or enjoying a new movie or turning pages in a long novel, he could be gently persuading you to believe harmful lies. When your defenses are down, his offense is at its peak. Read the paper or watch the news with alertness, and pray for what you see and hear.

### Pray in the Spirit.

I said I would follow the Greek order, but I left out one important phrase: Pray in the Spirit. True believers have the Spirit of God the Father, who is also the Spirit of Christ, living in their hearts. He strengthens us to pray, motivates us to pray, and leads us in prayer. He prompts us to pray, and we should follow his promptings. Let me give you two examples:

A few years ago, I had to leave for a church staff retreat later than the others. At about the time that they were driving up to the retreat center, I thought about them. Suddenly I felt led to pray for their safety on the road. When I arrived later, I heard them say something that made my heart stop: The van carrying them had almost been hit head-on by a speeding vehicle. I asked when, and it was at the moment when I had sensed a need to ask God to protect them.

One night, the Chinese Bible study group with which we have been involved had a wonderful

baptismal service. Two believers publicly professed faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. The next day, I read the story of Jesus' temptation, which took place right after his baptism. I felt an urgent desire to pray for these two new members of Christ's church. For the next week, I interceded for them several times a day, with more fervency than usual. A week later, I heard from one of them: On Sunday morning, she awoke in time to attend the 9:15 service. But she couldn't get out of bed: a powerful force pressed her down. Finally she gave up and sank into slumber. She awoke again later. The pressure on her chest returned. But this time she refused to give in. She cried out to God for strength, and prevailed. Trusting in God's strength, she arose and came to the 11:00 A.M. service.

All day long, every day, we face a powerful, relentless foe. We can either try to ignore him until he has completely wrecked our lives and the life of our church and nation. Or we can enter into combat, fully armed, and calling on God for victorious strength. Coupled with the Word of God, prayer is the weapon which God has given us for winning great victories in the cosmic warfare raging all around us. It's time for all believers to wield this weapon with faith and perseverance!



## **Chapter Eight: Giving Thanks to the Father<sup>6</sup> - Ephesians 5:20**

I'll never forget the last time my father spanked me. It was December, 1953; I was seven. We lived on the Naval Air Station in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The day before, two buddies of mine had persuaded me to go with them to the special toy store the Navy Exchange had opened for the Christmas season. Children weren't allowed into the store; the presents were all supposed to be surprises.

But we wanted to go in – not just to look, but to take. We managed to break in, while my anxiety level rose with every minute. While my “partners in crime” roamed throughout the dark warehouse, grabbing big-ticket items like a BB gun and a baseball glove, my uneasy conscience allowed me to make off with only a small package of darts. Three darts – that wasn't much, I reasoned. If we were caught, surely I wouldn't be punished for taking so little.

Well, we were caught. The very next day, as I was playing with these false friends, my father drove up. “Get in the car,” he ordered, and I knew “the jig was up.” The spanking that he administered when we got home and the month's grounding that followed, were painless compared to the question he asked as soon as I got into the car.

That question has a great deal to do with our topic: Gratitude. Thanksgiving.

Without going into the Old Testament, especially the Psalms, where God constantly commands his people to give thanks, let's just look at a few of Paul's letters:

Always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father (Ephesians 5:20).

As therefore you received Christ Jesus as Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving (Colossians 2:6-7).

Earlier, Paul had written to the Christians at Thessalonica, who were suffering persecution:

Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

God has given us a clear command: Be thankful!

Let's consider first, for *what* we should be thankful, then, *why* we should give thanks, and finally, *how* we can lead thankful lives.

### **FOR WHAT SHOULD WE BE THANKFUL?**

#### Temporal blessings

We should give thanks for the temporal, material gifts God gives us. For example, we can offer thanks for food and other material supplies. “...Foods (are) ... created (by God) to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Timothy 4:3). Even on the night in which he was betrayed, when Judas had already gone out to tell enemies how to apprehend him, and he was

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<sup>6</sup> Scriptures in this chapter are from the New King James Version.

facing desertion, denial, denunciation, degradation, death, Jesus took bread, and gave thanks for it (Matthew 26:27).

Speaking of his deliverance from his enemies, Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us in answer to many prayers" (2 Corinthians 1:11).

When God heals us, we should give thanks, as the psalmist did in Psalm 103.

### Spiritual blessings

In addition to physical, temporal blessings, we should constantly give thanks for spiritual blessings bestowed upon ourselves and others:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places... (Ephesians 1:3ff).

Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light (Colossians 1:12).

And his blessings to others:

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you... (Ephesians 1:15).

We are bound to give thanks to God always for you brethren, ... because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing... (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

We can thank God for the spread of the gospel. Speaking of the results of his ministry, Paul writes, "As grace extends to more and more people it increases thanksgiving, to the glory of God" (2 Corinthians 4:15). We particularly ought to thank God for the marvelous way in which millions of people in Mainland China have turned to Christ since the Cultural Revolution.

We can give thanks for troubles: "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. And let patience have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing." (James 1:3-4)

We can even thank God for limited resources, as Jesus did in the wilderness, when he had five loaves and two fish to feed twelve thousand people, Jesus took the meager food and offered thanks to God the Father (John 6:11). On a ship about to be wrecked, we read about Paul, "Taking bread, he gave thanks to God" (Acts 27:35).

Jesus told us to be grateful for persecution: "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12). Peter obviously listened to Jesus' words: "When they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5:40-41).

Most of the above quotations from Paul enjoining gratitude were from letters written in prison! We know that he "practiced what he preached," at least in Philippi, where they had been thrown into jail

for delivering a woman from a demon: "After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison... About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God..." (Acts 16:23). In fact, Paul had an entire life of suffering (as we read in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33) and yet he thanked God!

Finally, God's Word tells us to thank God for everything!

"I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth" (Psalm 34).

"In everything give thanks" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

"Always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father" (Ephesians 5:20).

## **WHY SHOULD WE GIVE THANKS?**

### Thanksgiving pleases God

First and foremost, we should give thanks because thanksgiving pleases God. Through the Apostle and many writers of psalms, God has commanded us to render thanks to him. "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18; see also Psalm 50:14 and many other places in the Psalms).

Furthermore, God expects us to express our gratitude and is displeased when we don't. When only one leper out of ten who were healed returned to give thanks to Jesus, he commended the one who demonstrated gratitude and said, "Where are the nine?" (Luke 17:11-19).

Thanksgiving brings glory to God. "He who offers praise honors me," says God in the Psalm 50:23. When God does something to display his goodness and his greatness, his power and his pity, our grateful acknowledgment brings honor to his name. Since Christians are to be "for the praise of His glory" (Ephesians 1:12), thanksgiving should be a high priority for us.

### Thanksgiving benefits us

Thanksgiving not only pleases God; it brings great benefits to us also. For one thing, giving thanks cures anxiety, as Paul pointed out in a letter from prison: "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6-7). As we pray, if we remember to thank God for his past mercies to us and his promises to grant all that we really need, faith will flood our hearts and banish fear and worry.

Thanksgiving also resolves conflict: That's because contentions come from discontented hearts:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (James 4:1-3).

In a powerful passage on love and peace, Paul inserts these words, "And be thankful" (Colossians 3:12-17). His clear implication: Ingratitude reveals idolatry, which breeds envy and anger, causing strife.

### An Unacceptable Alternative

To see the power of thanksgiving in perspective, let's look at the alternative: grumbling.

Grumbling, or complaining, reflects an idolatrous heart. Grumbling shows that we seek, that is, worship, something or someone other than the God who has created us. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul indicts unbelievers with these words:

Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things (Romans 1:21-23).

To make matters even worse ingratitude reaps a bitter harvest of greater and greater sin:

Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who they exchanged the truth about God for the lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen (Romans 1:24-25).

Paul shows the contrast between thanksgiving, on the one hand, and covetousness (and therefore complaining) on the other:

But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, but rather giving of thanks (Ephesians 5:3-4).

Grumbling renders our life increasingly unhappy, as we concentrate upon the negative. The more we complain, the more we dwell on unpleasant things. That infects our mind with the poison of negativity, which undermines our enjoyment of each day. We get into a habit of seeing the dark side rather than the light side; the half-empty glass instead of the half-full glass, the weeds rather than the flowers.

Worst of all, chronic complaining evokes the wrath of God. Because it issues from an idolatrous attitude, complaining provokes God's anger. Notice how Paul links ingratitude with idolatry and therefore God's punishment:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...because, although they know God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful... Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image... (Romans 1:18, 22-23).

God's anger comes to us in several forms. First, there is the sin itself: As we persist in worshiping the creature than the creator, our sin grows, and increasing sin becomes one means by which God punishes us, as Paul explains in that same passage (Romans 1:24, 26-27, 28-32).

If we persist in our complaining, we shall feel the lows of God's chastisement for our sin: Grumbling angers God, as his dealings with the Israelites in the wilderness demonstrated. After God delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, he led them by Moses into the wilderness. There they

repeatedly found fault with his provision for them. Whenever they ran out of water, or had no food, or got tired of their food, they accused Moses of having led them out of Egypt only to kill them with hunger or thirst. Even though God always fed them and gave ample supplies of refreshing liquid, they still griped.

Their worst offense came when the spies returned from the Promised Land. Two of the men described how fertile the land was; the others told tales of walled cities and giants and warned that they would all die if they occupied the territory God had allotted to them. The crowd chose to accept that majority report and refused to follow Moses. This time, they exhausted God's patience. He swore an oath that none of that generation would enter the land, but would perish in the desert. Each time we complain about food or drink or God's gifts to us, we invite his anger and discipline (Exodus 16:2-3, 12; Numbers 11:1-6, 10, 18-20).

If discipline does not work, then unrepentant ingratitude brings eternal punishment for sin: Those who dishonor God by perpetual ingratitude show that they do not know him; those who do not know God will not spend eternity with him, but will suffer eternal punishment (See Romans 2:5-9).

But let's return to the positive benefits of thanksgiving. A heart of gratitude, with lips that give thanks to God and man, would reduce family and work conflicts. Think of how an attitude of thankfulness would affect our family life. We would thank God for the good in the person whom we dislike. Instead of grumbling about our misfortune, we would thank God for the qualities he is working into us as a result of this person (patience, love, self-control, trust in God). Without indulging in self-righteousness, we would thank God that he has delivered us (if he has) from the sin that ensnares that person (but be careful: we may have a log in our own eye!) Thanksgiving also puts people into perspective. Even as he begins a letter to the Corinthian Christians that consists mostly of rebuke, Paul remembers that God has abundantly blessed them with spiritual gifts, and gives thanks for them (1 Corinthians 1:4).

I have a Chinese friend who spent years complaining about her husband's lack of spiritual leadership in the home. Finally, she decided to give thanks for his good qualities. Immediately, her attitude changed. Shortly thereafter, his actions began to show improvement.

A habit of giving thanks for all things also sheds new light upon suffering and trials. When we trust God as our loving heavenly Father, we can view all of life as a gift from him, even trials and troubles. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it: "It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ...He [disciplines us] for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness" (Hebrews 12:7,10). We do not say God is author of evil, nor do we say that evil is good, but we do believe that God is working it all together for our good and his glory (Romans 8:28).

Take two examples: First, cancer, the killer that stalks in our midst – We do not rejoice over the pain, the medical expense, the family anguish, the interrupted lives. But we can thank God for the advances of modern medicine that made recovery possible for many. We thank him for using cancer to mobilize the church to prayer and practical help over a long period of time. We thank God – in some cases – for the miracle of healing when medical experience would have predicted death. We thank God for the reminder of our own frailty and mortality.

We thank him for showing us people with courage and faith who persevere under trial. We thank him for the submissive hearts of Christians who face suffering and death without murmuring against God. We thank him for reminding us of the truly important things in life, for stopping our frantic pace so that we can recover a proper sense of values: family, friends, honest work, simple pleasures, communion with God, eternal life.

Another example: We do not rejoice to hear of arrest, imprisonment, fines, torture, and even death inflicted upon our brothers and sisters in Mainland China. But we do thank God for their faith, courage, steadfastness, bold preaching, and love for their persecutors. We also thank God for using persecution to cause the church to grow in China (and other communist lands). In all cases where human sin breaks forth so brutally, we can thank God for reminding us of our need for forgiveness. We have grown complacent, forgetting just how evil we really are, and how much we needed to have a savior endure God's wrath on our behalf. We can thank God that the torture inflicted upon innocent people gives us a glimpse of the unspeakable suffering of Christ. The moral revulsion we sense when we hear of such wicked deeds opens our eyes to see just how evil was the crucifixion of the Son of God.

Thanksgiving kills idolatry. We have seen how grumbling evinces an idolatrous heart; gratitude works against discontent and idolatry by focusing our attention on God our heavenly Father. Food can be an idol for some people. According to some things I have read, those who tend to eat too much might find that thanking God for each bite would slow them down and that they would eat less.

Giving thanks often would create a happier home. We would dwell less on negative things, like the news, the day's troubles, and others' faults and failings. We would share good news and encouraging developments.

Gratitude would help solve, and perhaps prevent, many financial problems: Contentment with what we already have keeps us from buying more than we need. Greed is bankrupting us: We want what we don't have, just because we see others owning it (not thinking how much debt they have incurred to acquire it!), or because the media – primarily TV – have persuaded us that we need this thing. If only we heeded the exhortation of the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews! “Keep your conduct, be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Hebrews 13:5).

Being content, and therefore grateful, creates time for the really important things in life. We wouldn't have to waste time reading catalogues and going shopping. That frees us up not to clean, repair, maintain, send back, and exchange things we didn't really need in the first place. That in turn delivers us from the necessity to work longer hours to pay for things we don't need.

## **HOW CAN WE GIVE THANKS?**

We have seen how much our lives would brighten up if we developed that habit of offering up words of thanks to God more often. Now let's think about practical ways to cultivate this practice.

### Through the Mediator

Paul tells us to give thanks “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He is the one who suffered, died, for us: he has paid the price for our sins, so that now we have access to the Father. He rose, lives, intercedes for us and is victorious over Satan. He has promised future happiness. Even now, at God's right hand, he serves as Mediator of all blessings to us from the Father. All our thanks, then, come from faith in Christ, through whom alone our manifold blessings flow.

### To God the Father

But whom do we thank? God the Father, who is the giver of all good gifts (James 1:17). He comforts us in all sorrow (2 Corinthians 1:3-5) and supplies all the grace we need for each day (2 Corinthians 12:9).

### Using helpful methods

Here are a few useful ways to nurture a mindset that turns to God with constant appreciation:

First, we must *renew our minds with the truth*. We need to read the Bible, and thank God for what he has already done for us in Christ, and what he promises to do later. We should fortify our minds with God's words at all times, so we can be convinced of his goodness. Passages like Romans 8:28 and 39 protect us from fear and grumbling. As long as we know that "Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," we can rest assured and thank God for all that he sends our way.

It goes without saying that we must *avoid input that feeds greed* and therefore discontent. Television programs and commercials especially, but also radio, magazines, the Internet, catalogues, and even some books incite our lust for more possessions, prestige, pleasure, and power and thus make us unhappy with our current situation.

We build a contented mindset also when we *expose ourselves to material that would elicit thanksgiving*, like great biographies, especially Christian ones. Christian music – or at least some of it – can fill our minds with positive thoughts of God's goodness to us.

To be thankful, we need to *pray* a lot: God will answer prayer, and we'll have something to thank him for, especially if we keep a list of prayer requests and God's generous gifts in response. Turn anxieties into prayer. There is no need to deny evil or trouble, but we can express our concern through prayer. When we do pray, Paul tells us to remember to give thanks as we make petitions. "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving..." (Colossians 4:2).

*Record God's answers* to prayer, and return to that record often to build our faith and remind ourselves of God's gifts to us. As we do, we should offer thanks. In this way, we heed the advice of the Psalmist not to forget all God's benefits (Psalm 103, 107).

*Think of others with thanksgiving*. As Paul so often did, we can lift up short prayers of thanks to God when we think of other people. That will put a smile on our face and a lift in our step.

*Turn everything into an occasion for thanksgiving*. Health, job, marriage, friendships, children, parents – all can be considered in the light of God's grace to us, and turned into prayers of thanks.

When possible, we should *surround ourselves with thankful people*. We can't avoid chronic complainers totally, but we can seek out the company of those who look on the bright side and render thanks to God for things big and small.

*Speak thankful words!* This will incur curiosity: Some enjoy their misery, and want to drag you into it, but most people enjoy being around someone with a grateful heart. When it rains, when others grumble, we can say, "Well, we needed the rain" (unless there's a danger of flooding, of course!). In cloudy weather, we can make a remark about how the clouds shield us from the sun. A creative mind will find countless ways of expressing gratitude.

*Sing*. We should follow Paul's advice (and example!) to sing, not only in church, but at home, perhaps using the church hymnal. If he and Silas could sing in prison, we can pour forth our praise and thanks in song anywhere.

*Use rituals*. Grace before meals, prayers in the morning and at bedtime can be employed to go over the day's events, with thanksgiving. Christian holidays, like Resurrection Day and Christmas provide

special occasions for thinking about God's mercy and goodness to us.

Remember that day my father rebuked me for shoplifting? Here's what he said: "Was it because we do not give you enough at Christmas that you thought you had to steal your own presents?"

My parents were generous at Christmas, but no earthly father can give a fraction of what God has lavished upon us, not to mention the promise of eternal happiness in a new heaven and a new earth. We don't need to persist in our idolatrous grasping and grumbling. We can, as the apostle urged, do everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to the Father through him.



## **Chapter Nine: The Father's Design for Your Life: Obeying God the Father**

### *Introduction*

What image comes to your mind when you think about the Christian life? If you're an athlete, perhaps you see life as a game, a contest, requiring discipline, stamina, teamwork, and high motivation. The Apostle Paul supports this metaphor when he talks about running the race, or wrestling with spiritual foes. A police officer might think in terms of law enforcement: keeping the commands of God to avoid punishment. And surely, the Bible is filled with laws we are meant to observe, and warns against disobedience. A soldier might have an image of a protracted conflict of good and evil; strategy, tactics, offense, defense, obedience, leadership, hardship, being willing to die for a greater cause. The Bible is filled with material for such imagery, including Abraham's nighttime pursuit of Lot's captors, Joshua's campaigns, David's single combat with Goliath, and the wars of the kings. And John Bunyan has given us his masterful allegory, *The Holy War*.

The image I shall use, however, is that of a journey. Perhaps it's because my wife and I moved twelve times in eighteen years. In the process, we traveled across America several times, and circled the globe. Here, however, I must be careful to clarify what I mean. Some Christians – and I'm afraid I am one of them – seem to imagine themselves to be passengers on a luxury cruise. We expect first-class accommodations, prompt and courteous service, a variety of delicious meals, and constant entertainment. We want to pick our fellow passengers carefully, avoiding those we find obnoxious and congregating with those whose tastes, personalities, and lifestyles match our own. If anything should go wrong, we assume the right to complain – to the captain, if necessary – and insist upon immediate satisfaction, or we just might demand a refund, and threaten to tell others not to go on this particular cruise.

No, the metaphor I have in mind is the pilgrimage. One writer has called it "a long obedience in the same direction." John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* has inspired generations of Christians to view their walk with God as a pilgrimage. A children's version of that classic has the accurate subtitle, *The Difficult Journey*. The Bible amply supports such a view. Enoch "walked with God" by faith for three hundred years (Genesis 5:22). Abraham was told, "Walk before Me and be perfect."<sup>7</sup> He had to leave his home and wander to a strange land, living in tents and fending off all kinds of attacks upon his trust in God. Micah summarizes God's requirements this way: "To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8)

Jesus said, "Follow me," and the disciples did so, literally. Peter wrote that Jesus has given us an example, that we should follow in his steps. Jesus told the Jews to walk in the light while they had the chance, and called himself the light of the world. Paul's letters abound with references to the Christian life as a walk: Walk in newness of life. Walk by faith, not by sight. Walk by the Spirit (or, as J.I. Packer translates, "Keep in step with the Spirit."). Walk into the good works which God has prepared for us to do. Walk worthily of the calling with which we have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love... He tells us to walk in love, as Christ loved us, as children of light, wisely, making the most of the time.

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 17:1. The New King James Version reads, "Be blameless."

If the Christian life is a journey, then we require at least three things to reach our destination:

- A *motive*. **Why** take this journey? Why not stay where we are, or go on another trip?
- A *map*. **What** route should we take? What places do we pass through on the way? What pitfalls should we avoid?
- The *means*. **How** can we actually complete the pilgrimage? Where do we find resources for our long journey?

Confucianism organized ethics under the categories of five basic human relationships. That model is good, but incomplete. It leaves out our relationship to God, for one thing. Buddhism speaks of the Eight Virtues. Christians can find much valuable teaching in Buddhist ethics, but some of it is distorted, and all of it comes from a world view that disparages the created order and lacks a proper knowledge of God.

For our map, therefore, we need to turn to the Bible. The Bible is God's revelation of his ways to us. The Word of God is a light for our path as we thread our way through the snares of this dark world towards the city of light. But which parts of the Bible? Can we find a convenient moral framework somewhere? In fact, there are several possible candidates for such a brief summary. I shall list only a few of many:

- The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). The first four tell us how to relate to God our Father. The fifth speaks of our duty to our earthly father and mother. The next four tell us how to love our neighbor, and the last returns to the crucial issue of idolatry and shows us how to look upon the things of this world that so easily attract us. What a marvelous outline for Christian living! But the Law of Sinai predates the Christian revelation, and therefore lacks several key ingredients.
- We also have Jesus' brilliant summary of the law: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:37-38) If he had said nothing else, these words would have established him in the front rank of religious ethical teachers. But the Christian life is more than law, more even than Jesus' summation of the Law's requirements.
- Jesus gave another command: "You believe in God, believe also in me." The Christian life begins and continues with faith, which brings us into an intimate, ongoing relationship with a Person, as distinct from mere obedience to a set of principles.

John's writings put it this way: True Christians are those whose lives exhibit faith, love, and obedience. By faith he means wholehearted trust in Christ, including mental assent to his claims, reliance upon his promises, and communion with him through his word. True faith will issue in and unreserved obedience to his commands. These commands can be summarized, as we have seen, by the word love.

Paul offers us other outlines:

- Faith, hope, and love, for example, provided Augustine with the framework for the *Enchiridion*, his handbook on the Christian life. This triad of virtues appeals to me, for it begins with faith, the means by which we enter into and maintain vital union with Christ, identification with him, spiritual fellowship with him at God's right hand, and a life of inner peace and joy. Hope points forward to the rich promises of eternal bliss with Christ after this transitory vale of tears. Love flows from faith and hope, as we share the riches of God's grace with those around us, passing on what we ourselves have experienced in Christ.
- There is another beautiful synopsis of Paul's moral teaching: The image of fruit of the Spirit. To see our walk as the result of God's Spirit's work in us shifts our attention from our efforts to God's divine energy, slowly transforming us into the likeness of Christ. (Galatians 5:22-23)
- Yet another key passage of the Bible contains priceless teaching about our pilgrimage: The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). The Sermon on the Mount towers above all other ethical discourses not only because of its literary brilliance, but chiefly because of its moral grandeur. Here we truly stand on holy ground. We take off our shoes and bow before our righteous God as we hear a greater than Moses expound a higher law.

Consider how the Sermon on the Mount turns our values upside down – or perhaps I should say, right side up:

Jesus turns our eyes upon future rewards and punishments rather than present pain or pleasure: "They shall be comforted, they shall inherit the earth; great is your reward in heaven." He declares true happiness to belong to the poor, the mourners, the meek, the hungry, the persecuted, rather than the rich, satisfied, and popular people who parade through our television commercials. He exalts giving over receiving; suffering over inflicting suffering.

He rips off the mask of our respectability and exposes the heart, reminding us that inner motives count as much to God as do outer actions. We seek to please men; Jesus tells us to live so that we might see God, be called sons of God, be rewarded by God in his kingdom, and glorify God. Jesus turns our attention away from this world's vanity to the everlasting kingdom of God, and urges us to bend every effort to enter that kingdom, even if it means personal pain and suffering. Better to lose an arm and enter the kingdom rather than go with glowing health into the fires of hell.

In this brief discourse, Jesus proclaims the authority of the Old Testament, and adds his own words to the canon of divine revelation. He reveals God to us even more clearly than did the inspired prophets of old. We learn of God's goodness: he is fair, sending rain to the just and unjust; just, rewarding each one according to his works; merciful, forgiving sinners; generous, bestowing good gifts upon his children.

But God is also great: His omniscience knows our hearts and our needs even before we pray. His holiness requires reverent use of his name. Transcendent, for he dwells in heaven. Sovereign, as king

of the universe. A righteous judge, who will mete out rewards and punishments with scrupulous justice. A God with eternal glory and power. A savior, who delivers us from evil. In short, he is our Father, great, and good. We can trust him, love him, and obey him with a willing heart.

The Sermon on the Mount has formed the basis of countless books and sermons on Christian morals, and with good reason. In this chapter, however, I shall look with you briefly at another passage of Scripture as we seek to answer our three questions – First, **Why** go on this journey at all? That is, Why live Christianly? Second, **What path** should we take; what is Christian living? Finally, **How** shall we find the ways and means for the journey; where can we get the strength to follow in Jesus' steps?

Let us do a quick survey of Paul's letter to the Ephesian Christians. Using Ephesians as our guide, therefore, let us ask, first:

### **WHY LIVE CHRISTIANLY?**

Why go on this journey at all? We could give two kinds of answers to this question.

One is, "Because it makes you feel good." We should not measure value by how it feels. On the other hand, there is a sense in which our own feelings do enter into moral decisions. We travel because we want to. We move because for some reason we want to leave our current home. Does it feel good to be enslaved to the world, to follow the random impulses of our own sinful nature, to render servile obedience to the prince of darkness? Consider how you feel when consumed by anger, or tormented by guilt, or distracted by worry.

All behavior is goal oriented. Everyone seeks happiness. Jesus told us how to be happy: Happy – truly happy – are the poor in spirit, those who mourn for sin, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Likewise, Paul speaks of the great joy that comes from living Christianly. We live this way, partly because it gives real pleasure. I have on my shelf a half-read book called *Desiring God*. The author insists that we find true pleasure only in God, and that he has willed that we should desire, and discover, ultimate satisfaction in him alone.

That leads us to the second type of answer: We want to live Christianly because of God – what he has done, and what he shall do, for us.

He has chosen us to become holy and blameless, thus freeing us from sin. He has adopted us into his family, and given us rights of inheritance, the rights of the firstborn son. He has forgiven our sins through the blood of his beloved Son. He has revealed the mysteries of the universe to us. He has given us the firstfruits of the Spirit. He has bestowed upon us the gift of new life, granting freedom from the world, the flesh, the devil, and the consequences of our sin, God's eternal wrath. He has brought us into fellowship with people of all races and tongues as brothers and sisters in Christ. He has reconciled us to himself and to others. He has in a word, saved us, by his grace, despite our own lack of merit. He has done all of this because of his great love for us. As John says, we love, because he first loved us.

May I add a bit more about God's will for us to become holy and blameless? For almost four decades,

I struggled with a couple of hard things that God had allowed into my life. I just could not understand why I should have to endure these trials. For years, I complained to God. Finally, I realized that I was mad at God; I had made him into my enemy! As a consequence, of course, I was not happy with my Maker. Nor was I winning in my battle against his purpose for me. I didn't like the way he had planned my life; I had a much different plan, one that did not involve any pain or frustration.

A few years ago, I woke up to two facts: First, I was not winning my battle against the Almighty. Second, my plan for my life stood directly contrary to his revealed will for me. I wanted happiness, and happiness defined as fulfillment of all my wishes and desires, now! God, on the other hand, had revealed many times in Scripture that he wills our holiness, our increasing conformity to the moral image of his Son Jesus. We are to be imitators of Christ. Jesus had stated clearly from the beginning that if we want to follow him, we have to take up our cross daily and deny ourselves.

Suddenly, it dawned upon me that I was an enemy of the Cross of Christ. No wonder I felt so frustrated, and so out of step with Jesus much of the time! Gradually, I began to change my purpose in life, to know Christ and to imitate him. Since then, I have slowly begun to experience a much deeper sense of personal peace, and a much clearer awareness of who Jesus is and what he did for me, a sinner who deserves nothing but wrath and hell. This new vision of the goal of existence – to know and follow Christ – has re-oriented my life and my thoughts, and brought much more joy and real happiness.

So, we follow Christ because of what God has done for us, and for what he wants to do in us, to make us more like his Son. We live Christianly also because of what God will do for us:

He promises redemption of our bodies, freedom from decay and death. He will grant us entrance into his eternal kingdom, where righteousness and peace dwell. He has promised the full enjoyment of his riches, the inheritance due his beloved children. Satan tells us we are alone and unloved, cast adrift in a shifting sea of uncertain values, untrustworthy people, and unreliable institutions. God tells us we are his beloved children. We have a loving Father. We are significant and secure, and shall someday be fully satisfied.

The motive for our life is the love of God – primarily God the Father – for us, what he has done and what he promises to give those who trust and love him.

## **WHAT IS CHRISTIAN LIVING?**

How about our map? In concrete terms, what does Christian living mean?

Here again our answer centers on God. We are to be imitators of God, as beloved children. Our attention now, however, is more particularly upon God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Specifically, we are to walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Well, what is love? Beginning in chapter four, Paul tells us. Love means humility – lowliness, meekness. It means patiently bearing with those who irritate and offend us. Love leads to a passion for

unity, based on diversity and truth.

Because we live in this world, we shall always be buffeted by winds of deceitful doctrine. Deceitful, because false teaching appeals to our flesh, and conforms to the world's views only too closely. Although I am a fan of James Dobson's, I realize now that I must treat him as I would any other Christian teacher: no matter how much I like or admire someone, their words must come under the searchlight of Scripture.

In fact, perhaps we should say that the more attraction we feel for someone, the more cautious we should be about their influence upon our values. That includes our own family members. We must help each other grow up into a mature faith and knowledge of Jesus. That requires knowing, and speaking, the truth, regardless of what idols may have to be thrown out of our homes or hearts as a result. But we must speak the truth in love, not itching for a good fight, but gently seeking to learn from each other and edge each other closer to a correct view of truth and a vital relationship with our God.

Our journey takes us along roads which lead us to places like edification: We should seek to benefit others, to build them up, to serve them. Generosity: We work to earn money to give to those in need, not to indulge our own inflated appetites. Honesty: We speak words of truth with an attitude of love, trying to help others grow in Christian maturity. Tenderheartedness: We may have to express anger, but we'll try to be kind, gentle, forgiving, as God in Christ forgave us.

Love means abstinence from lust. No fornicator, impure or covetous person shall enter God's kingdom. True Christians will avoid all that tempts them to crave that which they should not have, or indulge illicit passions. They will know the truth, and the truth will make them odd. They will not only not participate in the unfruitful works of darkness, but will expose them. They may write letters to the editor, or send postcards to sponsors of immoral and ungodly advertisements or programs. They might find themselves in a peaceful demonstration against abortion.<sup>8</sup>

They will try use every minute of every day to do what pleases God. That will mean turning off the television sooner than their neighbors do – or perhaps not even turning it on sometimes. They will put down magazines and books others read – or never pick them up at all. They will visit the theatre less frequently than others do – or perhaps stop going altogether.

Let me add that I fully agree with the idea that we must know about the world we live in. For the sake of love, we should be aware of what our neighbors read and watch and hear. On the other hand, I question whether we should spend good money to support an industry which purveys immorality, violence, and blasphemy in our own land and around the world. Can we really justify squandering precious dollars and hours exposing ourselves to the seductive wiles emanating from the film and the box? Would not a careful study of reviews in the print media tell us about all we need to know about the evil ideas infecting our society?

Our journey, then, will take us on a detour around such places as fornication, adultery, and vain

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<sup>8</sup> Christians can find no justification for violent protests in the Bible.

entertainments. True pilgrims won't seek joy in the abuse of any substance – sweets, or meat, or alcohol, or drugs. They won't look for happiness in the giddiness of the world's empty delights, but will offer themselves to God, seeking to be filled by his Spirit, and finding deep joy in singing his praises, recounting his benefits to them, and sharing his word.

As they follow in his steps, Christian husbands will try to love their wives sacrificially, remembering Jesus. Their wives will oppose the spirit of the age and submit themselves, as to Jesus. Fathers and mothers will seek by precept and example to teach their children about Jesus. They will probably have to renounce idols of ambition and greed to find the time for their most important job. Children will march to a different drummer and obey their parents. Employers, teachers, and rulers will treat their subordinates fairly; those under them will work heartily, as to the Lord.

### **HOW SHALL WE FIND THE WAY?**

In all this, we seek to walk the path pioneered for us by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Satan whispers: "Love yourself." Jesus shouts, "Deny yourself, follow me." The world cajoles, "Find yourself, fulfill yourself, actualize yourself, liberate yourself." Jesus calls, "Die to self, and only then will you find true life." The flesh whines, "Me first." Jesus – assuming that we already love ourselves – calls us to love others just as much. Paul challenges us to look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others. A popular formula expresses this point concisely: God first, others second, self third. That is the path to truth happiness.

Finally, how can we ever do this? Paul has laid before us an impossible standard. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. I know in me – that is, in my flesh, no good dwells. I want to do what is right, but find a power at work within me pulling me away from God and his ways. I find Vanity Fair enticing. Part of me wants to tarry in places like resentment, lust, worry, and ambition. Sometimes I falsely believe that unless I first store up treasures for myself, I shall have nothing to share with others. If I do give, I shall have nothing left. If I die, I shall never live again. The road is hard, the path steep, the journey long and tedious.

Paul tells us in that last part of Ephesians just why we find the going so tough: we are locked in mortal combat with a deadly, deceptive foe. Relying on our own strength, we shall surely lose. Once again, however, the answer to our question is: God. We can be strong in him, and in the strength of his might. He has given us weapons with which we can defeat our enemy. These fall into two categories: light from God's word – his promises and his precepts – and power released by prayer.

We can win the battle, but to do so, we must undergo training, maintain discipline, attend to the voice of our leader, renounce all the seductive voices that would suck us into the mire along the way, and set our faces resolutely towards the goal. We shall need to get up a bit earlier, perhaps, to spend quality time with God in Bible reading, study, meditation, and prayer. We shall have to make hard choices in order to draw upon the resources of other believers, our fellow travelers.

Our motive comes from the love of God the Father. Our model is Jesus, God's own Son. God's Holy Spirit provides for us the necessary means – the strength and wisdom – for our long journey.

As we wield the sword of the Spirit and pray in the power and under the leading of the Spirit, we can stand fast, stand firm, and finally stand alone on a battlefield. Except that we do not stand alone. Like the Roman legionary Paul had in mind when he painted this picture, every Christian belongs to an army. A vast, ever growing throng of believers on the way with us.

We shall surely stumble, even fall, but, like those who have gone before, we shall know God's restoring word of forgiveness, and his renewing grace. We shall get up and resume the journey. We shall stray at times from the path, but the shepherd will seek us out and lead us back to the flock. We march together, fully armed, following our victorious general Jesus, empowered by his Holy Spirit, as we make our way slowly but surely towards the eternal home prepared for us by our loving Father.

To God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, forever and ever. Amen.